



# Real lives in ‘artificial’ land

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ATIQUE ANAM FROM DOHA

If you happen to come to Qatar from the subcontinent, you could often get confused whether you landed in an Arab land some 3000-4000 kilometres away from home or you were just in another of Bangladesh or India or Pakistan.

Of course, the streets and the modern buildings and the disciplined traffic will not give you such an illusion. Instead, it is the familiar faces that you would come across on the streets, on the shops, the roadside restaurants and signboards that will make you feel at home away from home.

The Qatari capital Doha and its surrounding areas are full of those familiar faces. They are everywhere: at the eight World Cup venues working as security guards or chefs, on the metros to guide you around the city, on the taxis, taking you to your desired destination, and of course on the construction sites, working off their sweat to raise modern cities from beneath the desert sand.

There are Filipinos too, and a lot of Africans, but you'll see very few Arabs in these places or walking down the streets.

This is Doha, Qatar – an adopted home for South Asians, who make up the second largest ethnic group among a population of nearly three million, a tenth of whom are residents, the rest migrant workers. This is Qatar – the uber-rich Arab state roughly the size of Sylhet division but flush with gas and oil, allowing it to extend its economic and political footprint

services have brought droves of cheap labourers from the South Asian and African countries.

Rajab Ali is one such migrant worker from Bangladesh, working in Doha for the last six years after living in Saudi Arabia for 16 more. Rajab, from Daudkandi in Cumilla, isn't exactly involved in the construction sector, but it helps that there is a demand for his work all the time.

shops, barbershops, grocery shops, and money exchanges all across these areas.

Samir Chandra Sarkar from Mirershorai in Chattogram has been driving a company car for years now. He says everything is expensive here compared to Bangladesh. Then again, the payment is much better, which makes it possible for them to save some and send it home.



A welder by occupation uses his expertise in the trade and his connections to make a decent living.

He was having a cup of tea on the curb of an alley near the Fereej Abdul Aziz Street, close to Doha Downtown, when he caught the attention of this reporter.

Unlike many other labourers from the Bangladeshi background, he was more open in sharing his story and speaking about the condition of the Bangladeshis, despite noticing the accreditation card of a journalist.

He says he's had a rough time in the beginning after coming here following an altercation with his employer in Saudi Arabia. He's lost a fortune here after setting up his own company, before he turned his attention to working as a welder and making a pretty good amount since then.

The World Cup season also helps small businesses thrive. But Samir says there have been some forced evacuations from these residential areas ahead of the World Cup in order to make accommodation for foreign visitors, even though the World Cup hasn't drawn as many visitors as Qatar had anticipated.

An hour's drive from these small pockets of desi hubs, in a place called Sanaya, you will get to see many more from the subcontinent and Africa. There are labour camps there – long stretches of tents and apartments where they live and work, far away from the reach of the metro that connects much of the city. It is a city in itself, with its own restaurants, parks, theatres and shopping malls and even a cricket stadium. The migrant workers have made those camps their homes for the time being.

Jahirul, a restaurant employee in Doha Al Jadedda, says he's been living here for the past three years after coming on a free visa. He is saving up enough money so that he can go back home one day and raise a family.

"Everything here is much better compared to what we have back home," he says. "There is no issue of security, no pollution, no traffic jam. But you know what, it all feels very artificial. I feel as if there's no life."

Indeed, Qatar has built a spectacle around the World Cup. It has wide streets and tall buildings, planned commercial and residential areas, shopping malls and hi-tech infrastructure to make life comfortable for the locals and the tourists. It has all but completed the World Cup without any major glitch.

And yet, there is a lingering feeling of artificiality surrounding everything. The vibrancy of life and the festivity of such a human congregation is somewhat missing.

## Rajab Ali's ordeal

ATIQUE ANAM from Doha

Rajab Ali has been away from home for 22 years. He spent 16 years in Saudi Arabia before coming to neighbouring Qatar six years ago, and he hasn't been home for the past six years. In a candid interview with The Daily Star, this migrant worker elaborated on his life abroad and the state of Bangladeshis here.

**The Daily Star (DS):** How is life here in Doha?

**Rajab Ali (RA):** Life is fine for me, Alhamdulillah. It depends on who you ask. Some people are doing good here, some others not so much.

**DS:** What is your profession?

**RA:** I'm a welder. I work on my own; I have vast experience of working in this trade in Saudi Arabia, and I know people. They give me work.

**DS:** How much do you make from your job?

**RA:** Alhamdulillah, I make enough to keep me going and send some home. If you are smart and good at your job, you can make a decent living here.

**DS:** But things are too expensive here, aren't they? For example, a standard loaf of bread costs you five Qatari riyal, which is equivalent to 150 BDT.

**RA:** Expensive, right but they also pay you enough to cover for the expenses. If you come with a company visa, they will pay you a minimum of thousand riyal apart from providing food and accommodation for you. So, you can send some home. On average, you can get by with 800 riyal – 300 for accommodation, another 300 for food and 200 for other expenses.

**DS:** There is a free visa too, which brings a lot of people from Bangladesh.

**RA:** Free visa is the one not sponsored by any company. You can come with a free visa and look for your own job, but you won't get the facilities you get from companies. Furthermore, you have to renew the visa every year with a thousand riyal.

**DS:** Since you're not working for a company, you must be on a free visa.

**RA:** I am. But I'm happy like this. I make a lot more than what I would have working for a company.

**DS:** How did you end up here in the first place?

**RA:** I was in Saudi Arabia for a long time. Life there was much better, income much better. But I got into trouble with my employee and left.

**DS:** When was the last time you went home?

**RA:** I haven't been home since coming here. I tried to set up a shop here initially and lost about 13 lakh taka. I didn't have papers for two years. Then when I made some money, I prepared documents.

**DS:** You never got caught by the police when you were without papers?

**RA:** Yes, I did get caught once. I called up an Egyptian and he got me released overnight. No big deal if you have the right contacts.

**DS:** There are a lot of Bangladeshis living here alongside many Indians, Pakistanis and Nepalese. Do the Bangladeshis ever get into trouble with them?

**RA:** Not that I know of. Bangladeshis get into trouble with Bangladeshis most. People of two specific districts cause the most trouble here.

**DS:** I heard many occupants in these areas were evacuated before the World Cup.

**RA:** Yes, the authorities thought there would be a lot of tourists during the World Cup, but there hasn't been enough. So, these complexes have remained largely vacant.

**DS:** Has the World Cup brought any change to your fortunes?

**RA:** Not me personally. Maybe the taxi drivers and people in other professions have benefitted from the construction boom, but since I work on my own, it hasn't made a difference to me.



far and wide.

And the FIFA World Cup is the boldest statement till date of its financial ability and political clout. The World Cup in Qatar has been two decades in the making – long before the oil-rich nation became the first Arab country to be awarded the rights to host the Greatest Show on Earth in 2010. There have been sporting and financial projects aimed at garnering support for Qatar's lofty ambitions, and celebrities made faces of those projects.

The awarding of the World Cup has brought about a new wave of infrastructure development activities here: the gas-rich nation has spent an estimated 300 billion dollars for the quadrennial tournament. It has built a brand-new metro system, seven new stadiums, a modern shipping port, an expansion of its main airport and raised an entire city out of scratch.

All that construction work and related



There are others, though, who are not as street-smart as Rajab, yet happy with whatever amount they can save here.

The area where Rajab lives and its surrounding areas, including Doha Al Jadedda and Najma, are full of people of South Asian origin. Walking down the streets, you'll see many Bangladeshi owned restaurants, meat