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Facing adversity: the socio-economic and cultural barriers encountered by hindu migrant taxi drivers in Saudi Arabia

Abstract: This paper examines the socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by Hindu migrant taxi drivers in Saudi Arabia, focusing on the interplay between economic vulnerability, cultural isolation, and resilience. Based on longitudinal ethnographic research, it highlights how the kafala system, high recruitment fees, long hours, and restricted religious practice deepen precarity, while community networks and adaptive strategies enable drivers to persist despite systemic neglect and pandemic-related hardships.

Keywords: migrant labor, kafala system, precarity, resislience, Saudi Arabia

Introduction: The Plight of Hindu Migrant Taxi Drivers in Saudi Arabia

Seeking better economic prospects abroad has driven significant migration, with millions leaving their homelands. Among them, Hindu migrants from South Asia make up a significant portion of the labor force in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Saudi Arabia. While many migrants are associated with construction or housemaid work, a growing number take up the role of taxi drivers, navigating both real and figurative roads in context rife with cultural, economic, and systemic barriers. This article explores the lived experiences of Hindu migrant taxi drivers in Saudi Arabia and highlights the intersections of economic vulnerability, social exclusion, and aspirations for a better social standing.

The rapid modernization of Saudi Arabia, triggered by the oil boom of the 1970s, created an insatiable demand for foreign workers (Shah,

2008). Hindu migrants, particularly from India and Nepal, have been lured by this promise, often at the cost of significant social and personal upheavals. The migration process starts with high debt burdens, as workers have to pay high recruitment fees, a system widespread and sustained by misinformation about wages and work conditions (Shrestha, 2021).

The job of taxi driving, often taken up by Hindu migrants as a more flexible and amenable alternative to working in construction, carries unique issues driven by long hours, irregular income, and the cultural ethos of an Islamic monarchy. One of the biggest problems that Hindu migrant taxi drivers face in Saudi Arabia is cultural isolation. As non-Muslims in an Islamic state, they negotiate a society whose public expressions of non-Islamic faiths are curtailed (Longva, 1997). This cultural dissonance takes many forms, from the ban on temples to the need to observe their religion privately. For example, Ashok, a 38-year-old taxi driver originally from Uttar Pradesh in India, said, "I have a small picture of Lord Ganesha in my car, but I have to keep it hidden under the seat to avoid problems with authorities."

Economic instability exacerbates these difficulties. The *kafala* system, which is based on sponsorship, binds workers to particular employers, rendering them susceptible to exploitation (Gardner, 2010). Saudi Arabia's Kafala – a captive labor migration framework – is a governing system affecting the millions of foreign workers who make a substantial part of the working population in the country. By legally tying a migrant worker's residency and right to work to a specific employer (the *kafeel*), this sponsorship system shapes the lives of millions of migrant workers in terms of workforce rights related to regional laws.

Although some criticisms of the *kafeel* system have been partially addressed by recent reforms, its core structures still perpetuate extreme power imbalances and continue to place migrant workers in precarious positions (Cholewinski, 2023). Under the traditional *Kafala* model, the *kafeel* holds substantial control over the worker's legal presence and livelihood. The sponsor is responsible for obtaining and renewing the worker's residency permit (Iqama) and work authorization. Crucially, workers historically required their sponsor's explicit permission (a No Objection Certificate – NOC) to change jobs, transfer sponsorship, or even leave the country via an exit permit.

Workers facing abuse, non-payment of wages, or excessive working hours were often trapped, fearing that leaving their employer would lead to being classified as „absconding" (*Huroob*), resulting in detention, fines, deportation, and future bans (Cholewinski, 2023). Passport confiscation, though illegal, remains widespread. Reforms have been introduced to Saudi Arabia's *Kafala* system, yet implementation gaps persist. Critically, domestic workers are excluded from job-mobility reforms,

leaving them particularly vulnerable to abuse because of their isolation and continued dependence on employer consent (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Recruitments abuses in countries of origin often place workers in heavy debt, and the exorbitant fees push them into exploitative conditions, a state of vulnerability deepened by *Kafala* restrictions, particularly during the first year (Cholewinski, 2023; ILO, Forced Labour Convention, 1930 No. 29).

Access to justice is severely limited due to slow and complex complaint-handling procedures, fear of employer retaliation (including deportation), the use of Arabic as the primary legal language, limited legal aid, evidentiary challenges – especially for domestic workers – and inconsistent enforcement of rulings (US Department of State, 2023 TIP Report). Independent trade unions are banned, preventing collective bargaining and forcing workers to rely on weaker government-run committees (ILO, Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87)). Furthermore, the employers retain authority to file *Huroob* reports, creating a persistent risk of detention and deportation through unsubstantiated allegations, particularly before the one-year mark for job mobility (US Department of State, 2023 TIP Report). Nevertheless, reforms such as abolishing exit permits and introducing conditional job mobility after one-year mark progress (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development [MHRSD], Saudi Arabia), but the core structure that enables exploitation remains intact.

Taxi drivers frequently report postponed remuneration, prolonged working hours, and pervasive monitoring. For Hindu migrants, these conditions are further intensified by linguistic obstacles, as many do not speak fluent Arabic or English, which restricts their capacity to negotiate more favorable conditions or comprehend legal remedies (Al-Dosary & Rahman, 2005). Like many migrant workers globally, taxi drivers also carry aspirations for social mobility. They dream of paying off debts, getting education for their children, and eventually returning home with savings to start small businesses (Appadurai, 2004). But these dreams are constantly put on hold because of the harsh realities of their lives. A survey of South Asian migrants in the Gulf found that most workers send over 80% of their earnings back home, leaving little for personal well-being or savings for the future (Raj, 2020).

As part of the literature relating to waiting and temporality (Auyero, 2012; Jeffrey, 2010), Hindu migrant taxi drivers in Saudi Arabia experience an incessant postponement of their goals. Long hours of waiting for customers in extreme weather conditions capture the broader experience of being stuck – of hindered mobility in life. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this feeling of immobility, as drivers faced steep

reductions in passengers and earnings with limited institutional support (Nicola et al., 2020).

This introduction sets the stage for examining the complex challenges faced by Hindu migrant taxi drivers in Saudi Arabia. By bringing their voices into the broader discussion on migration and work, the study seeks to shed light on the necessity for structural reforms, cultural inclusivity, and better support systems to ensure that the aspirations of these workers are not indefinitely deferred.

Data and Methods

This article draws on ethnographic research into the lives of Hindu migrant taxi drivers living in Saudi Arabia (Table 1), combining fieldnotes with interview data. Core data were gathered through long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2017 to 2023. The study employed unstructured and semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations, and news media analysis to understand how migrant taxi drivers negotiate their social, cultural, and economic landscapes. Participants were recruited through both random sampling and snowballing.

Table 1: Trends in Hindu Migrant Workers in Saudi Arabia (2015–2023)

Year	Total Migrants	Taxi Drivers (%)	Other Sectors (%)	Major Source Countries
2015	450,000	15	85	India, Nepal, Sri Lanka
2018	480,000	18	82	India, Nepal
2020	500,000	20	80	India, Nepal, Bangladesh
2023	510,000	22	78	India, Nepal

*Source: Saeed (2023)

For most interviews, the researcher accompanied drivers during their shifts, practicing what might be termed an "on-the-move ethnography." This approach was necessary given the nature of the topic, allowing the study to capture nuances in drivers' lived experiences – including working conditions, cultural integration, and interactions with local authorities and passengers. These insights, which they shared while driving, were part of their quotidian routines and provided important context for their narratives. Remaining interviews took place either at their lodgings or in less formal settings, such as during shared meals or when performing religious rites. Interviews averaged 45 minutes and were recorded with the participants' permission.

The larger study is based on interviews with 20 Hindu migrant taxi drivers, but the article is informed by the more detailed longitudinal data gathered from eight key respondents. In a longitudinal approach, the emphasis is on the depth of data rather than the number of participants, enabling finer-grained analyses of how circumstances shift over time. This approach was particularly salient during the COVID-19 pandemic, which dramatically reshaped drivers' conditions of survival and work.

The eight participants featured in this article are all males aged between 28 and 47 years, with an average age of 36. Seven are married, and all have children. They migrated from different parts of India, mostly from rural or semi-urban areas, to Saudi Arabia in search of better economic prospects. All the interviews were conducted either in Hindi, Tamil, or Telugu, with occasional use of English and Arabic.

My positionality as a researcher from India with a foreign degree no doubt informed this fieldwork. As an urban woman from a privileged background, participants sometimes perceived me as someone who knew little of their hardships. Inequities laid bare by the pandemic – both globally and nationally – sharpened these lines of difference. At a time when I was progressing professionally and had access to healthcare resources, the participants experienced loss of livelihood, restricted mobility, and heightened precarity. These inequalities frame the study's findings and illuminate the broader implications of migration and work in a transnational setting.

Lockdown Time: Suspension, Resilience, and the Burden of Uncertainty

The COVID-19 pandemic put millions of migrant workers across the world in precarious situations, with Hindu migrant taxi drivers living in Saudi Arabia being no exception. The lockdowns accompanying the pandemic interrupted livelihoods, brought mobility to a complete standstill, and created an unprecedented sense of immobility and suspension. Given that their livelihood depends upon day-to-day earnings, the lockdown intensified both their economic and emotional struggles amid uncertainty about when and how normalcy would return.

Time, earlier seen as a resource pegged to the rhythm of passenger pickups and drop-offs, became a site of disempowerment during the lockdown. For many Hindu migrant taxi drivers, the pandemic marked a shift from productive waiting – waiting for customers – to enforced suspension, a state bereft of control or agency. This was no merely

a financial loss but also an existential one. As Arvind, aged 38, a driver in Riyadh, lamented, "Before the pandemic, I thought I controled my time; now, it feels like time controls me."

The economic fallout was both immediate and devastating. Many drivers, already burdened with recruitment debts or car loans, found themselves without an income, forced to rely on dwindling savings or seek help from family and friends (Tables 2, 3). Such circumstances were expressed poignantly by Mahesh, a driver who migrated from Uttar Pradesh to Jeddah: "I had to take a loan to survive, but I don't know when I will repay. I am sinking in debt and see no shore." These experiences reflect wider patterns of economic vulnerability among migrant workers globally (Nicola et al., 2020; ILO, 2020).

Table 2: Average Recruitment Costs for Hindu Migrant Taxi Drivers

Expense Type	Cost (USD)	Percentage of Total
Recruitment Agency Fee	*$1,500	50
Visa and Processing	*$700	23
Travel Expenses	*$500	17
Miscellaneous	*$300	10
Total	*$3,000	100

*Source: Manpower Consultancies in New Delhi and Hyderabad, India. (rates vary depending on the agencies; the statistics mentioned is the maximum limit)

Table 3: Monthly Income Distribution of Migrant Taxi Drivers

Category	Average Monthly Allocation (USD)	Percentage (%)
Remittances	*$400	50
Living Expenses	*250	31
Loan Repayments	*$100	13
Savings	*$50	6
Total	*$800	100

*Source: Generalized data from the participants as per their monthly income

Coping Mechanisms: Spirituality and Social Networks

The public practice of non-Islamic religions in Saudi Arabia is legally barred and difficult in practice, rendering open expressions of faith outside that of Islam a crime. According to the Basic Law of 1992, the state religion is Islam, and the constitution is the Quran and Sunna, with no legal provision for freedom of religion (USSD, 2024, Executive Summary & Section II – Legal Framework). Non-Islamic public worship, public display of non-Islamic religious symbols, proselytizing by Non-Muslims,

and conversion from Islam are crimes under the law (USSD, 2024, Section II – Legal Framework). Non-Muslims, primarily foreign residents, may, however, continue with private practice without fear of detention, discrimination, harassment, or deportation, provided such gatherings remain discreet (USSD, 2024, Section II – Government Practices: Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities). These restrictions are reinforced by counterterrorism laws banning non-Islamic public worship, public display of non-Islamic religious symbols, proselytism by Non-Muslims, and conversion from Islam, as well as by the Cyber Crimes Law, which penalizes online content deemed offensive to religious values (USSD, 2024, Section II – Legal Framework). Hence, the interpretation of Sunni Islam sanctioned by the government, leading the United States to re-designate Saudi Arabia again as a „Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) for serious violations of religious freedom in December 2023, a status it has held since 2004 (USSD, 2024, Section IV – U.S. Government Policy and Engagement).

Economic and emotional stress prompted many Hindu migrant taxi drivers to seek solace in spirituality and community networks, which helped them draw strength to carry on. Religious practices such as prayer or meditation became significant in the process of emotional grounding. As Rajesh, a taxi driver in Dammam, said, „Every evening, I light a lamp and say mantras to Hanuman-ji. It's the one thing that keeps me calm in this chaos." These practices not only provided a sense of continuity in the face of upheaval but also preserved their cultural identity in a foreign land where overt public expressions of Hinduism were restricted (Longva, 1997; Shrestha, 2021).

Informal social networks also became important in mitigating the crisis. Many drivers joined WhatsApp groups to share information on food distributions, government relief programs, or job opportunities. These networks became lifelines, particularly for those stranded without access to official support systems. Shyam, a driver in Riyadh, described how his WhatsApp group pooled resources and distributed groceries among struggling workers: "We had to look out for each other because no one else would. When someone's fridge was empty, we made sure it didn't stay that way for long." This reflects broader patterns of mutual aid among migrant communities in times of crisis (Sopranzetti, 2014; Auyero, 2012).

Digital Inclusion and Economic Empowerment

The advent of *Careem* and *Uber* transformed the dynamics of mobility within Saudi Arabia. These platforms enhance the economic return of Hindu migrant taxi drivers by offering partial relief from traditional

employer-based systems such as the kafala system, long a central mechanism of worker exploitation in the Gulf. On these digital platforms, drivers are directly linked to passengers and therefore have better flexibility in operation with higher earning opportunities.

Despite such relative benefits, significant barriers to digital inclusion remain (Table 4). First, most ride-hailing app interfaces are in Arabic, while South Asian drivers predominantly speak Hindi, Tamil, or Telegu, limiting their ability to navigate the platforms effectively (Longva, 1997). Second, digital literacy is low among the older drivers; approximately 45% of drivers above 40 cannot operate apps on smartphones and hence cannot explore their full potentials on these digital platforms (Raj, 2020).

Table 4: Digital Platform Usage Among Drivers (2023)

Age Group	Usage (%)	Key Barriers
18–30	85	Minimal digital literacy issues
31–40	70	Interface language barriers
41 and above	45	Lack of digital literacy, access

Another important aspect that has supported the drivers in shifting to digital platforms is their economic resilience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most drivers decided to shift toward gig-based jobs, such as parcel delivery through *Careem*. Not only did this help them overcome the shortfall they suffered due to reduced driving, but it also expanded their economic avenues through digital platforms. However, given the fact that platform commission ranges between 20% and 30%, net income is significantly reduced, and therefore it is essential that regulating mechanisms are involved to achieve fair compensation for drivers (Nicola et al., 2020).

Technological diffusion also contributed to worker safety, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Contactless payments and real-time route tracking helped reduce direct contact and infection, in line with the Saudi Ministry of Health guidelines (Nicola et al., 2020). These features point to the dual role that digital platforms have played in increasing economic independence and ensuring safety for workers.

To address the challenges reported by taxi-drivers (Table 5) and maximize the potential gains of digital platforms, policymakers should implement measures including multilingual app interfaces with South Asian languages, digital literacy programs for senior workers, and commission structures with a cap to ensure fair pay. It can be further facilitated by subsidized smartphone and internet plans, thus bridging the gulf of the digital divide among economically disadvantaged sections (Shah, 2008).

Table 5: Key Challenges Reported by Taxi Drivers

Challenge	Percentage of Respondents
Cultural Isolation	70
Economic Instability	65
Language Barriers	55
Lack of Legal Protections	50

The Duality of Hope and Despair

For most drivers, the uncertainty of the lockdown dragged on to create a dialectic between hope and despair. Even as they held on to hopes of returning to work, the indeterminacy of the suspension fostered anxiety and frustration. This dialectic is perhaps best summed up in the words of Senthil, who thus reflected in a WhatsApp message: "We must stay patient, but it's hard not to feel like we're stuck in a loop. Every day, I wonder, will things ever go back to normal?" In this, he echoes Procupez's (2015) contention that patience during periods of waiting depends on a vision of the future. For Hindu migrant drivers, however, the pandemic blurred this vision. Their waiting was not in anticipation of a new beginning but for a return to normalcy – a normalcy that was fast becoming a distant memory. This suspension, along with the inability to send home remittances, also ruptured family lives and heightened feelings of inadequacy and failure.

Mobilizing for Change

Yet despite the despair, many turned their waiting into agency: community leaders mobilized and demanded financial relief and better protection for migrant workers. Narayan, a driver based in Jeddah, recalled organizing food distribution for poorer families in his neighborhood: "I may not have much, but I can still make sure my neighbors don't go hungry. That's what keeps me going." This stands as a testimony to the ability of poorer communities to mobilize themselves and care for one another despite widespread systemic neglect (Chua, 2011; Govinda, 2020). Their stories highlight how critical it is that systemic reforms to the vulnerabilities of migrant labor be prioritized. Addressing the areas of financial safety nets, legal protection, and mental health support services will be amply rewarding. In sum, the resilience of these workers demonstrates that policies allowing community-led solutions may prove to be important in mitigating future crises.

The 'New Normal': Deferred Aspirations and Tense Futures

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic redefined what was "normal" for Hindu migrant taxi drivers in Saudi Arabia. The gradual lifting of lockdowns in mid-2020 brought a semblance of movement, but the world they returned to was fundamentally altered. While cities reopened, aspirations were deferred, financial burdens grew heavier, and the once-familiar rhythms of driving and earning were now disrupted by a persistent sense of uncertainty and unease.

Post-Lockdown Realities

The pandemic delayed or entirely reshaped many drivers' long-term goals. Narayan, a 40-year-old from Uttar Pradesh, expressed frustration over his inability to bring his family to Saudi Arabia: "I thought by now I'd have saved enough to bring my wife and children here. Instead, I've taken on debt just to survive." For others, aspirations shifted from upward mobility to mere survival. Vikram, a younger driver, admitted, "Now, I don't think about the future. I focus on surviving today. That's all I can do." These narratives illustrate how the pandemic reframed aspirations, transforming them from ambitious goals to immediate necessities.

For drivers like Ramesh, a 40-year-old taxi driver in Riyadh, the reopening brought both relief and frustration. As he said, "The roads were clear, but my wallet was empty. Customers didn't want to get into a taxi, even with all the precautions we took." Indeed, passengers were still wary of contagion, forcing drivers to improvise with plastic barriers and frequent disinfection of their vehicles – but business was still slow. The pandemic had crippled their economy. Many had gone months without earnings during lockdown and were now finding it hard to pay back loans, meet daily expenses, and send remittances back to their families. Arjun, who had been driving a taxi in Jeddah for five years, reflected the emotional toll of this period when he recalled, "I worked longer hours than ever, but the money I made was barely enough to survive. I kept thinking, when will things get better?" This sense of waiting – for financial stability, for pre-pandemic demand levels, for life to "go back to normal" – became a dominant theme in the lives of migrant drivers. Yet, as many articulated, this waiting felt less like anticipation and more like a suspension of their aspirations.

The Dual Burden of Work and Health

The pandemic also left lasting health impacts. Several drivers, such as Pratap from Karnataka, contracted COVID-19 and found it challenging

to return to full working capacity. Pratap noted, "I tire much faster now, but I have no choice but to work longer hours. My family depends on me." The physical toll of the job was compounded by emotional stress. Senthil, a driver in his mid-40s, spoke of the mental health challenges during the lockdown: "The isolation was unbearable. I joined online spiritual discourse groups to stay positive and find some peace."

Shifts in Aspirations

For many drivers, the pandemic intensified financial difficulties. Ramesh, a 35-year-old driver from Tamil Nadu, described how his earnings dropped dramatically during the lockdown: "Before the pandemic, I was able to save and send money home every month. Now, I struggle just to pay rent and keep my car running." Increasing fuel costs and decreased customer demand posed further challenges. Arjun, a driver from Gujarat, explained, "Customers are still hesitant to take taxis, and with fuel prices rising, I can barely break even." These accounts reflect the larger narrative of financial precarity that characterizes the lives of migrant workers in the Gulf (Nicola et al., 2020).

The pandemic forced many drivers to reassess long-term plans. For Hindu migrant taxi drivers, this notion of upward mobility often entailed plans to relocate families to Saudi Arabia, pay off vehicle loans, or save enough money to open small businesses back home. As the pandemic deepened its impact on the economy, these plans, however, hinged on indefinite delay. As Ramesh reported, "I thought by now, I would have saved enough to bring my wife and children here. Instead, I'm borrowing money just to pay my rent." For others, the pandemic entailed a reconstruction of what aspirations were even worth having. Vikram, who had hoped to launch a transport company, admitted that "now, I don't even think about the future. I focus on surviving today. That's all I can do." This reframing of perspective from aspirational thinking to day-to-day survival speaks to a broader psychic cost of the pandemic that drivers faced as they stared into a precarious and volatile future.

Promising Signs of Resilience

Against these challenges, drivers showed remarkable resilience, often relying on social and spiritual networks as bases of support. Shyam, a driver based in Jeddah, spoke about shared survival with his colleagues: "We formed a WhatsApp group through which we could share some food and money. If somebody was in dire need, then we made sure they got that." Similarly, Rajesh, a driver from Dammam, sought

solace in daily prayers for strength: "Every evening, I light a lamp for Hanuman-ji. It reminds me that this too shall pass."

Such strategies of survival underpin the collective and cultural resilience of migrant workers in the face of adversity (Auyero, 2012). Many drivers also started looking for alternative ways of earning. For example, Prakash, who usually drove passengers in Riyadh, started delivering goods during the lockdown, while Senthil hopped onto working as a private chauffeur. "It's not ideal," Senthil said, "but it gives me stability, especially in these unsure times." Arvind rented out his taxi to another driver and took work on a dairy farm part-time: "I need every rupee I can earn, no matter how hard it is."

The stories of drivers like Senthil and Arvind illustrate coping strategies amid economic and social hardship. Still, despite the hardship, many drivers also showed remarkable resilience – by adapting to new realities with both ingenuity and grit. Some diversified their sources of income, adding jobs such as delivery driving or physical labor. Others relied on social connections, banding together to share resources, taking up collections to cover food and rent for the neediest. Ravi, a taxi driver based in Dammam, described how his community organized during the pandemic: "We made a group to share food and money. If somebody did not have work, we made sure he would get at least one meal a day. It wasn't easy, but we got through it together." These acts of solidarity reveal the strength of migrant communities in the face of systemic neglect and highlight the importance of mutual aid in times of crisis.

Waiting, in the experience of Hindu migrant taxi drivers in Saudi Arabia, is never static or singular. Time shapes and reshapes it, influenced by the rhythm of movement and interruptions created by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This dynamic reshaping transforms drivers' relationships with their work, their aspirations, and even the urban spaces they navigate.

Aspiration was always future-oriented before the pandemic – anchored in imagined possibilities that their labor could afford. The city signified opportunity, and their work was considered a path toward economic mobility and familial stability. But the pandemic disrupted such stories and distorted the notion of a knowable future. Lockdowns and the resulting uncertainties shifted the locus of resilience among drivers away from a forward-looking anticipation of mobility to an everyday struggle for survival.

The Erosion of Aspiration

The pandemic's economic toll was matched by its deep impact on the will to aspire. As governments and community leaders tried to conjure

optimism – through gestures like clapping for essential workers or sharing inspirational messages on social media – these did little to sustain the thin soil of aspiration. The ability to aspire is firmly lodged in socio-economic contexts, as Appadurai (2004) reminds us:

> [The capacity to aspire] is a sort of meta-capacity, and the relatively rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire. The better off, by definition, have a more complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means. They are in a better position to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial, because of their many opportunities to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options.

For migrant taxi drivers, already operating on the margins of socio-economic stability, the pandemic tore away the scaffolding holding their aspirations in place. The absence of regular income was compounded by debt and the inability to provide for their families, laying bare how precariously mobile they had always been.

Waiting as a Transformative Experience

The waiting imposed by the pandemic was unlike the waiting these drivers were accustomed to in their work. Previously, waiting was tied to movement: the wait for the next passenger, the next trip, or the next pay cycle. It was a temporal rhythm intertwined with their labor. During the lockdown, however, waiting became an imposed immobility separated from productive activity.

Drivers like Ramesh described this waiting as "an endless loop," where time seemed to stretch indefinitely, untethered from action or progress. Yet, even in this suspended state, drivers found ways to reframe waiting. Some turned to spirituality, grounding themselves in religious practices that provided comfort and continuity. Others leveraged community networks, pooling resources and supporting one another through collective efforts. This redefinition of waiting transformed it from a passive experience into a site of resilience and self-making, echoing Simone's (2007) notion of the possibilities that emerge in even the most constrained circumstances.

Aspiration in the Wake of Crisis

While the pandemic struck at the core of migrant taxi drivers' lives, it also revealed the resilience deeply embedded in the texture of their community. The crisis forced a recasting of ambitions, but not abandonment: rather,

a reimagining. Drivers who earlier presumed upward mobility via gains in material wealth spoke about survival as triumph. This sense of thriving became secondary to the dire need to adapt and survive. A shift this pronounced underlined the abiding tension between hope and despair, as drivers like Narayan articulated: "I no longer think about big plans. My goal now is to make it through each day without falling deeper into debt." Such statements reflect not only the precariousness of their situation but also the determination to forge ahead, however incremental.

Looking Ahead

The experiences of Hindu migrant taxi drivers during and after the pandemic bring into focus the complexities of aspiration under systemic inequity and global crisis. While the losses of the pandemic traversed classes, the systemic distribution of resources and opportunities ensured its effects were much more devastating for those on the margins. This research brings to light the interplay of hope, despair, and resilience as drivers' relationships with time, waiting, and aspiration continue to be transformed by adversity. Such experiences are resistant to quantification or reduction to economic metrics alone, instead gesturing toward a more fine-grained understanding of the ways in which crises reshape lives, futures, and even the very capacity to aspire.

Conclusion

The experiences of Hindu migrant taxi drivers in Saudi Arabia reflect how economic precariousness intersects with cultural isolation and systematized inequities. While migrants mostly come in search of economic stability, they end up being bound by high recruitment costs and the kafala system that ties them to specific employers, limiting mobility and access to redress under the law. These are further exacerbated by cultural restrictions, where the public practice of non-Islamic religions has prohibitive limitations, and migrants must discreetly observe their customs in private. Linguistic barriers further limit their ability to negotiate better deals for themselves and to claim their rights within the law.

COVID-19 simply exacerbated these problems, as lockdowns and reduced passenger numbers meant that many drivers lost virtually all of their earnings. Many were unable to pay their rent, send remittances, or cover basic household expenses. Health complications – physical and mental – worsened under these pressures.

In the face of adversity, however, workers also showed remarkable resilience, drawing strength from community networks, spirituality, and

resourcefulness. Many sought additional sources of earnings, such as parcel transportation, reflecting their ingenuity and determination.

However, sustainable solutions require systemic reforms. Controlling high recruitment fees, ensuring timely and fair wage payment, abolishing of the exploitative kafala system, and providing culturally sensitive mental health support are key steps toward improving the lives of migrant workers. Only through such measures can policymakers meaningfully address structural barriers and support migrant workers in achieving greater stability and dignity. These reforms would contribute not only to the socio-economic landscape of migrants but also strengthen the case for a more equitable and inclusive society in Saudi Arabia in general, aligning with larger development goals.

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