



Spatial concentration patterns of South Asian low-skilled immigrants in Oman: A spatial analysis of residential geographies



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ABSTRACT

Oman is a major recipient of South Asian labor immigrants, and correspondingly, the demographic statistics reveal that the non-Omani populations primarily are constituted of the Asians. This research examines whether the largest immigrant groups (Indian, Bangladesh, Pakistani and Sri Lankan) in Oman form residential clusters according to their work skills (higher and lower skills). The residential geographies of South Asian workers at the subnational administrative boundaries have been investigated in the current study. Empirically, the study employs the use of Location Quotients (LQ) and Entropy Index within the GIS environment to spatially analyze the immigrant residential distributions based on their work skills. Interestingly, the findings of this research confirm the primary influence of geography on the residential patterns of the low-skilled immigrants. Initially, Al-Batnah governorates constituted the main destinations of low-skilled Bangladeshis. Further, the research also highlights significant clusters of Indian and Pakistani high-skilled immigrants in urban residential communities within the Muscat governorate. In addition, the South Asian are found to be a relatively constant stream of immigrants to inhabit the Omani urban areas, with employments in various public and private economic sectors (e.g. educational, health, manufacturing, finance, business etc.). This concentration pattern of low skilled immigrants is attributable to the need to labor shortages of native populations in certain jobs. The research results also indicate that the rural and suburban communities of Al-Batnah coastal plain not only have a greater number of low skilled immigrants but also display equitable distributions of the four South Asian groups in the residential settlements. For policy makers, it is imperative to understand the spatial patterns of low and high-skilled immigrants in Oman, which exert several geographic, economic, social and demographic implications. The significant role of immigration in development necessitates the identification of the predominant destinations for immigrants. It has been observed that the immigrants are crucial to several sectors of Omani urban economy, and urban areas with a large number of immigrants are more likely to grow and expand faster. In addition, the immigrants' laborers offer potential economic benefits to the host country, which include fostering entrepreneurial activities, small businesses and reducing wages, especially in unskilled jobs. Despite the negative impacts of immigration (e.g. losing national cultural and creating socio-spatial segregation), the diverse and distinctive locational patterns of immigrant groups in Oman contribute crucially to the socioeconomic development and immigration policy. Yet understanding of the spatial dynamics of immigration in structuring the Omani regions and its influences remains very limited. Thus, further research accounting for the different spatial and attribute ancillary data is necessitated.

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of nation inception, there has been a polarized debate on the impacts of immigration on both the local economy and workforce. The term, immigration is defined as a movement or flow of people from their origin country to a host country, with the purpose to settle or live in specific areas. There are several reasons as to why people immigrate, which include social, economic, political and natural

disasters. However, the economic circumstances are by far the strongest explanatory factor contributing to immigration. Correspondingly, the socioeconomic, cultural and demographic impacts of immigration exert diverse implications not only on the origin countries but also the host regions.

Immigration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman) show a considerable influence on the socioeconomic status and

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population structure. Post “the oil boom” in 1973, these countries had to invest the revenues from oil exports in the development of several fields particularly constructing socioeconomic services and infrastructure. However, due to the small size of native-born populations, immigrants ended up significantly contributing to the massive transformational development, as evidenced in the last three decades. Furthermore, the governorates in the GCC states rely heavily on importing foreign laborers for the infrastructure construction in various domains, including education, health, housing and network facilities.

Geographically, the total population size of GCC states now is almost 48 million inhabitants and nearly 50% of the population are immigrants. In some countries such as the UAE, immigrants comprise more than 85% of the total population. For instance, in Qatar and the UAE countries 1 out of 10 people is a citizen and 6 out of 10 are from India (Lori, 2012). This progressive rise has been consistent except during the 1991 Gulf crisis when the migration rate was negative, and otherwise, the waves of labor migrations to these countries have been continual. This large number of non-native-born workers often causes a loss of national culture and result in a socio-spatial segregation between the locals and immigrants. In addition to Arab workers, a majority of immigrants to the GCC region come from developing regions such as South and Southeast Asia. For instance, immigrants from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh comprise the largest numbers of South Asian foreign immigrants. A large number of immigrants from these countries are low-skilled workers undertaking jobs in construction and service sectors that are abandoned by citizens. This can be attributed to the local Arab culture and the inhabitants’ decision not to engage in certain jobs. Consequently, the labor market of such sectors is characterized by foreign workers.

Oman is one of the members of GCC states and is situated in the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula. It shares its borders with United Arab Emirates in the northwest, Yemen in the southwest, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the west, Arabian Sea in the southeast, and Sea of Oman in the northeast. In March 2017, the total population of Oman exceeded 4.5 million (4,593,896), with around 2.1 million being accounted for by non-Omani population (2,106,808). Earlier, the number of Omani population was slightly less than two and a half million (2,487,106) (NCSI, 2017). A close look at the development of the Omani economy, reveals that the development commencement was in 1964 when the exploitable oil fields were discovered and the actual production began in August 1967. Thus, Oman has become an importer of the foreign workers since the oil boom era in 1973. The oil boom has greatly benefitted the country; and from the lack of basic services before 1970, it has now progressed to have the fastest Human Development Index (HDI) in 2010 (Ross, 2012).

Although, during the First Gulf War, the number of foreign workers significantly decreased in Oman due to the economic slowdown and the decline in oil prices. However, in the year 2009, Omani economic status improved and the percentage of foreign laborers showed an increase to 36% as compared to 23.9% in 2003; moreover, in the year 2016, this number increased to 2,08 million. It can be concluded that Oman is a major recipient of South Asian labor immigrants, and the demographic statistics show that the non-Omani populations are enormous Asians. For instance, in 2013 among the top five immigrant-origin countries in Oman, the first three are from South Asia (644,704 Indian, 148,314 Bangladeshi and 117,208 Pakistani respectively) (UNICEF, 2013). In addition, the majority of the South Asian migrants are characterized as single, low-skilled laborers.

Despite the particular interest in the locations of immigrants, there is an apparent lack of academic research as regards the spatial distribution of immigrant laborers in Oman. The South Asian laborers in Oman display distinctive features that merit analyzing how different administrative zone. In this study, the locational patterns of each South Asian immigrant group, as the majority of the immigrant workers, have been calculated using the LQ and Entropy indices each immigrant group is distributed compared to the overall pattern of all groups in each. The

study focuses on conducting an analysis of the residential concentration and diversity of immigrants with particular reference to their low and high skills. Moreover, the use of Location Quotients (LQ) to identify low-skilled immigrant's concentration provides a clear understanding of the presence and distribution of South Asian immigrants across the Omani administrative zones. In essence, developing a systematic understanding of immigrant settlements has various essential implications such as identifying employment enclaves, ethnic group concentrations, and spatial patterns of foreign labor force participations. In this regard, this research contributes to the existing literature in several respects. First, this study attempts to fill the current gap by providing a spatial analysis of immigrant's settlements in Oman. Second, the study analysis is based on the aggregated census data at subnational geographic scale, which is not very common in the GCC research body of literature. Finally, from the methodological point of view, quantitative methods (LQ and Entropy indices) have been employed which provide optimal adaptation for spatial concentration and clustering within a GIS platform. This allows accurate quantifying of the spatial patterns of low and high-skilled immigrant distributions, for all study purposes.

Corresponding to this literature domain, this study, in addition, attempts to shed some light on the spatial distribution patterns of immigrants due to their skills across the three Omani governorates (Muscat, Al-Batnah North and Al-Batnah south). Globally, limited research papers are available that address the spatial distribution of low and high-skilled immigrants (e.g. Borruso, 2008; Carrasco, Jimeno, & Ortega, 2008; Mendez, 2009; Pamuk, 2004). However, to the best of our knowledge, the literature review reveals an absolute lack of any previous research to examine the spatial patterns of immigrants in Oman or in any other GCC country.

The main aim of this research, therefore, is to conduct a systemic examination of the spatial residential patterns of South Asian low-skilled immigrants across Omani subnational zones (Willayats). In order to achieve the research objectives, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the spatial distribution patterns of low-skilled immigrants across the Omani subnational boundaries?
- Are low-skilled immigrants' groups becoming more or less geographically concentrated in urban Willayats?
- What are the levels of residential diversity of low-skilled immigrants in the Omani Willayats?

Data from the 2010 Omani Census will be analyzed to primarily capture the immigrant residential patterns over the settlement areas. Further, to achieve the research aim and answer the research questions, optimally, a geospatial database has been created which includes the necessary variables of interest related to immigrants. Also, the study computed the stock of low-skilled South Asian immigrants in each Wilayat as a percentage of the total immigrants. The LQ and Entropy indices were spatially calculated to measure how different low-skilled immigrants are distributed and concentrated.

2. Literature review

There has been an exhaustive debate on the impacts of immigrants amongst the developing nations and developed countries from several perspectives (economic, geographical, social and political views). Correspondingly, the beginning of the 21st century witnessed, various immigration oriented attitudes and policies being articulated by the governorates. Although there are several positive impacts of immigrants for the host countries, most of the governmental policies are aimed at limiting immigration and reducing the total number of immigrants.

Literature review reveals that researchers tend to make two main arguments about immigrants: a) the first argument emphasizes on the socioeconomic problems, which are usually encountered by immigrants

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