

The Impact of Gulf Migration on the Practice of Islam: A Case Study of District Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

Migration has been a leading source of income for the people of district Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, since the 1970s. Migration impacts almost every aspect of human life. This paper discusses how the worst economic situation in the local area made people migrate to the Gulf countries. It further discusses the general impacts of migration on the lives of the local people, whereby it is evident that it has affected almost every sphere and has led to an increase in literacy rate and better quality of life. However, one of the most under-researched areas related to migration is its impact on the practice of Islam in the local area. There is a significant transformation in the religious practices of the migrants who have spent time in the Gulf, and most of them consider their version of Islam as pure and based on the actual teachings of the prophet.

Keywords: Migration, Remittances, Development, Islam

Introduction

Migration is one of the leading sources of subsistence for the people of district Dir Lower in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. Almost every home has at least one adult male in the Gulf. Gulf migration was first introduced among the people of district Dir Lower in the mid-1970s. Because of meager economic opportunities, the people found the idea of Gulf migration as attractive, and many young men from different villages started going to the Gulf in search of a promising future. The area did not have many economic opportunities because of the oppressive rule of Nawab that ended in 1969. The Nawab discouraged education and economic activities among the local population as he considered it a threat to his unquestioned rule. Once the migrants started going to the Gulf, remittances were initiated. This was a new phenomenon and helped bring change in people's lives. The change was slow but was visible in almost every aspect of the people's lives. The socio-economic status of the people changed. The change was not just limited to the socio-economic condition of the people, but it also impacted their religious outlook. This is

evident in their daily discussions, use of Arabic words and language, comparison of Islam in the Gulf and in Pakistan, and being critical of the newly added practices in Islam in Pakistan. Most of them consider the Islam being practiced in the Gulf as 'real' in comparison to the one filled with 'biddat' in Pakistan.

Study Objectives

- To find out the reasons why people mostly migrate to the Gulf
- To explore the broader impacts of migration on people's lives.
- To document the impact of migration on the practice of Islam of the migrants.

Research Questions

- What are the main reasons behind the growing migration of the people of district Dir Lower to the Gulf?
- What are the broader impacts of the migration to the Gulf?
- How and in what ways does migration to the Gulf affect the practice of Islam among the migrants?

Theoretical Background

This research is located in the broader theoretical context of the human capital model, which treats the market as focused on maximization of utility by choosing a place that offers excellent returns. Tracing the history of migration theories, Economist Adam Smith (1776) pioneered writings on migration. In one of his earlier academic works. He wrote;

“But the labor wages in a great town and its neighborhood are frequently a fourth or a fifth part, twenty or five-and-twenty percent higher than at a few miles distances. Eighteen pence a day may be reckoned as the common price of labor in London and its neighborhood. At a few miles distance, it falls to eight pence, the usual price of common labor through the greater part of the low country of Scotland, where it varies a good deal less than in England. Such a difference of prices, which it seems is not always sufficient to transport a man from one parish to another, would necessarily occasion so great a transportation of the bulkiest commodities, not only from one parish to another but from one end of the kingdom, almost from one end of the world to the other, as would soon reduce them more nearly to a level. After all that has been said of the levity and inconstancy of human nature, it appears evidently from experience that a man is of all sorts of luggage the most difficult to be transported.”

Adam Smith (ibid) believes that migration occurs mainly because of fluctuating wages in the labor markets, and he considers this to be the most important factor in the process.

The motivation behind migration is the maximization of return on human capital investment. If the cost of market opportunities is more than the cost of relocation, the result is people's migration (Bodvarsson et al., 2015).

Sjaastad (1962) views migration as bargaining one's skills with the highest payer. However, he fails to mention the non-monetary gains from migration (such as a better climate and political or religious environment) (Bodvarsson et al., [2015](#)). The current work, besides focusing on the monetary gains from migration, also emphasizes how the local people think that beyond the monetary gains, they also benefit from migration by learning honest Islam in the Gulf.

Methodology

This research is qualitative and ethnographic. Data was collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Two-month fieldwork has been carried out in district Dir lower. Twenty interviews have been conducted with migrants who were either on leave for a few months or have

permanently settled back in Pakistan after spending years abroad. Personal contacts were used to identify the respondents. The issue of confidentiality has been addressed by using pseudonyms for the respondents. However, most were not concerned about their original names being mentioned in the research. A convenient sampling method was used to select the participants.

Analysis and Discussion

After interviewing and observing the respondents in the field, we started compiling the data, transcribing the interviews, and generating and analyzing the themes.

When asked about the significant reasons people migrated from Dir to the Gulf states, most of the old (pioneer migrants who visited the Gulf in the 1970s) respondents mentioned the post-Nawab Dir's economic condition as worse and having no opportunities. Many people who migrated during the early days did not have formal education because the Nawab was anti-education and discouraged schools and colleges. One of our respondents, Khaliq, told us that:

“Had I not gone to the Gulf, my children would not be able to have a good life. I sacrificed my life for them, but I am happy I did because, at that time, there was no work available in our area, and there were no businesses or business opportunities; even if there were, one needed to have money. Had the economic condition been good, I would never have gone there.”

The lack of opportunities and jobs was the primary reason mentioned by the respondents who went to the Gulf.

Migration is a chain process whereby the father is replaced by the son, which has been a common practice in district Dir Lower. In most cases, as many men reach a certain age, they arrange visas for their sons and bring them over. Hashim, a returnee migrant who spent 40 years in UAE, said:

“I spent forty years in UAE; I went through very tough times. I was only 20 when I went to UAE for the first time; now, when I am old enough to continue, I arranged a visa for my son, who is now there, and I have retired and returned. I do not know if my grandson will continue the same or he will opt to stay here.”

Hashim's story is a story of almost every home. However, the remittances that helped people get education and even jobs in Pakistan are quickly breaking the migration chain. Many young people are unwilling to go abroad mainly because they have heard the stories of suffering and hardships from their parents. Instead, they are being told by their parents to focus on their education and try to settle within Pakistan. Aftab, a 30-year-old pharmacist, while narrating his story, said that;

“My father spent many years abroad, focusing only on his children's studies. I completed my degree in pharmacy and started working here in Pakistan because I have faced the hardships and sufferings my father went through. My father was unable to give his family time; he did not even take care of his health, and he came back after decades with ill health and regrets of not being able to spend time with us. I do not want that to happen to my children”.

Migration in Islam is an old phenomenon that dates back to the time of the Prophet (PBUH). In 622, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), along with some of his followers, migrated from Makkah to Yasrib (later named Madina) (Sahlieh: 1996). Many of our respondents quoted the prophet's migration as a reason one should leave one place for another to search for a good opportunity for themselves and their families.

One of our respondents, Ashfaq informed us that:

“Migration is an Islamic concept; it is something that our prophet did, and we followed his instructions; we left for another country to change our lives; we followed the traditions of the prophet, and it helped us change our lives”.

People migrate for many reasons, such as economic and religious reasons. Sometimes, people migrate in order to relocate. The Quran tells about leaving the oppressed lands for another land of God (Saritoprak: 2011)

Nevertheless, there is also the concept of Ansar: Did the local people of the Gulf countries behave like the Ansars did? On this question, we received diverse answers; for example, one of our respondents told us that;

“The behavior of the local Arabs is not good towards the migrants; we are being treated in discriminatory ways, they do not consider us as equals, and it is very common throughout the Gulf countries.”

Nevertheless, this is just one side of the image; many respondents revealed that Arabs are true Muslims and treat others as equals irrespective of one’s social status. Nabeel, a migrant working in Saudi Arabia, told us:

“I have seen humanity in the Arabs; they are the best followers of Islam, and I believe their humility and humbleness are one reason they are so developed. You get to know humanity and humility there. The law treats a billionaire and a common man similarly, which is why people trust the government. Do we have the same here? No, we do not”.

This is not the only reason why the Pakistani migrants consider them good Muslims; their clarity in religious thoughts, belief in the oneness of Allah, and discouragement of any forms of idolatry are yet other reasons why they are considered good Muslims. Most of the men living in the Gulf were seen to have become strictly anti-shrines and anti-Islam social practices. Hamdan, who works as a driver in a bus company in UAE, revealed that:

“We see many forms of Shirks being practiced here in Pakistan. We go to the shrines and believe in them; it is like performing idolatry and is the worst practice ever. You will never find any Arab going to a Saint or a shrine. I learned it from them and try to propagate the message as much as possible”.

There were a few people among the respondents who used to visit shrines regularly, and now, because of spending time in the Gulf and seeing Islam firsthand, they have abandoned all such practices. Kamil, who works as a gardener in Saudi Arabia, told us that;

“Before I went to Saudi Arabia, I was the follower of a Saint; I used to visit him now and then; he was a part of my belief, and I used to consult him before making any decision. In the meantime, I went to Saudi Arabia, and it took me 5 years to come out of the superstitious beliefs. I observed that the local people practice the simplest and straightforward Islam, which, to me, is the real Islam that we in Pakistan have moved away from”.

When asked what they like the most in the Gulf countries, many respondents answered that it is how they follow Islam. The respondents, considering the Arabs as pure Muslims, were very critical of their version of Islam. They were primarily critical of the new additions to the practices, called biddat. A young migrant, Zahir, in his early thirties, responded;

“Here we have a version of Islam that is corrupted with local cultural practices, and we have added so many biddats that we have moved away from the real Islam, which I found in the Gulf. They are very clear about their faith; they do not believe in any shrines, nor do they engage in any practices that are against the original teachings of Islam”.

Calling their Islam the honest Islam, the respondents have further inquired if their behavior towards the migrants is discriminatory; how can we call them the ‘real Muslims’? The respondents replied;

“Not all are same; some of the Arabs are doing excellent charity works in Pakistan; they are helping the needy, making hospitals, schools and even sponsoring marriages of those who cannot afford.”

It was not just the stay in the Gulf that changed people's beliefs; certain people started using Arabic words in their routine discussions. It seemed as if they considered it rewarding to use Arabic words. The usage of Arabic words also signifies superiority over the locals.

Conclusion

Migration is not just an economic phenomenon but a broad one encompassing the social, cultural, and religious spheres. The people of district Dir have been subject to the rule of Nawab, which was oppressive and barred people from getting upward social mobility. Once the process started, the people's lives transformed. The transformation occurred primarily in the economic sphere of their lives. However, it was not just limited to it. Another significant area of transformation beyond the economy was the religious outlook of the local people. It was noticed that the people have started using certain Arabic words in their routine conversations; they also mention the mosques and religious practices of the Arabs. The mosques, according to them, are clean and do not spread hatred, while the people practice the 'true Islam.' After spending years as migrants, most of them abandoned their old ways of Islamic practices because they considered these practices as anti-Islam and idolatry.

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