

The prospect of overseas employment

Employment
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PAKISTAN has one of the largest pools of skilled manpower in the world. Cost-wise cheaper and considerably efficient, time and again Pakistani manpower has proven its worth by easily adapting to different cultures and conditions across the globe.

According to recent estimates, there are about 3.678 million Pakistanis working overseas. In the thirty years since 1971, employment promoting agencies have provided overseas employment to 4.5 million Pakistanis. Out of these, it is estimated, about 2.5 million emigrants are still working abroad. These Pakistanis send home remittances well in excess of a billion dollars every year. And this figure is only the money that is transacted through official sources.

However, all is not rosy in the field of overseas employment. To date, the government has issued over 2,000 licenses to individuals, groups and companies which are engaged in the business of providing overseas employment to Pakistanis. Of these, only 868 are working as Overseas Employment Promoters (OEPs). But of these companies, the ones operating in the private sector, though large in number, have managed to establish an ill reputation for themselves.

Numerous cases of corruption, malpractice and irregularities have dodged their existence. These OEPs have been accused, and in some cases proven right, to have indulged in contract substitution and providing sub-standard manpower to foreign clients. Exploitation of candidates too is common, who are heavily over-charged. Then, the practice of sending Pakistanis on fake travel documents, to the extent of being engaged in the smuggling of human beings, has been all too well-known

all over the world.

Globally, it is the responsibility to the government to provide employment to its workforce. And overseas employment opportunities provide the best way for the government in Pakistan to take care

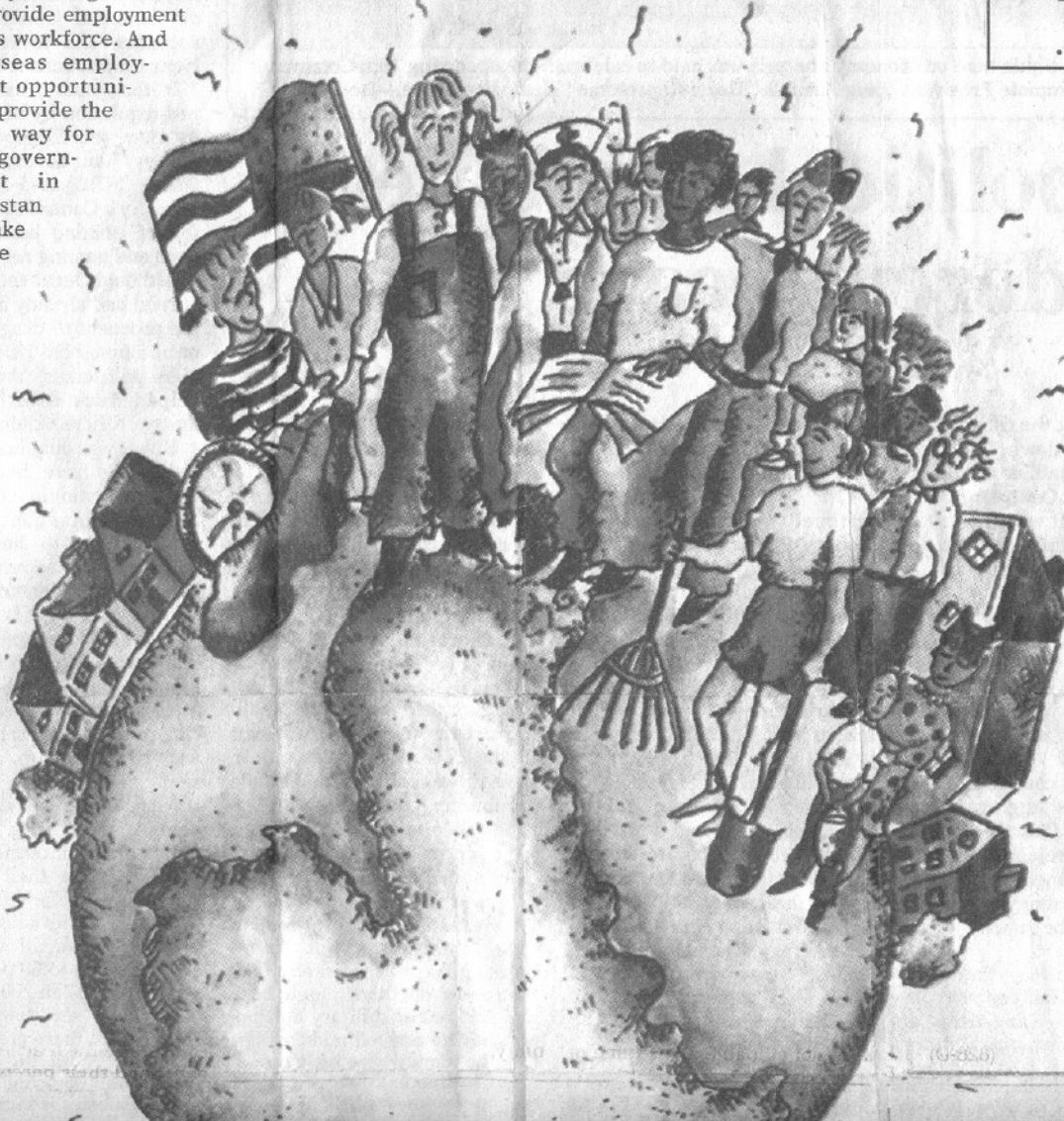
strengthen the development base of the host countries. They, however, need to observe international standards and the respective country's

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social and legal framework, which at times some fail to do so.

The business of manpower export, especially in today's world economy, should know no bounds. The world is headed towards the development of all strata of economic well-being. Potential new markets, other than Middle East, include any and all friendly countries having a future outlook on their development. The countries such as Libya, Yemen and Brunei Darussalam are satisfied with the hard work and adaptability of the Pakistani worker and may prefer to employ them for various development projects in oil and non-oil sectors. Surplus manpower, mainly teachers, professionals and hi-tech personnel can gainfully be employed in Malaysia, Nigeria, Syria, Morocco, Uganda, Kenya, Sudan, and the like. Germany, the USA and UK require a considerable number of foreign workers in the fields of IT, engineering, teaching and medicine.

Pakistan can mobilize its resources to seek a reasonable share in these markets. This requires strategic marketing based on a thorough analysis of the economic and political situation in these countries, as well as identifying and creating a niche for Pakistani manpower. The dynamics of the employment business in present times revolve not so much around the demand, but on the competition between suppliers. We face fierce competition from other developing countries in the region. Pakistani manpower has to develop a competitive edge, identifying the categories in which the nation is better placed in comparison to India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, etc. In order to compete with these countries we may target and



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Despite the governmental checks, the situation has persisted since the seventies. And instead of showing any sign of improvement, it has actually aggravated. Still, due to the gravity of the situation, the government has cancelled the licenses of as many as 15 OEPs in the past two years.

Due to the irregularities and malpractice committed in the sub-sector in the seventies, which tarnished the image of the nation and the state, the government decided to bring these OEPs under some form of regulation. This decision led to the formation of the Overseas Employment Corporation (OEC) which came into existence in 1976. Regulated by the Ministry of Labour, Manpower and Overseas Pakistanis, the OEC enjoyed its best time in the 1980s. At its peak, the OEC was arranging overseas jobs for as many as 10,000 to 14,000 Pakistanis every year. Since then, the performance of the Corporation has been marked by ascents and descents, sending job seekers abroad in the range of 2,000 to 8,000 persons a year. So far, it has provided jobs to over 123,000 people, from illiterate labourers to highly qualified professionals,

of the high level of unemployment in the country.

Recently the government took some measures to that effect. These measures included restructuring of the institutional infrastructure on modern lines, improving labour market information system to develop inventory of the national manpower, undertaking international market studies to identify potential markets and strengthening the role of the Community Welfare Attache's, stationed abroad. These words have yet to be translated into actions. Still, a lot more can be done towards promoting overseas employment, particularly in achieving the ambitious target of providing overseas jobs to 100,000 persons annually.

Middle East, or the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council countries are the major markets for Pakistani manpower. Here about 96 per cent of the emigrants were provided jobs. Though declining in recent years, Pakistan still

has significant share in the total migrant workforce in UAE (30 per cent), Saudi Arabia (17 per cent), Qatar (18 per cent) and Kuwait (nine per cent). These states, despite current adverse policy measures, continue to offer good prospects to Pakistani professionals.

Middle East remains the prime market for Pakistani manpower. However, the current and future requirements are those of skilled or technical persons and professionals. These are needed in the fields of agriculture, construction, maintenance, engineering, cement, fertilizer and steel industries, oil refining, telecommunication, tourism, electronic media, seaports, airports, highways, utilities and other infrastructure projects. Employment opportunities also exist in the professions of accounting, banking,



information technology, economics, water resource management, teaching, medicine and nursing.

Pakistan has to adopt a dynamic strategy, with focus on consolidating and then developing, its Middle East market. This it can do by matching the required job demands with suitable persons who are to be trained and groomed specifically for this market. Skilled manpower is a field in which Pakistan should have developed an edge by now. Our technical institutes and universities turn out skilled persons by the thousands and these are the workers Pakistan should concentrate on. Their academic skills should be enhanced by teaching them value added features. Knowing basic languages like Arabic, English and French is a start. Familiarity with domestic conditions, discipline, teamwork and a work-oriented approach instilled in the emigrants will also help. Similarly, Pakistani professionals are of considerable quality, and are qualified to help

and occupations required by the overseas markets, such as, printing and packaging, aircraft maintenance, cargo warehousing, jewellery making, plantation management, hotel and tourism etc.

There is a need for effective enforcement of Pakistan emigration law and rules. Also, amendments in the existing rules can be made with the objective to minimize malpractice and to develop corporate culture in the business. For example, the procedure for grant of license to operate as OEP should be made stringent. Only the enterprises registered under the Companies Ordinance 1984 be considered for grant/renewal of licenses, or otherwise comprehensive documentation of the company. Subsequently, its sponsors should be collected, and their performance strictly monitored. Performance parameters for the OEPs should be defined, with benchmarks, and other aspects closely monitored, including periodic performance audit.

It is time for the government to consider reformulation of the Emigration Policy in view of the current demographic, political, economic and technological developments in Pakistan as well as in overseas markets. □