

## Gulf blacklisted cos, Govt playing an agent

Hyderabad, January 23: "I jumped from the second floor of the building. I could not bear the harassment by my employer's wife anymore," said Shabana Begum, recalling the nightmare of her work as a maid in Saudi Arabia. A mother of two children, Shabana Begum who is all of 24 years is a divorcee. Hailing from the Old City, she recalls the trauma she had to face in a place called Abha, a few kilometres from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where she went in search of a job a year ago. While her employer ill treated her and made her work 22 hours a day, she sustained severe back injuries one day after 'falling' from the second floor of a building. Wheelchair-bound, Shabana is still wary about talking of the incident as she recounts her days of hospitalization and the help she received from the Indian embassy to return to India.

"The immigration laws of our country state that a woman has to be 30 years of age in order to travel to the Gulf. But she was so desperate for a job that she stated her age as 30 in her passport," said M Bheem Reddy, a participant at the workshop on 'Case management for Gulf migrants,' organized by Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), Migrant Rights Council (MRC) and National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) on Sunday.

The first day of the three-day workshop saw five Gulf returnees present their eye-opening tales of suffering. The workshop aims at raising awareness about the conditions of the workers trapped in Gulf countries and the measures that can be taken to help them. Throughout the day, the returnees poured out their heart wrenching stories. While some were stranded there with no documents for months and some harassed and abused, others were made to work for no wages.

T Murali, one of the participants, spoke about the hardships he had to endure ever since he was recruited by Abdul Nas Co., Bahrain in 2008. Though the Indian government had blacklisted the company in 2006 itself, it strangely managed to recruit around 2000 Indians. "I worked there as a labourer and they would pay just 45 dinars a month, that is only around Rs 4500. We were told the pay would be much higher. We were not given proper accommodation and food. So I took up small jobs outside the company to support myself. When they found out, I was fired, my passport seized and the Bahrain high court imposed a travel ban on me and 127 others. They asked up to pay a fine of Rs 70,000 each if we wanted to return to India," said Murali.

P Narayana Swami, president, MRC, revealed how they brought these men back to India. "MRC filed a PIL in the AP High Court and the Indian embassy there responded and supported us. A notice was sent to the King of Bahrain following which a delegation of our workers went there and managed to get emergency out-passes issued for these men. How did a blacklisted company manage to recruit these people and take them there?" he argued. Alleging the government was acting like a broker or recruiting agent, he added that many agents and airport authorities were in the pockets of these companies. "We filed an RTI application asking about their passports and visa details, seeking to know how they were cleared to travel to Bahrain to work with a blacklisted company. Though the application was filed nearly one-and-half year ago, the only reply we received was "no records" or "unable to answer due to lack of clarity"," he said.

The remainder of the day included similar sessions, with two returnees, T Chinna Bhumaiyah and A Yellaiah from Karimnagar who worked for Al Shafar International, Dubai giving their account of how the

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company did not pay their wages of four months when it closed down, another survivor Saleema Rahman from the city talking about how she was trapped for nearly four months in the clutches of a Mudir (manager) in Riyadh who would sell servants to sheikhs for a period of time and would not pay the workers any money. A family of S Mallesh who has not heard from him in nearly five years recounted how every single effort to trace him had gone in vain. Mallesh had gone to Muscat around 17 years ago in search of a job. He used to write to his family regularly. In the last few letters, he mentioned how he had no money and that his employer was not paying him.

The programme also included a talk by Anuradha Mallimoggala, advocate in Dubai, on the precautions to be taken before travelling to Gulf countries, interaction between the participants regarding possible suggestions like appealing to the government for assistance and providing legal aid, financial support to returnees and skill development prior to departure.

An RTI query seeking to know how several men got passport/visa clearance to travel to Bahrain to work with a blacklisted company, got a stock reply of 'unable to answer due to lack of clarity'

A notice was sent to the King of Bahrain following which they managed to get emergency out-passes. But how did a blacklisted company manage to recruit these people and take them there?

Courtesy: TOI

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