# The struggle to belong
## *Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.*

Amsterdam, 7-9 July 2011

## Zones of contact and spaces of negotiation:

## The Indian diaspora in Muscat (Sultanate of Oman)

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Paper presented at the International RC21 conference 2011
Session nr. 28: Living with difference

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## 1. Introduction

The dynamic development of Oman's capital is closely linked to migration processes that have been taking place for over four decades. Both internal migration as well as international migration have contributed to these changes, the latter being the topic of this article. To show how the dynamics of international migration have impacted urban development, an example: In 1970 approx. 30-50,000 people lived in the Capital Area (Scholz 1990, 162). The population rose to 226,000 inhabitants in 1980, with the number of non-Omanis already reaching 108,000 (ibid.). In 2003 a census was conducted, indicating that approx. 630,000 people were now living alone in the Capital Area, 40% of them stemming from overseas. The number of foreigners in all of Oman was estimated at 560,000 – approx. a quarter of the total population. It is therefore obvious that the total number of non-Omanis living in the desert nation has increased over all. However, the highest concentration of foreigners in proportion to Omanis has always been in the Capital Area of Muscat.

Muscat is an ideal example of a young and dynamic urban and demographic development. International migration to Oman has largely been a direct result of globalization (e.g. increasing and improved transport, information and communication). On the other hand, immigration has been systematically regulated by Omani politics. The comparatively high salary level makes the country economically attractive for a foreign work force. Although the employment situation is extremely precarious as employees can be made redundant on short notice. There are so many migrant communities, that there is an ongoing political effort to create the notion of a homogenous Omani nation; in other words, an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006; Valeri 2009, 119) which claims cultural hegemony. Oman aims at conveying this image publicly – in contrast to other, similarly developed cities in the Gulf region.

In migrant communities, an individual's position in the hierarchy of the labour market and his/her subsequent social standing vary significantly. More than any other city perhaps, Muscat is suited for a study based on a qualitative empirical approach: On the one hand, a large number of migrant communities live here and they amount to at least half of the urban population. They also hold very specific yet different positions in the hierarchical Omani society. On the other hand, Omani society has developed strong mechanisms of exclusion towards non-Omani nationals. Some already appear to have become social practices. Other restrictions for foreigners are e.g. not being able to obtain Omani citizenship or buy property. Such opportunities which would allow foreigners to integrate and be accepted are legitimised by political, social and cultural hegemony.

## 2. Concepts of Migration Networks, Transnational Communities and Diaspora

Durand/Massey (1992, 17) consider migration networks as a „set of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas". Migrating entails specific costs and risks, therefore decisions to do so have to take those parameters into account. Networks usually make them more foreseeable and measureable (Parnreiter 2000, 36). Ties that are less close and not family bound are referred to as "weak ties" (Granovetter 1973). One of the advantages of "weak ties" is that they are more flexible, more interdependent, complex and dynamic (Goetze 2002, 159). Nonetheless, ties within a family are perceived as more reliable sources of information and experience. Emigrants, who have succeeded abroad, are often seen as role models (Fawcett 1989). This model of migrant interaction has been used e.g. in analysing the international dynamics of migration between the Caribbean states or between Mexico and the U.S. The majority of labour migrants are encouraged by their networks to relocate. Such contacts play a crucial role in influencing migration biographies. Differences in salary and absolute distances are of lesser importance (Pries 2001, 34). Furthermore, existing networks can predetermine the migrants' spatial and professional preferences (Parnreiter 2000, 36).

Anthropologists in the U.S. have developed a research approach called Transnationalism (e.g. Glick, Schiller et al. 1997a, 1997b). Transnationalism describes a process where immigrants create a social surrounding for themselves in which both the country of origin and the current country of residence are interlinked. So, transmigrants develop multifaceted, transnational ties on an economic, social, organizational, religious and political level and across families. Their networks are spread over two or more nationalities. The transmigrants act, make decisions, overcome worries and identify themselves across the threshold of their networks (ibid., 1997b, 81f.). This new research approach developed out of the new migration patterns, coupled with a growing international migration as well as the new possibilities for migrants to stay in contact with people at home (e.g. through actual physical or communicative-virtual contact). These changes made a new understanding of migrants and migration necessary. However, transmigration mainly focuses on labour migration because transnational migrants often constitute the proletariat of the receiving country's work force (ibid. 1997b, 95). More and more however, highly qualified workers (Vertovec 2002) – particularly researchers (Latour 1987) – are a growing group amongst international migrants.

It is only recently that the concept of diaspora has become more prominent in the area of transmigration research. In this context, the Jewish diaspora is seen as the archetype (Safran 1999, 365), but e.g. the Armenians, Turkish, Greeks, Palestinians, Chinese or the African diaspora of former slaves in the Americas (Hall 1990; Braziel/Mannur 2003, 2) are also referred to. Safran (1999, 364f.) gave an often cited definition of diasporas as being "expatriate minority communities", which were dispersed from their centre, i.e. their home country, to the periphery or to another country. They cultivate a collective memory and melancholic attempts to keep myths of the home country alive. The immigrants do not feel fully accepted by the receiving

country; instead they hope to return to their country of origin one day. They feel responsible for the safety and prosperity of their native country. Lastly, their collective conscience is shaped by the existing ties to their home country. Increasingly however, current research has found that the wish to return to or constant references to ones' place of birth have become a less important criteria for diasporas (Clifford 1999). Diaspora was mostly used in the context of the above-mentioned historically and politically motivated archetypes, and helped emphasise their religious significance (Smart 1999; Braziel/Mannur 2003, 1). Today, the semantic range is greater and the expression "diaspora" is most often used synonymously with other terms such as „immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" (Tölölyan 1991, 4f.), and „transnational community".

Nevertheless, one should mention that there are important differences between diasporas and communities (Dahlman 2004, 486). Communities, that are not considered diasporas, can still exhibit „diasporic dimensions to their practices and cultures" (Clifford 1999, 303) with some communities being „more diasporic than others" (ibid., 310). This indicates the broad empirical and conceptual range of this social phenomenon. The concept of diaspora is changing and now has more positive connotations, be they anything from latent to openly positive (Mayer 2005, 9). Diasporic ties have become an economic success. For this reason, diasporas are now also conceptualized as a resource or asset (Kokot 2007) and are becoming important to (trans-)migration research.

An underlying question is whether „expatriate minority communities" are by definition diasporas if they are developed mainly through voluntary international labour migration. More crucial than obtaining a steadfast scientific answer, is trying to determine whether the migrants themselves feel uprooted and in misery (Mayer 2005, 10), perhaps even discriminated against, excluded or marginalized from the society in which they find themselves (Clifford 1999, 311ff.).

Taking all of these assumptions into consideration, we came to the following open questions, defining an ongoing research project[1]:

- How do the different migrant communities live together in the city and how do they organise their daily lives?
- What significance do the existing institutional and personal networks have for the members of migrant communities and how are they organised?
- Where and how do foreigners deal or negotiate with Omani natives or other individuals or groups?
- To what extent do migrant communities perceive their situation as "diasporic"?

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The contact zones (Mayer 2005) between a diaspora and the receiving society is one main research area. But, we also take a look at the links between some diasporas selected from the many to be found in Muscat. To depict the wide range of migrants' social and economic positions, Egyptians, Indians, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshi and Europeans were selected as focus groups. In this paper we present some of the first observations we made based on the empirical data and the interviews we conducted during the field trip in March 2011. The interviews dealt with everyday life of the Indian community in Muscat. To understand what their possibilities, conditions and interests in social integration it is necessary to get an idea of optional zones of contact and spaces of negotiation in the new – also if just temporary – place of residence and work. We therefore shall give an overview of the labour migration and its developments in Oman and the socio-spatial differentiation of the Capital Area of Muscat. Subsequently, we shall then concentrate on the work conditions for Indians in Muscat, their everyday practices and networks.

## 3. Characteristics of the labour immigration to Oman

Since the beginning of the oil production on the Arabian Peninsula, the region has experienced a large influx of labour immigrants. Studies have shown that the migration system in the Gulf States has changed significantly multiple times (Birks/Sinclair 1980, 1992). In the early stages, employees were mainly recruited from Egypt. Since the 1990ies though, Indian citizens have become the largest national group migrating to Oman for work. This shift was caused by growing concerns over immigrants from other Arab countries influencing Omani politics. Another reason was the fear of an "Egyptisation" of the Omani language and culture (Kapiszewski 2006, 7). Additionally, Arab migrants are often thought of being subversive and prone to going on strike easily. Asian nationals on the other hand are perceived as being more controllable and non-political (Castles/Miller 2009, 164f.). They are also cheaper to employ and easier to lay off (Kapiszewski 2006, 7). The number of Asian migrants in particular from Southeast and East Asia, e.g. Bangladesh and the Philippines (Massey et al. 2009, 139), continues to rise. The percentage of female migrants is increasing, too (Castles/Miller 2009, 165).

Throughout the years however, the labour market of the Gulf States has remained very hierarchical and segmented. The top earners, who also enjoy the most privileges, are a small number of Western experts. The Omanis themselves take the second highest rank, followed by migrants from Arabic countries and lastly Asian migrants (Omran/Roudi 1993; Massey et al. 2009, 141). The majority of the latter group is mostly employed in the construction industry, trade, manufacturing or agricultural sector or as domestic workers. But, the working conditions they are forced to accept are significantly below the natives' (ILO 2009, 3f.). Nevertheless, the Omani economy continues to depend on foreign work force even though the government has actively taken on countermeasures. One of them – the most common practice – is the "Omanisation", a policy aiming at systematically replacing foreign employees with Omani natives. In 1985 52% of the labour force in Oman

were from overseas, a decade later in 1995 they amounted to 64% (United Nation Expert Group 2006, 16). According to the Ministry of National Economy (2009) in 2007 the percentage of foreigners in the private sector totalled 77% as opposed to 22% of Omani nationals. The "Omanisation" policy only succeeded in the public sector, where the quota of Omanis is estimated at 80% with an upward trend. Then again, this sector offers less employment opportunities than other areas of the economy (Gonzales et al. 2008, 162).

Of the 638,000 foreign employees working in the private sector in 2007, 62% were of Indian nationality. This high percentage rate originates in the long lasting history of trade relationships between Oman and India (Pradhan 2010). The second largest group of nationals are migrants from Pakistan (ca. 13%), followed by Bangladeshi (ca. 12%), Filipinos (ca. 2%), Sri Lankans and Egyptians (both ca. 1%; Ministry of National Economy 2009; ILO 2009, 3). In the official statistics European labour migrants are not highlighted separately, they are included in the category "Other Nationalities" (ca. 9%). The percentage of Indians and Egyptians working in the public sector is almost equal with 39% and 38%, respectively (Pradhan 2010, 13).

Taking current approaches of migration research into account, the high rate of immigration in Oman appears to be brought about by better salaries, a higher quality of life as well as more promising career opportunities in comparison to the migrants' native countries (Borjas 1989, Kapiszewski 2006, 11). The close proximity of India, Pakistan and the Gulf States is also of importance as it also allows poorer families to send relatives abroad and benefit from their remittances (United Nation Expert Group 2006, 22).

The theory of the segmented labour market actually sees the requirements and demands of modern industrialised societies as a major incentive for international migration (Piore 1979). Omanis avoid insecure, poorly paid jobs with a low reputation, thus making it necessary to recruit foreign employees. In addition to the lack of an unskilled native workforce, Oman does not have enough citizens to staff the better paid, better thought of and highly qualified job positions. Hence, foreigners take on these jobs. Despite being highly trained however, these foreign employees work under the same precarious employment conditions as the unskilled nationals from other countries do. Their employment contracts are usually temporary and they can be made redundant on short notice, too.


## 4. Muscat – an international (migration) city

Since the beginning of petroleum exports in 1967, the Sultanate of Oman has experienced a swift and intensive modernization not only bringing economic transformation upon the country but also political and social changes (cf. e.g. Ibrahim 1982; Pridham 1987; Peterson 2004; Valeri 2009). Growing economic activities have led to a rapid increase of job positions. The multiplying number of branches of foreign companies has accelerated the demand for skilled work force even more.

Some of the most important economic activities are concentrated in the region of Muscat, a city with a representative character. It also is the centre for political-administrative functions (Hawley 1977). The transformations Oman has been experiencing are mirrored in the Capital Area's demographic development, which today is a culturally very heterogenic region. Up until 1970 the port cities Muscat and Mutrah were two independent cities. Together with the surrounding settlements, they were merged into one administrative unit. The Capital Area today stretches over 80km along a narrow coast line framed by the near mountainous region (cf. Fig. 1).

There are two distinctive features that set Muscat's development dynamics apart from other metropolitan areas of the "modern periphery" (Souza 2008). From the beginning of the modernisation push, the expansion of the Capital Area has been clearly monitored and managed by the Omani government on the basis of the National Development Strategy, which came into effect in 1975 and was laid out for the following three decades (Whelan 1987; cf. Ministry of National Economy 2009). Secondly, the high revenues from petroleum exports led to financial independence and enabled the development and upgrading of the infrastructure to be self-financed.

The following aspects are relevant to the socio-spatial differentiation of Muscat (Scholz 1990): Throughout the decades of modernization the distinguishing feature of social segregation has not only been nationality (i.e. Omani – Non-Omani). Gradually over time, segregation began to take place on the basis of the individuals' socio-economic position in society, especially income. Through monitoring the expansion of settlements, the government was able to steer the socio-spatial development to a sizeable extent. Thus, it could thwart and counteract the spread of urban poverty promptly and efficiently. For example sometimes land was seized illegally and built upon. Basic infrastructure was lacking, so that conditions similar to squatter settlements prevailed, as it was the case in Wadi Kabir in 1977 (ibid., 177). The government reacted by systematically erecting houses for the low-income population. Other instruments to prevent illegal settlements included e.g. regulations on awarding land for development and particularly providing financial support for low-income groups, thus giving them the means to build (ibid., 138f.). The less preferred living areas along the Southern banks of the basin and Wadis of the city were designated for low-income classes. Influenced by the lifestyle and living preferences of the European labour migrants, some of the favoured locations and thus more expensive areas in Muscat, are the Northern basin of Ruwi as well as the new developments to the West of Mutrah and Old Muscat (Wuttayah, Hayy as-Saruj, Madinat Sultan Qaboos),. The city's hillsides (e.g. Qurm) were also populated by the wealthy living in palatial houses in the midst of huge gardens. Even twenty years ago a specific address in Muscat indicated an inhabitant's social position, because the socio-spatial segregation had already advanced that far (ibid., 160).

*Fig. 1: City of Muscat*
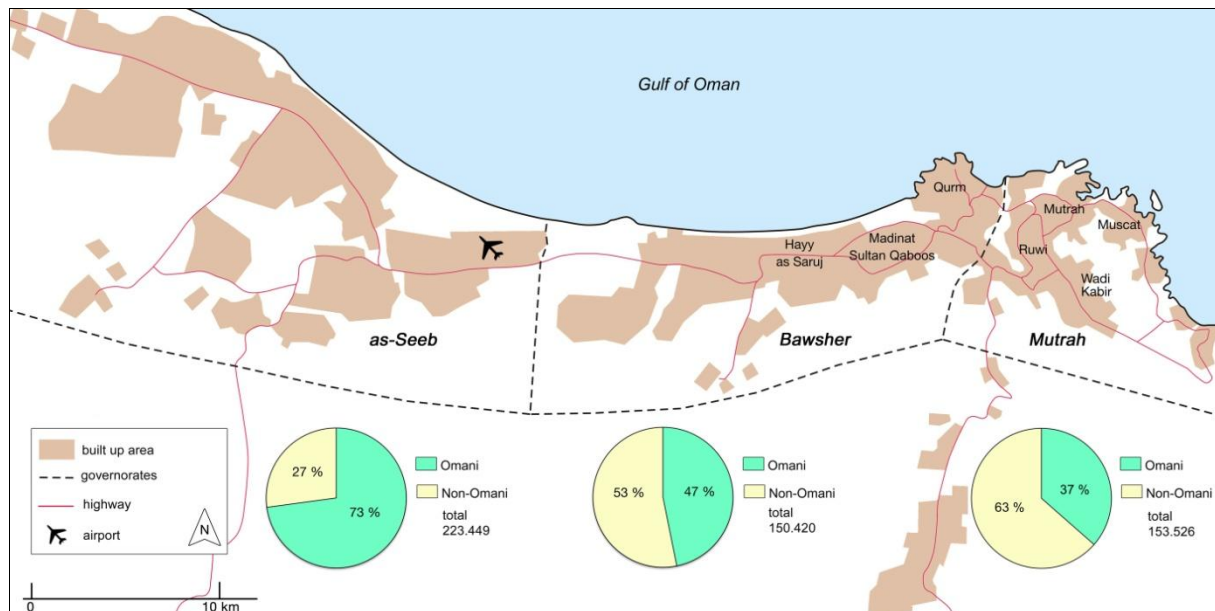


Source: Own design; Apex Map of Muscat 2010, Census 2003 (Ministry of National Economy, 2009)

Nowadays, Asian communities make for the largest group of migrants in Oman. Of the total amount of Non-Omanis in Oman, 54% come from India, 15% from Bangladesh and 2% from Sri Lanka, just to mention the three largest ones (Ministry of National Economy, 2009). They have been a vital economic factor since the start of the modernization process. Their low-salaried manpower particularly in the private sector is still indispensable to Oman's economy. Around 50% of the Indian community live in the Capital Area of Muscat. Interestingly, the Indian community covers the widest range of social positions compared to other communities. Meanwhile, Sri Lankans and Bangladeshi by and large take on employment at the bottom of the labour market and often work under precarious employment circumstances.

With regards to preferred places of residence in the Capital Area of Muscat – taking only Asian nationals into account – we can see that Indians are the dominant group of Asian immigrants in all three districts of the city (cf. Fig. 1): In Mutrah 43% of all inhabitants are of Indian origin (34% in Bawsher). Compared to the number of Non-Omanis in this district, they even amount to 68% (64% in Bawsher). As a consequence, the social infrastructure, retail and the local gastronomy are strongly influenced by the largely Asian residents, especially in the Ruwi quarter. Three Indian, one Pakistani and one Sri Lankan school are located there as well as two Hindu temples (Krishna and Shiva). One can also find various national Social Clubs and other recreational facilities (e.g. cinemas), which cater to the customs and lifestyles of the Asian migrant communities.

## 5. Indians in Muscat

A significant difference between the Indian community and other migrant communities is that Indian labour immigrants are represented throughout the entire social stratigraphy. The majority of the Indian employees in Oman holds down low-paying jobs in the service sector (esp. in the construction industry, as domestic workers or cleaners). The Indian Embassy estimates that – based on the occupation-wise work statistics – those blue-collared labourers (i.e. small items salesmen, domestic workers) account for 82% of all Indian employees in Oman. Engineers and technicians amount to less than 10%, while white-collared workers (e.g. executives, supervisors, accountants, scientists) add up to 5% (data of 2010, unpublished document by the Indian Embassy Muscat). They work in positions requiring high qualifications such as banks, national or international private corporate groups (esp. finance) and IT-companies.

The educational level of the Indian migrants is as diverse as their employment positions are. The qualifications of Indian migrants for the most part do not exceed low to medium standards. 76% of Indians in Muscat have not graduated from secondary school and only 15% are university graduates (Ministry of National Economy, 2009). Pradhan (2010, 12) has categorized four of their most common fields of work: (1) unskilled workers (esp. in construction industry), (2) employees in the agricultural sector and domestic workers in the private sector, (3) skilled work force (employees in the private and public sector), (4) highly qualified experts (e.g. doctors, engineers, managerial positions in the public and private sector and self-employed businessmen).

Men dominate the Indian work force in Muscat with only approx. 7% of the employed Indian labour immigrants being female. However, the women quota varies considerably depending on the social class and the occupational field. At the low-salaried end of the labour market housemaids amount to 10% of all Indian workers, a comparatively large portion. Only a few women can be found in highly qualified jobs (0,5% of white-collared workers). However, even less work in such demanding jobs and contribute to a double-income household together with their husbands or, alternatively, live as singles all at once. Usually, many women, who are highly skilled, do not work at the same time. Instead, they look after family members, who have accompanied them abroad (i.e. husband and children), and/or their relatives in India.

Depicting everyday life and the organisation of the Indian community in Muscat in general is nearly impossible. The possibilities and opportunities to shape one's life are just too diverse. It seems to be more reasonable to speak of various Indian communities rather than only one. Thus, this paper focuses on the living circumstances of those at the socio-stratigraphic "edges" of the Indian community in Muscat, the high earning and the low earning Indians.

**5.1 Everyday life of highly qualified Indian workers**

The well to highly qualified Indians come to Muscat as young professionals or as experienced experts. Their lifestyle is influenced by unlimited mobility and sufficient funds. Although their livelihood opportunities are similar to those of the Europeans, they seldom maintain private contact to them or other Asian migrants. Even if their stay in Muscat is long term (in some cases lasting their entire professional life of up to 40 years), they do not interact with Omanis often either. The close-knit circle of friends is distinctly limited to the national community. An individual's network in the Indian community is shaped by his or her social position and not by regional, religious or linguistic affiliations. Interview partners describe their contacts to colleagues or neighbours – no matter which nationality – as polite, but reserved.

How members of the wealthy Indian community spend their leisure time and make use of their environment depends entirely on their phase of life. Families and elderly couples regard living in Muscat as very pleasant, often citing aspects such as safety, peace and quiet as well as tidiness and order and comparing them to life in large Indian cities. The desire to move to another country is rarely pronounced. Instead, the close spatial proximity between the Sultanate of Oman and the Indian home country is seen as a significant advantage. The scenic charm of Oman's countryside and the recreational possibilities it offers are little availed of. Free time is mostly spent within the vicinity of e.g. the metropolitan area. The majority of the Indians do not consider going on holidays in Oman an option, they rather spend it in India. As opposed to the Europeans, the type of housing is more important for the Indians than the location in Muscat. Many live in houses chosen by their companies or in one of the employers fully furnished and equipped residences. That being so, the Indian upper class is scattered across all of Muscat's residential areas, instead of being concentrated in a specific city district.

It is important for Indian families and more senior employees to be able to maintain a certain way of life in Oman without having to miss out on too many cultural features. Muscat's urban economy has been influenced strongly by the large number of Indians that have been there for such long time. Indian produce dominates the range of daily necessities on offer (e.g. foods, beauty products, clothing, household goods, etc.). The gastronomic scene also offers a broad selection of regional cuisines at varying price ranges. The Indian community values these economic and cultural aspects. However, socio-cultural structures are essential, too. Both contribute to the feeling that living standards in Oman are high in comparison to other Gulf States. Omani and Indian cultures have a fair amount in common: Both are family orientated; privacy is valued above all and religion plays a vital role in one's life. Hindus are the only Asian religion permitted to have a temple in Muscat. Additionally, families can avail of a good social infrastructure. Parents can send their children to one of the

three different Indian schools in Muscat, all of which are identical in form and content with schools in India. The language of instruction is English and in some families English is now the only language spoken. Families tend to live rather secluded, focused on their professional career and the education of their children accompanied by numerous recreational activities.

Younger Indians of the upper class who do not have any family yet have to live with two specific disadvantages in Muscat: Lacking opportunities for social interaction and actual places to mingle and, hence, non-existing entertainment possibilities. Wealthier young Indians therefore expand their spatial radius of action by going on regular trips with friends to Dubai or venturing out into e.g. the Wadis, the desert Interior or other outdoor activities, e.g. Beach-Camping. They consume alcohol in "unobserved" spaces or go to parties and clubs, which are usually in some of the international hotels in Muscat. This generation of 20 to 30 year olds is internationally orientated and has come to acquire global consumption patterns. For them, Muscat or Oman is usually only a stepping-stone in their career. Surprisingly, this age group also tends to keep to themselves; they do not seek international contacts.

## 5.2 Everyday life of low-income Indian workers

By contrast, the unskilled or low-qualified immigrants have to deal with entirely different restraints. Usually, they are not accompanied by family members as legal regulations of a working visa, requirements an employment entails and financial limitations in Oman do not allow for that. Consequently, the labour immigrants live on their own in a foreign country separated from their families. The length of their stay in Oman is tied to the employment contract and is limited to two years. Each time it ends, it can be prolonged by no more than two years. Their only ambition is to cover their living expenses and help provide for their relatives at home in India.

India, one of the largest manpower exporting countries worldwide, built up an elaborate scheme of overseas recruitment policies and practices. An independent Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs supports low-skilled workers, who cannot avail of personal contacts or networks of friends or relatives already working overseas, in finding employment abroad. They do this by initiating and organizing recruitment campaigns and agencies and providing extensive information online on Diaspora and Emigration Services. The national manpower recruitment agencies only hire workers in India. Therefore, employees that were recruited for a specific job or company in Muscat or Oman tend to keep to themselves even within the Indian working community there.

As a sizeable amount of their salary – low as it is – is sent home as remittances, most workers cannot participate in local society or interact with others socially. Long working hours do not allow for much leisure time either. As a result, this huge number

of anonymous modern wage slaves lives very isolated – spatially as well as socially – dedicating their lives entirely to working hard. Social interaction – if it takes place at all – is limited to a small network of colleagues within their own national community.

The unskilled, low-paid workers live a precarious life throughout their stay in Oman. By having to hand in their documents to their employer, they are degraded legally to inferior residents. Being allowed to stay or to leave is dependent on the good will of their employers. Instances such as exploiting work conditions, overdue salary pay-outs or various forms of harassment through sponsors have risen and been brought to light. An increasingly lax media censorship has helped to report and publicize them. However, the position of the Indian Embassy or the Indian Social Club regarding such incidences is not an easy one. They are not authorized to interfere in judiciary issues of the Sultanate let alone express legal or political demands to protect Indian employees. Nonetheless, the Embassy is the only representative body for Indians in Oman. Through organisations such as the Community Welfare Section or the Indian Social Club the Embassy acts as a mediator. They e.g. plead their citizens' cases in front of an Omani labour court. Unfortunately, in most cases they are merely able to obtain an exit permit for their defendants for them to return to India.

## 6. Zones of contact and spaces of negotiation?

As already mentioned, the private lives of the Indians are almost entirely separated from those of the Omanis – irrespective of their social position. Both sides show hardly any interest in promoting integration; the relationship should remain merely work related. Albeit the migration of the Indians is economically motivated and voluntary, creating an inferior class of anonymous workers is alarming with respect to the social cohesiveness of society. The following example highlights the effects a two-tier society has as well as the risks and potential for conflict it bears, especially for the coming generations of young Indians that are being brought up in Oman.

### *'I am mother of two Omani kids, but I am on the streets'*

**Muscat**: She was a wife of an Omani citizen for 12 years and the mother of two young Omani boys aged 11 and 12. But now she is literally lost on the streets. She doesn't know where to go or what to do. She is running in despair, from pillar to post, in the hope of getting a shelter to stay in Oman and look after her children, Mazar and Ibrahim.

"I don't know why am I so cursed? Nothing good happens in my life. Why was I given such a life, only to suffer? I am only 31-years old, but I have already gone through a lot of suffering". Jameela told *Times of Oman* with tears rolling down her cheeks.

Jameela, an illiterate girl from Kerala, India, came to the Sultanate after she married an Omani national in 1998. Coming here, she found to her dismay that her husband had already been married twice and had fathered 13 children.

**Age difference**

"I was only 18 and he was above 50 when we got married. I was an orphan. My foster father was a nice man. He looked after me with care. So, when this marriage proposal came, he thought that even if there was an age difference, I would get relief from the financial problems and will be safe in my husband's house", Jameela said, holding her two boys close to her.

After coming here, Jameela came to know that her husband didn't have a decent job and some of his children from earlier marriage were older than her. "It was a very big family and we had little money, so most of the days we didn't have enough food to eat. In addition to this, he used to abuse me a lot. I never complained to anybody. But I am also a human being. In 2009, I got divorced from him", she said.

Jameela thought that getting divorced will solve her problems, but things started to get worse after that. After getting separated, she lost her "Family Visa" status and was told to go back to India by the officials.

Jameela did not get any compensation when she approached the court. As she was not ready to leave her children alone here, she arranged for a 'Job Visa' with the help of some kind-hearted people, went back to India and returned to be back with her children.

"Even if I have to work like a slave, I want to stay here so that I can at least see my children regularly," Jameela added.

While working as a housemaid, she used to meet her children two days a week at a flat in Hamriya. Here too, fate was against her. During a raid, she was caught by the police despite having all valid papers. Later, she was set free, courtesy the Indian embassy.

**February 21**

"Now, my visa will expire on February 21. So, I have to go back to India again. I don't want to leave my children here. As they have Omani citizenship. O cannot take them with me. Here,

they are living in a pathetic condition. Most of the time, neighbours are providing them with food. My ex-husband and his family are not taking care of them", she added.

Meanwhile, her foster father in Kerala is bedridden with some illness and he needs someone to take care of him.

"Even though he is my foster father, I call him *uppa* (father). Back home my *uppa* is not well. Here, there is nobody to take care of my children. Sometimes, I think of ending my life, but when I see my children's faces, I have to give up that thought", she added with a tremble in her voice.

Jameela has prepared a plea to submit to the Ministry of Interior to help her.

"Being here at least I can see my children, earn some money by working as a housemaid and send some money for my *uppa's* treatment, but who will help me. I have not sinned but my experiences make me believe that I am damned and cursed forever", she bemoaned.

## 7. Muscat – a city of diasporas?

Muscat has many expatriate communities. Yet, it depends on the communities' perspective on their daily life, if these national groups can actually be described as diasporas.

The Indian Community only occasionally interacts with the surrounding Muscat environment. Their view is more pragmatic. For the high qualified Indian workers the city is merely a place to boost their professional career and live a comfortable life. Their native country India remains the place with which they identify themselves emotionally and culturally, no matter how long they stay abroad. Indian migrants, who have even spent more time in Muscat than they ever did in India, do not wish to remain in Oman after they retire. According to Hindu doctrine, Hindus should return to their place of birth to die or respectively to be buried. Similarly, expectant mothers go back home to their parents' house to give birth to their children in India. Consequently, the wealthy Indian community in Muscat features some of the typical diasporic patterns.

The possibilities, conditions and interest for Indians to integrate into Muscat's society differ greatly. The extent to which this is possible depends on the individual's social status, i.e. their working position there. It either makes the process easier or more difficult. Migration is generally triggered by the hopes for a better life after returning home and as a consequence the expectations and the motivation are high no matter what social reality turns out to be. This applies, indeed, to most of the Indian immigrants irrespective of their social and working position in Muscat: Coming back home, it either helps boost their career or they then have the necessary funds to build a house for their family in India. However, the living situation in Muscat can be entirely different depending on the social position they have in the Arab country: Living in Muscat is troubling for the less and unskilled workers as they are a class of anonymous, exchangeable inferior individuals, separated from their families and

accepted but socially not recognized as equal human beings. For the wealthy members of the Indian community living in Muscat is an enjoyable, pleasant, calm and peaceful alternative to living in one of the large Indian cities. Earning an above average salary makes for an easy life, too. The only downside is being separated from their families and social contacts back home.

As long as the lives of the Indians and the Omani remain separated, they get on well together. This is the case as the expectations on both sides are clearly defined and the conditions and rights Indians are granted in the receiving and nonetheless hospitable and tolerant Omani society are obeyed by most of the immigrants. A question that is going to become more important – especially against the backdrop of the current democratisation in the Middle East – is how the social cohesion develops while maintaining peace. The extent of social differentiation and segregation in Muscat's urban society is still very minor and Omani citizens are able to live a life of social well-being. What would happen, if the substratum of society would not be Asian migrants anymore?

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