

# *The Goat Life*: Indian workers victims of slave labor in America's great friend, Saudi Arabia

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Written and directed by Indian filmmaker Blessy Ipe Thomas (born 1963, best known as Blessy), *The Goat Life* (*Aadujeevitham*) is adapted from the 2008 novel *Goat Days* by Benny Daniel (Benyamin), a writer in Malayalam from Kerala in southwestern India. Malayalam is one of India's 22 recognized languages.

The novel and film are inspired by the real-life story of Najeeb Muhammad, a Malayali man from Kerala, who was enslaved in Saudi Arabia for several years in the early 1990s as a goat herder. Both book and film are banned in Saudi Arabia. The film is streaming on Netflix.

*The Goat Life* is currently the third highest-grossing Malayalam film in history and one of the highest-grossing Indian films of 2024. The novel also marked the first time that a writer had focused on the travails of migrant workers in the Gulf in Malayalam literature.

Although the film is set in Saudi Arabia, the production team, for obvious reasons, was barred from shooting in that country.

The film's central protagonist Najeeb (Prithviraj Sukumaran) spends his life savings for a chance to work in Saudi Arabia. Najeeb's visa procurer has told both him and co-traveler, Hakeem (K.R. Gokul), that they can make good money for working only a few months in the Gulf country. Both men come from poverty-stricken coastal villages.

Furthermore, Najeeb's wife, Sainu (Amala Paul), is pregnant. Extra funds are urgently needed. (In real life, Muhammad was enticed to go to Saudi Arabia with the promise of being a salesperson at a grocery store.)

Neither Najeeb nor Hakeem speak Arabic and are preyed upon as soon as they set foot in the country. At the airport, they are approached by the grizzled, short-tempered Kafeel (Talib Al Balushi), who rips their passports from their hands, loads them on the back of a truck, manhandling them when they attempt to protest. Torrential rain does not lessen the trauma. The unpaid duo are soon trapped in remote goat farms in the harsh Arabian desert (900,000 square miles).

Often physically assaulted and starved during his enslavement, Najeeb takes on the scruffy, bestial appearance

of the animals he tends. Flashbacks of the lush greenery of his homeland and delicate moments with Sainu help to sustain him.

After a few years of his horrific, almost unendurable captivity resulting in a body deformed by mistreatment and beatings, Najeeb accidentally meets up again with Hakeem. The latter is planning to escape his servitude with the help of an African immigrant, the Somali goatherder, Ibrahim Khadiri (the fascinating Jimmy Jean-Louis). Following the sun in the apparently endless desert, their deadliest of adversaries, the three men face a daunting challenge attempting to survive.

The movie's postscript reads: "This is not just Najeeb's story. It is the grief of many thousands who have lost their lives in the desert leaving their country and home to survive."

In the course of a decade-long struggle to make the film, director Blessy faced immense political and logistical ordeals, finally able to bring to the screen a remarkable story, with stunning visuals and high production values. It has what lead actor Sukumaran describes as "this huge liberty of not having a language," as only some 20 percent of the film contains dialogue. The original score and songs for the film, composed by A.R. Rahman, embellish and help compensate for the absence of human voices.

This is a heartrending drama. The presentation is not flawless, with tendencies in the direction of melodrama and tugging at the heart-strings, but the filmmakers in this case have confronted an immense injustice and tragedy of our time head-on and deserve full credit.

Relations of modern capitalist wage slavery continue to co-exist on this planet with feudal, semi-feudal and slave labor relations, in various forms. Only this week, the *New York Times* reported on the extensive use of forced labor in "fraud farms" in Southeast Asia, involved in internet scamming, which are "often staffed with trafficked workers laboring under the threat of severe beatings, electric shock or worse."

The *Goat Life*'s portrayal of medieval torture and practices, and a dedicated cast that brings this brutal social

reality to life, gives one a palpable sense of modern-day slavery.

It is a fictionalized version of conditions in contemporary Saudi Arabia, which has the highest prevalence of the blight of slave labor of any Arab country and the fourth-highest prevalence globally. Its *kafala* system ensures that foreign workers are tied to a single employer for the duration of their time in Saudi Arabia, often with their passports confiscated. The labor performed by *kafala* workers is similar to labor previously performed by slaves, and the workers often come from similar parts of the world from which slaves were previously imported, according to the 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI).

The GSI continues:

If a worker quits, strikes, or flees from an abusive situation, he will be unable to return home. With loans hanging over their heads, and a family depending upon every penny of their meager earnings, the workers are trapped. Skilled workers are reduced to performing demeaning labor; female domestic workers endure abuse and ill-treatment.

“Saudi Arabia, one of the world’s richest countries, has no excuse for detaining migrant workers in appalling conditions, in the middle of a health pandemic, for months on end,” commented Nadia Hardman, refugee and migrant rights researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW).

Video footage of people crammed together, allegations of torture, and unlawful killings are shocking, as is the apparent unwillingness of the authorities to do anything to investigate conditions of abuse and hold those responsible to account.

The October 2020 HRW report estimated there are approximately 10 million foreign workers in Saudi Arabia.

This is not a process on the decline. On the contrary, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that forced labor

in the private economy generates US\$236 billion in illegal profits per year ... The total amount of illegal profits from forced labour has risen by US\$64 billion (37 per cent) since 2014, a dramatic increase that has been fuelled by both a growth in the number of

people forced into labour, as well as higher profits generated from the exploitation of victims.

The ILO report, *Profits and Poverty: The economics of forced labour*, estimates that traffickers and criminals are generating close to US\$10,000 per victim, up from US\$8,269 (adjusted for inflation) a decade ago.

Total annual illegal profits from forced labour are highest in Europe and Central Asia (US\$84 billion), followed by Asia and the Pacific (US\$62 billion), the Americas (US\$52 billion), Africa (US\$20 billion), and the Arab States (US\$18 billion).

Modern-day slavery in Saudi Arabia continues because it is vital to the economics of capitalism. The US, despite its military operations all over the world in the hypocritical name of “democracy,” embraces Saudi Arabia in its quest for energy dominance and global hegemony. The Gulf country is ruled by a tyrant-monarch who has become a byword for murder, savage internal repression and genocidal warfare.

The US is the imperialist boss in the relationship. As the WSWS wrote in a 2022 perspective:

In the meeting between [President Joe] Biden and [Saudi crown prince and prime minister Mohammed] bin Salman, it is Biden who is the Godfather, guilty of so many crimes that he can barely remember them all. And he heads a military-intelligence apparatus that was carrying out murders just as bestial as those of bin Salman before the cutthroat crown prince was even born.

*The Goat Life*, with its weaknesses, makes important viewing.



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