THE MAN WHO HID IN AN AEROPLANE TOILET

Rahul Jayaram

Humsari Hussain turns away from the small, barren patch of land that she and her husband once owned near the two-room house they still live in. The patch is roughly the size of a tennis court, though once it had seemed to be enough. Surrounding it are well-demarcated rectangles of land owned by neighbours, where cabbages, sugar cane, and wheat are in varying stages of fruition. The patch is barren because the new owner has not worked it yet. Children from nearby homes use it as a playground. They have abandoned the hopscotch squares they etched on the hard brown earth and will soon switch to cricket.

This land once kept Humsari's family fed and was, for a poor family such as hers, the umbrella for a rainy day. Her husband, Habib Hussain, grew up working it. As did his father and his father's father. Then he sold it. For a dream.

'It was our mistake,' says his wife. 'We made a big mistake, which we are paying for.' Her voice chokes up and her eyes fill with tears. Then she gets agitated and begins to shriek, looking at me, though the person she seems to be speaking to is herself. 'We were cheated,' she says. 'We didn't do anything wrong. We didn't do anything wrong.' Her two small children tug at her knees, consoling her.

Habib sold their land so to pay for his passage to Saudi Arabia. The strategy had seemed foolproof. Habib would leave his home and his family and his village and travel a great distance in the belief that – like so many Indian men before him – he would earn enough money to return a man worthy of admiration.

Instead he changed his family's fortunes in ways he could not foresee. Then he escaped, in a most unusual way, and in the early winter of 2010, Habib Hussain was briefly a footnote in the national conversation. His face,

bearded and drawn, flashed on the television and in the newspapers, not as a symbol of a successful man of the world, but of something else.

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It is not difficult to imagine the appeal of seeking one's good fortune in a place far from Kundarki, the village of some 26,000 souls where Habib Hussain lives.

Kundarki is about one hundred miles northeast of New Delhi, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous province. Its market street is so narrow it does not allow for two-way traffic. The ground is half-hardened sludge. Sewage spills over onto the path, where it mingles with wet earth and is carried on by cycles, motorbikes, and rickshaws. Lines of grocery stores, stationery shops, and clothing sellers face each other along the route. Lamb and mutton carcasses hang from shop fronts, where flies buzz in circles around the suspended meat, like satellites. As buyers line up in front of the butcher shops, street dogs, their legs as grimy as the lane, bark at their rivals for a bone.

What little work there is to be found in Kundarki is in the fields, where Habib Hussain toiled. But for twenty years, Indian agriculture had been in a freefall, wreaking such human devastation in the interiors of north and central India that, according to a report by the National Crime Records Bureau, between 1995 and 2010, a quarter of a million Indian farmers committed suicide. Many poor Indian farmers and sharecroppers left for the cities. Millions of others, drawn by stories of the money to be made for those willing to journey to the Gulf, headed overseas, as many Indian men have since the oil boom of the 1970s.

Habib Hussain was better off than most people in Kundarki in that he owned land. The land yielded little; its worth was in its value to a buyer, and even that was not a lot. But selling it would allow him to afford his airfare, the cost of a visa, and the fee charged by an agent who would make his passage possible. Luckily, or so it appeared, the agent was a relative – Imran, his sister's husband.

Imran himself had made the journey. He had left behind a small farm and travelled to Saudi Arabia where, for three years, he worked for an Arab sheikh. When he returned, in 2008, Imran was able to set up a shop with

a photocopier, a fax machine, stationery items, and a telephone booth with long-distance calling capability. Habib saw how Imran had become a man of respect in his village. Imran bought a new Maruti car for himself and a Hero Honda motorbike for his younger brother. Imran began scouting for people who wanted jobs in Saudi Arabia as labourers, coolies, shop workers, electricians, plumbers, and carpenters. He became the local manpower consultant for the Middle East. Habib heard that Imran had sent four people from his village to Riyadh, Medina, and Jeddah, two of them to work for the same sheikh for whom he had worked.

Habib, meanwhile, was making only enough money to feed his family, the equivalent of perhaps $100 a month – a fifth of what he said Imram told him he could make in Saudi Arabia. Habib had studied till the fifth grade at a municipal school in Kundarki. He could read with some difficulty and could sign his name in Hindi. 'I wanted change,' Habib would later say. 'I wanted to do something else with my life. Give my family better things.'

In May 2009, Imran began visiting his relatives in nearby villages. His sister spoke with Habib's sister, who, in turn, spoke with Habib's wife, Humsari, about him going to Saudi Arabia. But the trip would come at a cost and no one was willing to lend Habib the money.

But then there was the land.

The family was divided about selling it. Habib's older elder brother, Jalaluddin Hussain, who lived next door and who tilled the adjoining parcel of land, opposed the idea. But Habib was determined. He told Jalaluddin that because Imran was a relative, nothing could go wrong. Habib prevailed. He sold the goats, a buffalo, and the land. He used some of his money to host a feast for his family and friends in Kundarki.

Then, a week later, he left to seek his fortune.

He would return six months later, in circumstances far different than he, his wife or anyone in Kundarki could have imagined, escorted from detention to courtroom, again and again, as a judge in Jaipur tried to determine whether Habib was a threat to the nation's security or, as he claimed, a victim of what amounted to indentured servitude, servitude so humiliating that he sought his freedom by stowing away in the toilet of an Air India flight out of Medina.

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The big water tank at Kundarki stands over a wide swath of land that is the bulk vegetable market. At one corner, just before the main entry to the market, Kalway Ali sits in a chair by his furniture shop.

Kalway is in his early forties and sports a beard and prayer cap. We exchange pleasantries and he sends a boy in the shop to fetch special 'ginger-cardamom' milk tea. The villagers, wrapped in shawls against the December winter morning, gape and smile at me. Kalway and I begin talking. Others often interrupt.

'Habib will be here tomorrow,' he says. 'He has gone to work and could not get a day off today.'

I have come to Kundarki to meet Habib, to hear his telling of the events that led to his escape. First, I have a question for Kalway, who wants me to know that all of Kundarki was thrilled at Habib's return.

It's a matter of great honour to go to Saudi Arabia, I say. What do you make of how people are treated there?

Kalway gets animated. 'Oh Lord! Not good. Not good at all. People go there thinking we will make money and send it home. Leave their wives and children behind. Get our boys and girls a little more educated. Go for Haj. However, nothing of the sort happens in Saudiya,' he mutters. Saudiya is the local slang for Saudi Arabia.

The next morning I return to Kalway Ali's furniture shop. There are more villagers there than yesterday. It's nippier than the day before, too, and the village folk are tightly covered in shawls and caps. Tea is ordered again. Soon comes a ripple of cheers from the people gathered. A young man zips into the storefront on his bicycle. A boy calls me. As I proceed toward him, the man gets off the bicycle and greets me with a tight handshake. It is Habib Hussain.

He is slim and his thick black hair is oiled and neatly combed. Habib still has the stubble that I saw in the photograph that ran in *The Hindu*. But he looks fresh and energised. He seems far removed from his past. The eyes that looked so lifeless in the photo now look well rested.

We begin to talk and ten or so villagers seem eager to chime in. Habib and I move into a space where logs of wood are stacked.

The first thing Habib talks about is greed. 'I got greedy,' he says 'I was blind. And I paid the price for it. I should have been more smart while getting into all this.'

I ask what Imran, the agent, told him. Habib is convinced that Imran – whom he believed he could trust because they were relatives – deceived him. Still, 'Please do be careful when you write about him,' Habib says. 'It's a question of my sister's life.'

Imran, he says, 'promised I would find a job in a company or an office.' Yes, he concedes, the Saudi visa that Imran arranged for him clearly stated he would do the job of a cleaner. (All Saudi Arabian work visas specify the category of worker.) 'Yes, it was a cleaner's visa and I had made it clear to Imran that I wanted to work in an office. He said with the same visa I could do other jobs. The cleaner's visa was for just the purpose of first getting to Saudi Arabia.'

Imran got Habib's passport issued in June 2009. The total expense – including Imran's charges, the visa and immigration fees, and the air ticket – amounted to 110,000 rupees, or $2,227. Habib had been earning 5,000 rupees from produce he sold off the land. The money he spent to leave for Saudi Arabia was almost two years of what had been his income.

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When the journey began, Habib spent a week in Mumbai, at an accommodation that Imran arranged, a dingy room in a lodge in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood, a small room he shared with two other people. Over the next few days, Habib underwent blood and urine tests at a hospital that issued reports recognised by Saudi Arabian authorities. Habib had expected Imran to hold his hand from the moment he left Kundarki till the time he reached Saudi Arabia, but he was on his own. 'He could at least call me and speak to me and stay in touch,' Habib says. 'He hardly kept in touch.'

Habib tells me about the day of the visa interview at the Saudi Embassy in Mumbai. 'I wanted last-minute instructions from Imran and we spoke after many days,' he says. 'He told me what will be asked and what to answer. But he had also promised to buy me good clothes and I didn't have any good ones.'

As he waited in line for his visa interview, Habib says, an officer looked at him, pointed to the slippers that he was wearing, and moved him into another line. Habib believes that the first line he was in was for those applying for a slightly 'superior' visa, one for a plumber or electrician or factory worker. But in Habib's telling, the officer looked at his appearance, muttered something in Arabic, and moved him to the section handing out work visas for 'cleaners.' Habib got the visa eventually, but was furious with Imran. 'I called him that evening, but he kept saying it would not be an issue,' Habib says. 'Deep down, though, I knew it was a problem.'

Habib doesn't remember the exact day he flew from Mumbai to Jeddah, but the month was July, in 2009. His first flight ever, and an international one at that, was on Air Arabia. Habib was excited about Saudi Arabia. But, he says, when he landed at King Abdulaziz International Airport, there was no one to pick him up or to give him directions. 'I waited for two-and-a-half hours at the airport, looking here and there,' he says. 'I did not expect this.' Habib had a few hundred Saudi riyals. He tried calling Imran but the call wouldn't go through. He did not want to call his family, though the thought often crossed his mind.

After two hours of waiting in the lobby of the airport with his luggage, a man turned up. He was an Arab wearing a traditional *dishdasha*. He looked at Habib, called his name, and checked his passport and visa. He asked Habib to come with him. For almost half an hour, Habib tells me, he followed this man, pushing his baggage trolley, until they reached a series of rooms in the airport. This man instructed Habib to stay inside till he returned. He told Habib he would be back in half an hour. When he left, Habib heard the door snap. The room had been locked from the outside.

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The room was large and occupied by five other men from different parts of India. It seemed to be a waiting room for transit passengers. There were rolled mattresses, rugs, and sheets in a corner. Most of the other men were sitting on a mat. Habib guessed that these men slept on the floor. 'They did not look happy to me,' Habib says. 'They spoke little, but they were friendly. They had been confined to the room for ten days.'

All of them had arrived in Saudi Arabia on 'cleaner' visas. Twice a day, the Arab man would open the door and a Bengali airport worker would bring them their food. This consisted of lentils, big rotis, and curries. Whenever Habib asked him about work or about Imran, the Arab man would get the Bengali speaker to interpret. 'You will be fine, wait for some days,' the Bengali said. Habib says he remained in that room for twelve days.

The room had a toilet, a refrigerator, and air conditioning. For the first four days the Arab man came in with the Bengali twice a day. Later, the Bengali dropped in alone for a third time in the early evening. It was then that the men in the room would plead with him to get them out, or at least to find out what was happening to them.

Habib doesn't know the Bengali's name, but all those in the room called him '*bhai*,' brother. He assured them that they would begin working soon, that the Arab man would place them either with companies or with an individual employer. All those confined were devout Muslims. They had not prayed in days. Habib and others requested '*bhai*' to take them to a mosque.

Habib describes, with some bile, the first time he prayed in Saudi Arabia. On a Friday several days after his arrival, *bhai* came to pick them up. There were two other Arabs with him. 'We walked some distance and then switched from elevator to elevator before we reached a big parking area,' he says. They crowded into the back of a van and drove for thirty minutes. It was Habib's first glimpse of the world outside the airport.

But at the mosque, Habib says, he and the other Indians were barred from entering. Instead they were told they could pray outside the mosque, in a traffic island, a hundred feet away. *Bhai* asked that the men be allowed inside but was refused. 'None of us said much, but we were all very angry,' Habib says. 'We stood there and then we prayed.'

On the drive back to the airport they stopped at a cheap roadside restaurant. Habib says it was the first good meal he had eaten since the flight from Mumbai. In the days that followed, the food *bhai* brought got better, too. Instead of two meals a day, they now got three. The men pooled some of their money and gave it to *bhai*.

After two weeks of this, Habib was finally put to work. First, he had to surrender his passport. Then Habib took his luggage and moved to another corner of the airport. *Bhai* told him that three of his roommates were

going to Riyadh for work, at a company, while the fourth fellow went to work for a sheikh on the outskirts of Jeddah.

'And what about me?' Habib asked him.

'Wait,' said *bhai*.

Habib's first job was cleaning the men's toilets and urinals at the airport. 'It was the work of a very low person,' he says. 'I felt betrayed and embarrassed.' He worked with two other men, one a Bangladeshi and the other a Pakistani. Work began at six in the morning. Habib worked seven days a week, with a half-day off on either Tuesday or Wednesday. He did not get paid. 'When I would ask the Arab about my salary, he said he would give me money in two or three weeks,' Habib tells me. (Here one of the other workers helped translate what the Arab man was saying to Habib.) 'He would also say since I was new, I was being observed on how I was working,' he tells me, searching for the word, probation.

Through an arrangement with a restaurant not far from the arrival terminal, Habib and his colleagues ate at a price lower than that on the menu. And the owner let them have lunches and dinners on credit—'Two big rotis and a dal and sometimes chicken or mutton curry,' Habib says. Two times a day. He says he never got paid.

After two months, Habib started to get restless. He called home and spoke to his wife and children and broke down. His wife told him that she had not seen Imran. When she asked Habib's sister about Imran, she was told he was away from home and would return in two weeks. Habib told Humsari that he felt swindled by Imran. Humsari wept on the phone. The children, she told him, missed their father.

A few days after the call to his family, Habib was cleaning when another worker came to him with the Arab boss. 'Would you want to work in Medina?' asked the boss. 'Pay is better and the work is moving luggage.' Habib thought a little and then agreed to the Medina offer. The next day, he took his bags and flew to Medina. The flight was short. His Arab boss handed him his passport, which he would surrender after landing in Medina.

But things were scarcely different in Medina. He worked in another airport, one that looked identical to the one in Jeddah. It seemed to Habib that he had just moved to another section of the same airport, only he had flown by air to get there. For the next three-and-a-half months, Habib

moved luggage. 'It was a little better,' he says. 'I did not have to deal with toilets anymore.' The rhythm of his life, however, remained almost unchanged: the room he shared with others would be locked from the outside. There would always be an Arab guarding the door. Habib's shift was always for twelve hours, but sometimes in the day and sometimes through late evening to early morning.

Habib was fed. But, he says, he had yet to be paid. Habib asked the other workers whether he should inquire about his wages. Two of them told him they had started getting paid after five months. Habib thought of asking, but hesitated. His confidence, he says, was shaken. He was afraid of upsetting his boss, who, he adds, retained a large man as his enforcer.

When Habib spoke of the enforcer, I sensed something amiss.

'What happened?' I ask.

'He hit me,' Habib says, his mostly neutral tone now inflected by rage.

'Why?' I ask.

'I was late one day,' he said. The guards knew the schedule of their shifts – they kept a timetable. A guard would keep the door open for select workers to exit one by one, ten minutes before their shift began. On that day the others, he explained, took time to finish bathing in the room and he was the last to leave.

So when Habib readied himself to leave the room, he was fifteen minutes late. As he was leaving, the guard came with the Arab boss's deputy. Behind them was a horde of other co-workers. Before Habib could utter a word, the deputy struck him. He aimed for Habib's cheek but, Habib tells me, 'He hit me on the neck. Then he screamed at me in Arabic.' Almost immediately the Arab man turned back. It was a command for everyone to return to work.

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I wanted to speak with Imran, so that he could tell me his version of Habib's story, to understand how it was that Habib felt first confused and then betrayed. What had Imran promised? Did he tell Habib that his janitor's visa was merely a convenience for gaining entry to Saudi Arabia, and that it would keep him from a better and less demeaning job? Was Habib wrong to feel betrayed, especially by his brother-in-law?

But Imran refused to meet with me and did not reply to my messages and calls. He did try to clarify things a bit to reporters from *The Indian Express*, on December 28, 2009, where he washed his hands of the matter. He said that, along with Habib, three more persons had gone to Jeddah on job visas. Imran is quoted as saying, ‘I contacted the other three persons this morning and they said Habib returned because he was missing his family. I took money from Habib only to arrange the ticket and the visa. I have come to know that Habib sent money to his family twice.’ He said he had told Habib he would be working as a labourer at Jeddah airport and make 800 riyals a month. ‘I am not in the business of sending people abroad. One of my friends in Mumbai who works in an agency asked me if anyone wanted to go abroad for work. So I contacted Habib and the others,’ Imran said.

I had other questions for Imran that I couldn’t ask. So instead, to better understand how this labour system works, I sought out those who understood something about the system that people like Imran are part of, and how a barely-literate farmer like Habib might feel that he had been led astray.

I travelled to the nearest city, Moradabad. There, along its anarchic main road, was a line of travel agencies. The poorly painted buildings wore a mossy, rain-drenched look. But their billboards claimed they could get you a passport, visa, and tickets for a low price. And inside they looked better. It was almost refreshing entering one of these offices, ragged on the outside but slick within.

Akbar Travels of India Private Limited is among the better-known international ticketing agencies in the city. Rifaqat Ali Khan, an affable Urdu-speaking man in his early forties, has been the manager of the Moradabad branch for four years. Though his company is not involved in manpower consulting, the business of ticketing and air travel has given him a close view into the workings of Middle East migration. The office is warm and shields us from the evening fog outside.

‘I cannot tell you the number of instances of people coming into my office and asking for a job in Dubai or Saudi Arabia,’ Khan says, shaking his head. ‘Every day, at least one comes in. Two years ago, we even kept a big notice outside our door, explaining we are ticketing agents and not manpower consultants. Still, many people didn’t understand.’

For Khan this misunderstanding is a symptom of a deeper confusion. 'The really poor class of this town, and its surrounding areas, does not grasp the fundamental difference between people who arrange work in a foreign country and those who arrange your travel,' he explains. 'Clearly, if they cannot follow this, they are easy prey for so-called agents.' The government's regulations have not been able to clarify the distinction between a manpower consultant and a travel agency, Khan explains. 'It's a gap that is exploited by all sorts of people. When a man says I am an "agent" he can be a manpower consultant or a travel agent or both. This allows anyone to become an "agent".' Thus, an individual can exploit the crack in the governmental regulations.

Khan, like many people in Moradabad, has immediate family in the Middle East. They have been residing there for the last twenty-five years. He has travelled there every other year and has conducted the Hajj prayers.

What meaning does the Middle East hold for him? I ask.

'My uncle, who runs a business in Dubai now, had to sweat it out in the early 1980s when he went there,' he says. 'Working conditions were, and still are, horrible – especially if you begin at the lower rungs of employment.'

Why are Indians so crazy about the Middle East?, I ask.

There is the Hajj, and the money, 'bogus' as Khan says it often is. But there is something more, too: 'Going to the Middle East was a status issue. It bought you respect in this town,' he says. 'If you were a father who had a young son working there, it meant the son would get better prospective alliances in marriage. In the culture of Uttar Pradesh and Moradabad, you could show off a little if you had a son working there.'

He explains that Moradabad's four-hundred-year-long reputation as a centre for brass works declined dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s, as cheaper Chinese goods flooded the market. 'We're still a big-producing brass city, but not in the way we were long ago. The working class that was employed in those units saw their incomes rise very marginally,' he says. 'So a lot of them caught the Dubai or Saudi flight.'

But the magic of the Middle East has, in Khan's view, waned.

'All the poor folk here would think if you got to Saudi Arabia there would be trees of gold,' he says. 'Instead you are working in a desert at 45 degrees Celsius, sometimes being abused or beaten, and the money is a

few crumbs more than what you get here.' And with India's domestic economy growing, especially in the cities of Mumbai, Delhi, or even in the state capital of Lucknow, Moradabad's lower middle class began seeking work in distant parts of India, instead. 'People used to send a lot of money home from the Middle East. Now it comes from inside India.'

So it is, he says, that agents like Imran do not scout for clients in Moradabad proper. Instead, they operate in the interior, in the nearby villages. 'That's where the gullible catch is,' he says, speaking of the villages surrounding Moradabad with the same sort of hauteur that big-city Indians of Delhi or Mumbai reserve for places like Moradabad. 'People would go to Saudi Arabia, work for a sheikh for four or five years, and return. By that time, they had developed a good relationship with their employers. The sheikh would ask them to send more labourers. So when this person returns, he calls himself informally an "agent".'

Many of these travellers come back to their home village and would not want to go back to the Middle East. Yet they wouldn't consider doing the same work they did before they went away; that would imply loss of status and of face. Besides, the riyals or dirhams earned abroad would now come in handy. 'So, this kind of man would set up a small shop with a photocopier, phone booth, passport-size photo facility, or a stationery business that would earn him a decent monthly income,' Khan says. For banks, such a returnee has a creditable profile, worthy of a loan if he wants to start a business.

Which sounded very much like Imran's story.

But what of the men like Habib – the dupes, the innocents, the ones whom Habib himself called 'airport coolies.'

'Since you are from Delhi, you should go to the centre of such agents,' he says.

Where? I ask.

'Have you heard of Khizrabad?'

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Its formal name is Khizrabad Bhagol but it is better known as just Khizrabad, a blue-collar borough in southeast Delhi. For workers from

Delhi and its outskirts wanting to work in the Middle East, Khizrabad is the Mecca they come to before taking off for the real Mecca.

On the facades of the offices there, dozens of billboards draw your attention. Most of them promise to take you to Middle East nations like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar. A few also offer services to Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Unlike Akbar Travels, many of these firms combine the functions of getting a job for a labourer, procuring his visa, and also arranging his international travel – a one-stop shop for those eager to work in the Middle East.

Khizrabad is the hub for emigration agents and small agencies. Though many are affiliated with firms, some are not. The non-associated agents mostly bring in clients from outside New Delhi. The ones within an agency attract dozens of aspirants from the city proper. When you speak to any agent, he will always claim that he is working for a firm, even if he is not.

Pervez Ahmed is one such man. He is in his mid-thirties and has been in the business since his late teens. 'I work for all these offices,' he says, pointing to the roughly two-dozen firms in the area. He has worked for most of these firms and has since gone freelance. 'With a job there is security and growth is steady,' he explains. But 'in freelance there can be more money, if you calculate on the basis per client, but business can be shaky. That's why most agents are all with companies now.' He gets a phone call and excuses himself, saying it will take him a long time to return. I look out from his office onto the street. I see two men wrapped in shawls, smoking beedis – thin South Asian cigarettes with tobacco wrapped in leaves. I head out to talk to them.

Mintu Singh and Bijayant Singh are both pipe fitters in their early thirties. They are waiting for Ahmed to call them, once he readies certain documents. They have travelled far, having come to Khizrabad from Siwan district, six hundred miles away in the province of Bihar. They want jobs in Dubai. Both are clear they don't want to go to Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, considered by many Indian lower class labourers as rigidly Islamic and demanding environments.

Why did they come all the way here? I ask.

'We didn't trust the agents in our hometown,' says Mintu. 'Also, Bijayant and I have a friend who is now working in the U.A.E. Pervez got him the job. We trust him.'

Bijayant concurs. Both he and Mintu have been in Delhi for a month. They've been staying at the homes of friends from Siwan who are working in Delhi. 'The training here is very good,' Bijayant says. 'And they conduct interviews here also.'

Bijayant tells me of one nearby office that arranges for interviews for housekeeping, cleaning, carpentry, and electrical jobs in the United Arab Emirates. A door opens and both are called inside.

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To perform well at an interview for a decent job in the Middle East, a man must be prepared. And that, in turn, has spurred yet another industry – job training for work in the Gulf. G.M.C Trade Centre for Mechanical and Technical Training is just such a place. It has the appearance of a warehouse that has been converted into a training space. There are niches with pipes, plumbing materials, welding machinery, furniture kits, painting and fabrication equipment, brass and steel polishing items and liquids, and a tiny classroom with a blackboard. In the middle of the hall is a bench where two applicants are paying fees to join the course. Facing them are a young man and a middle-aged one. They run the centre. The older man is K.M. Khan.

Khan is bearded, smiling, and has a sturdy millworker's handshake. He takes me for a little guided tour of G.M.C. Khan was a facilities manager in a building in Abu Dhabi for many years before returning to India for good. 'What I see is that those with skills like plumbing, carpentry already have the raw talent,' he says. 'We make the finished product before they take off.'

To illustrate, he takes me to the plumbing niche of the hall. He lifts two pipes fitted to washbasin taps, one in the left hand the other in the right. 'This one' – he raises the tap on the left – 'has a conventional system.' He disassembles the tap to show the pattern of the washer, the pivot, the valve and the nut that holds the tap together. He then shows me the other one, which 'you will see in a five-star hotel bathroom.' This one is more complex. 'The simple one is what the plumbers coming here will have worked on for years in India. The other one, they wouldn't have seen much of. Those are only in big houses or hotels.'

Khan's explanation of the fine points of, and differences between, the water tap and the pipe, applies to almost everything else inside the G.M.C. training centre. These include mechanical and technical apparatuses, and pipe fitting, carpentry, and building materials, to name a few. All the types of fixtures common in India and prevalent abroad are kept to educate students about the differences between each particular piece of equipment and the techniques required to work them.

In short, G.M.C. brings the working world of the Middle East to Delhi. 'Our purpose is to get those who want to go to Dubai to know what it is like to work there, even before they go,' Khan says. Among the other interesting things he does is to hold classes in the small classroom in another corner. On the blackboard is a diagram drawn in chalk. It shows the drainage structure of a building in Dubai. One day a week, Khan becomes a teacher in the classroom, explaining how civic and sanitation systems function in the Middle East. For applicants who want to work as company van and tempo drivers, he deputises another person at G.M.C. to teach them right-hand driving. (India, like many countries of the Commonwealth, drives on the left.)

Speaking to Khan, it becomes evident the kind of pre-departure exposure is something that someone like Habib missed out on. All this priming before travel makes one look at agents a little differently. Clearly, not all of them can be painted with one brush.

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By December, 2009, Habib Hussain had been at the Medina airport for a little more than three months. He worked almost entirely with a company that deals with passengers on Hajj flights. Many of those flights came from India on the Indian national carrier, Air India.

Though Habib primarily moved luggage and helped in the upkeep of the arrivals area, he also cleaned Air India flights. Having so much wanted to flee the task of cleaning urinals, Habib now found himself cleaning the toilets on Air India planes. He did it, he says, because he lacked the will to complain. He says he was still unpaid.

On December 25, 2009, he entered one such Air India aircraft. This one was flying to the northern Indian city of Jaipur. The flight was scheduled

to depart in two hours. Habib cleaned the aisles and went into one of the toilets with his equipment. Once he got in, he says, he began rinsing the rim of the washbasin. He finished it and dealt next with the toilet seat. He had closed the door. As he was scrubbing, he shut the door tight.

'I didn't know how it all happened. I don't know how I got locked from the outside,' he says. He tried yanking the doorknob but the door wouldn't open. He banged and shouted for some time, but heard nothing. He kept at it for ten minutes and then gave up.

Then he sensed the aircraft move – on the ground, for about half an hour. In the course of that time, he made up his mind: he would stay silent.

He thought this was his best chance to escape from Saudi Arabia. He knew doing what he was doing – 'no ticket, no passport' – was like a leap into the ocean. Quietly, Habib prayed and wept.

He heard faint noises outside the door. He wiped the sweat off his brow. He felt cold. He was sure the plane was going to take off.

He sat back on the toilet seat and waited. Then, he felt the plane begin to roll fast.

He held the doorknob tight with his right hand. With his left hand he held the washbasin faucet. This position helped him keep balance. In time, the wobbling of the aircraft subsided and Habib released his grip on the knob and the water tap.

A few minutes later there was a thud at the door. Somebody tried to yank it open. Habib then heard a fiddling sound and the door spun open. It was an Air India stewardess, and she let out a scream. Habib joined his hands into a *namaste* and pleaded to be spared.

More flight attendants rushed forward as passengers looked on. 'I told them about my condition, and what had happened,' Habib says. Soon there were other people, even some passengers who got involved. The stewardesses gave Habib a vacant seat. Habib told them the story of his time in Saudi Arabia. The attendants called the pilot. By now many curious passengers had gathered. Most, if not all, were Muslims. Habib's tale of privation was an often-heard one. It was the manner of his exit that was new.

Habib reckons the staff felt convinced he was telling the truth. He was given biryani to eat, and a blanket. The flight had a scheduled stop in Jeddah, he was told. When one of the pilots came back to the scene, Habib says he screamed at the attendants for the breach in security that had

allowed Habib to somehow stow away. 'The pilot told her, "I knew there was something wrong with one of the toilets, and I had told you to check it,"' Habib recalls. (Air India planes have radar sensors in the cockpit. The sensors indicate any intrusive presence during the time before a plane takes off. Air India officials later conceded to the press that Habib's presence on the flight was not only a huge embarrassment but a major security lapse. Air India declined to return calls for this story.)

Then the pilot turned to Habib. He questioned him for twenty minutes. The pilot asked him if he wanted to get off at Jeddah. Habib refused. 'I pleaded with him to take me to India,' Habib says. The pilot warned him about the repercussions of landing in Jaipur without a passport or ticket. He would be handed over to the police. 'I was fine with going to a jail in my country, rather than rot in Saudia,' Habib says he told him. He was allowed to remain on the plane.

When the aircraft finally landed in Jaipur, one attendant remained with Habib. As the rest of the passengers left, some offering him their good wishes, Habib was instructed to stay where he was. Finally, he was escorted off the plane. The pilot and attendant walked him into the immigration section, where he was interrogated again. Soon police officers arrived. An immigration official helped Habib fill out a document regarding his arrival in India, which Habib signed. And then he was led away.

At the police station, Habib was booked under a provision of the Passport Act of India that treats entry into the country without a valid passport and visa as a crime punishable by five years in prison. He was placed under arrest. But by now, the Jaipur press corps had been tipped off to the story and reporters and cameramen descended on the police station.

That night the nation watched Habib Hussain – flanked by two uniformed officers; bearded, drawn, and dressed in a striped brown sweater – being led into detention. The reports not only told of his curious and remarkable escape, but of the miseries that had led him to flee.

Habib himself was not shy about speaking, even if he did colour his escape as somewhat more calculated than merely accidentally locking himself into an airline toilet. 'I had no money,' he told a throng of reporters. 'My employer used to beat me up and treated me badly. That is when I started planning my return to India. I hid in a plane and came here.'

Reporters travelled to Kundarki to find his wife. She sat on the ground outside their spare house, a blue scarf covering her head, as her young children stood nearby. 'He had been very unhappy since he left India,' she said. 'He used to tell me on the phone that his employers delay making salary payments and that they sometimes made him work thirteen hours nonstop.'

The questioning of Habib went on for ten days.

'I pray to the government to release me so I can go back to my wife and two children,' Habib told reporters. 'I think of them all the time. All I can do is sit in a corner and cry.'

At last he was brought before a judge, who concurred with the police that Habib, whom by now had become known as the 'Air India stowaway,' was telling the truth, and that while he had surely exposed a breach in airline security, he posed no further risk to the nation's safety.

'He is a poor man who was tortured,' the judge told the reporters waiting outside his courtroom. 'and he has come back in desperation.'

His elder brother Jalaluddin came with others to Jaipur and took Habib back to Kundarki.

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Habib pauses as he recounts his story. There are more people surrounding us in Kalway Ali's shop where we sit and talk. 'When I got back home, I felt like I got back my self-respect,' Habib says.

The villagers around us in Kalway's shop now take over the conversation. 'The whole village came out to greet him. Our brother Habib had returned,' says Salim, a worker in Kalway Ali's shop.

'Do you still hold a grudge against Imran?' I ask.

'Of course, I don't talk to him,' Habib says, but adds, 'It's in the past now,'

I asked Habib about what life back in India would be like for him. After all this, I said, 'What does the future hold?'

'Life is good,' Habib says. 'I am home with my family. I work in the brass unit. I can take care of them with whatever I earn. What else should a man want?'