

The story of Gurucharan Singh: from guest worker to illegal immigrant 'Are our lives and worries not important at all?'

I, Gurucharan Singh, thank you all for listening to my story.

From India to Dubai and back

I lived in the Punjab in India and the only work I knew was building. My grandfather and father had been in construction during their times. Hence it was an obvious career choice for me.

I worked in Dubai from 1978 for 12 years as a mason, a bricklayer. I enjoyed my work and was happy with my life. I visited India once a year for a month and spent time with my parents and friends. I earned good enough to serve my parents. I came back to India in 1990 when there were no new construction projects for my company.

After returning to India, I started working as a contractor. I constructed buildings for my customers by supplying labourers; my customers provided raw materials.

My life changed after meeting Puran Singh, but not in the right direction.

From India to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and the Caribbean

I started looking for opportunities to work abroad to better serve my parents. During this period, I met Puran Singh, an engineer and agent for the Carillion Company, who lives near my house. Puran Singh is also a distant relative. The Carillion Company gets contracts from foreign construction companies and send the people it recruits through its agents. One such agent was Puran Singh. As an agent he received a handsome amount of money from people who were looking for opportunities to work abroad. I approached him to get work. He told me that he would take me to a construction work in Russia. I would get 500 US dollars as monthly salary. He demanded 55,000 rupees (1100 US dollars) for this job. Hoping to provide a brighter future for my family, I agreed and managed to arrange the entire amount demanded.

I worked in Kazakhstan as mason for the construction company, in which Puran Singh also worked as an engineer. After 6 months I had to leave and to go back to India, as the construction project got completed. I felt cheated, so I met Puran Singh and had arguments with him. He then told that when I paid him another 25,000 rupees (500 US dollars), he would give me another job abroad. This time I would receive 600 US dollars as monthly salary. I assumed that he cared about my concerns and hence I arranged the entire amount by borrowing money from my family, friends, and relatives and paid him. I worked in Kyrgyzstan on a new project. Within one month, the construction company sent me back to India, because it had some problems with its partner company. All other labourers were also deported with me. Puran Singh left 15 days later.

This time, I was very frustrated, because I was cheated for the second time. I spoke to Puran Singh and said him to return my money. He told me that he could not return my money. Instead he offered me a new job. Five months passed and during this period I had a car accident. My legs were severely injured. All the money I saved when I worked in Dubai was spent for the operation. Although I

recovered from my injuries after four months, I could no longer work as a mason, because a steel rod had been implanted in one of my legs.

After four months I met Puran Singh and told him that I would not longer be able to work as a mason. I asked him to give me another position in building construction. He told me about an opportunity in Anguilla in the Caribbean as a foreman, a supervisor of labourers. He also said that the salary would be 700 US dollars a month. He demanded 200,000 rupees (4000 US dollars) for this new offer. Since I did not have any money left after my operation, I told him that I would not be able to arrange such a huge amount and negotiated the agent amount back to 150,000 rupees (3000 US dollars).

Since I had no money, I applied for a 40,000 rupees loan from ICICI bank. But this amount of money was not sufficient. I approached my dear friend Jitendar Pal, nick name Mentu, for help. He gave me 130,000 rupees (2600 US dollars). With his help I was able to pay the agreed amount of 150,000 rupees (3000 US dollars) to Puran Singh.

Hunger strike in the Caribbean

I know the saying "history repeats", but I never knew that my struggle would be like that.

I went to Anguilla in the Caribbean for work. This time, it was not the length of the construction project that was reduced but the wage. I would get 700 US dollars monthly, but I was not paid any salary for the first three months. Later it became clear I would get only 350 US dollars. The nearly 80 masons whom I supervised were cheated also. They received 160 US dollars, also half of the amount they were told. We all were in tears literally. We explained our situation to Puran Singh as he was our agent, an engineer for the Carillion Company and our only hope in the unknown island.

We were also did not get good food. The water and the meals were contaminated with insects. We had no choice but to eat our food with insects.

We all decided to raise our voice. 400 other workers who came through other agents were cheated also and they joined us. All these workers had either sold some land, or borrowed money from relatives, friends or from unknown people who gave it them at interest rates. The construction company with which the Carillion Company was partnered told us to either take the offer or resign the job and return to India.

But we could neither leave the job and go back to India nor accept less salary as in either case we could not repay the money borrowed from others. I informed Puran Singh about our problems, but he said he was helpless.

To fight back against the injustice done to us, 100 workers, me included, started a movement to raise our voice against the company. The company saw me as a threat and hence decided to suspend me. It only fired me, because I formed a union of employees from the different agents and led the movement.

I was unsure what was stored for me in future. The construction company could send me back to India. But I wanted to get justice. I went to the labour court and described the injustice done to me by the company. The labour court kindly listened to my entire story and told me that they would provide me justice. The court was also ready to help my other colleagues in the similar situation.

I went back to the company to meet my colleagues and told them the labour court was ready to help us. Many of them were scared about losing their job and being send back to India. Worried about their family situation in India, they chose to accept the situation. Only 40 members out of 400 were ready to go to the labour court for help. Seeing 40 workers coming together, many others felt encouraged to raise their voice too.

When we were heading for the labour court, five of the construction company men tried to stop us. Since they were five in number and we were 200, they could not do much. As the issue became big, the construction company now was ready to listen to our concerns. We were told that the Project Manager would meet us and try to resolve our problems.

After three days, the Project Manager met us and told us the salary mentioned in the agreement we had signed, was 350 US dollar for a supervisor and 160 for a mason; just the amount currently given to us. We were shocked as our agents had promised us double the amount. Since most of us were not educated, we had believed what our agents told us.

The Project Manager also said that the construction company had made all the arrangements for the employees to reach the company from India and has not taken a penny from us. Then we all realized that our agents had cheated us. The Project Manager said since we had signed the contract, it implied that we had agreed. He could not do much about the situation and we could either chose to work for the small salary or leave our job.

We decided to go on a hunger strike next day near the labour court at 10 am, as Gandhi's principles were instilled in me and I wanted to fight in peaceful way. The hunger strike became talk of the town and we received a lot of attention from the public. They could understand our anger as the usual wage for a labourer there was 100 dollars a day. We got much less than the normal wage. When the people came to know about the injustice, they were very supportive and offered us water and fruits. Since all of us were on hunger strike to get justice we could not accept the offer, but we were grateful for their love and encouragement.

The Minister also came to know about our situation. He asked for five of us to tell him the story. Some who could manage to speak English well, explained our tough times to the Minister. He ordered the labour court to get our details and make arrangements to help us. I wholeheartedly thank the public, legal court and the Minister for their help.

The Minister decided to send away the Carillion Company, which partnered with agents to recruit us, for cheating us. He then negotiated with the construction company to employ all of us. We were very happy because now we got the same wage as any citizen of Anguilla. Our working-hours were reduced drastically from 12 to 8 hours a day. We also got holidays, what was the last thing we would expect from our previous employer Carillion.

Deportation

Carillion Company did not want to spare me as I led the movement that succeeded in getting justice for 400 employees. The company had a huge loss of nearly 65,000 \$ a month. They looked for a reason to send me back to India. To harass me, the Carillion Company tried to make made the construction company believe that I could no longer work as I was operated on my leg and could not walk much. But initially the construction company supported me.

I did a regular checkup every year since my accident, and I underwent one such checkup here in the Caribbean as well. Carillion used this health check record as evidence and somehow convinced the construction company that I was unfit for any role in construction work and should be sent back. The labour court protested. It claimed that the construction company at least should pay me back the money I had spent during my stay. The construction company did so and deported me.

The decision was made to send some Carillion officials, agent Puran Singh and me together back to India with the same flight . I was very scared as I was sure that the Carillion officials could even kill me during or after my return to India. Because they lost a huge amount of money and a lot of their reputation. But I had no other choice than to go with the Carillion officials, as they had my passport.

In this situation, God was my only hope. I was happy I helped 400 colleagues to get back their rights. Their families would be in much better position in terms of education, health and wealth. Though things did not work out well for me, I was satisfied that many others would have a great future and I had been the medium to help them. But the thoughts of death came up now and then. I was also scared of what would be the life of my children, parents, and wife without me.

Holland

In 2007 Destiny had chosen Holland, The Netherlands, for me

We had to change flights at Holland (Schiphol Airport) to reach Delhi, the Capital of India. When we landed at Schiphol airport, thoughts of death intensified my scare. I was praying for help. Fortunately I met an Indian at Schiphol Airport whom I briefly described my situation. As he had to hurry to be in time for his flight, he said that he could not really help me much, but gave me few clothes and 20 Euros. He suggested me to hide in a restroom till my flight was over. I followed his advice and hid me in a toilet. I had no sleep, food or water for 18 hours. But since my life was too precious for me, I managed to wait till my flight had gone.

I stayed in Schiphol airport for three days, not knowing what to do and where to go. I used the money and the clothes the Indian man had given to me. After three days I was without a cent. I went to the Immigration department and asked for asylum. Not sure how to handle, I changed my name and story. "I am Ram Singh and I came along with my agent. But I lost track of him in the airport and have no legal documents or passport with me. I would like to get asylum". I changed my name from 'Gurucharan Singh' to 'Ram Singh' to save my life. I did not want the Immigration department to find my real details and send me to India, where I would be killed by my agent or the Carillion Company. I was arrested and sent to a jail at Schiphol airport.

My life as an illegal immigrant treated as number and not as a human

I did not get asylum and spent my days in jail. Four months passed by and suddenly one day officials and prisoners were running here and there. A guard told to me to leave the unit immediately. I was not able to run after my accident, so I could not run as fast as he wanted. He pushed me and as result I fell down 4 or 5 stairs. One of my fingers was severely injured. I could not bend the finger and it has remained a permanent burden to carry.

Later they told me that two years back there had been a fire at the Schiphol jail on 26-27 October 2005. Eleven illegal immigrants were killed and fifteen others injured. To save lives there was a fire-drill. Why didn't the guards inform us about the drill? In that case I would have told them about my leg injury and could have saved my finger. The guard who had pushed me, apologized, but will this heal my finger? No lawyer or doctor approached me when I was injured; and the only medicine I got was paracetamol to relieve the pain.

After nine months, I was released and had to leave the country. I did not know where to go. I did not know anyone here. I remembered Jitendar Pal Singh who lent me money to pay for the job in the Caribbean. He was residing in France and I had his address. I had only 40 Euros with me. But to reach France, I needed more money and a place to stay till I could leave.

Two days before I was set free, Kapoor, an Indian of Delhi, came free. He lived in Rotterdam and had given me his phone number. I asked him to accommodate me in his house for five days to organise my journey to France. He agreed.

Jitendar Pal Singh sent me 200 euro. I gave some money to Kapoor for helping me and I traveled to France. I was caught at the France border as I had no documents or passport and was told to leave the country.

Not knowing what to do, I met my friend Jitendar Pal Singh asked him to help me. He said that in order to get documents, I had to go to Spain. He gave me some money to travel by train. I was caught in Spain and sent back to France.

In France, I was put in jail for a month. They asked me about my details. They finally decided to send me back to Holland, because I asked for asylum there. At that occasion the Dutch immigration officials took my finger prints. Wherever I get caught in Europe, the authorities will send me back to the place where my first finger prints are taken. As I said: Destiny had chosen Holland for me.

In prison for the second time

After reaching Holland, I was sent to a migrant prison boat at Dordrecht for four months. After it I went to the Zeist migrant prison for another three months. I did not understand why Holland did not send me to India like other countries such as France or Spain had sent me back to the place I came from? Why does Holland always choose to place illegal immigrants in jail? This only increases their expenses. Do they have benefit in sending us to jail and providing us food and shelter? The questions remain unanswered.

In Dordrecht, I underwent an operation on my right leg. But it was not successful as I got serious pain after the surgery. I was not able to walk and used crutches. After ten days the crutches were taken away from me and even after repeated requests I did not get them back. In winter the pain increased severely, but the only medicine given to me was paracetamol, the medicine they provide for every health problem here.

No one was interested in my sorry plight. But I kept asking the jail officials: "Why, for what crime am I put in jail for two times?"

I went through a lot of mental disturbances, and many questions remained unanswered. Other illegal immigrants had the same problems. Some of them broke whatever they could get in hand such as a TV, a door or a mirror. There were many such incidents.

In the prison some one told me he traveled in a truck through Holland to Belgium to go to England. He was caught and sent to jail for nine months.

When I was arrested in other countries such as France, I was sent back to Holland as my first finger prints in Europe were taken in Holland. Why was this illegal immigrant not sent to the European country, where he came from? Why was he sent to jail in the Netherlands for nine months? When somebody actually wants to stay in Holland why would he go on to cover himself in a truck when he had already reached Holland?

The only event in jail that gave me some peace was when once a week some volunteers came to meet us, offered us fruits and listened to our stories. In one such occasion I met Joop. He listened to my entire struggle and the mental torture I was going through leaving my children, parents and wife in India. I had some relief that there was one soul who had a heart to understand what I was going through.

Later on, when I was at another migrant prison, Andries, the pastor, asked me if I knew a place to go when I would get released. I told him that I did not know where to go. He asked me if I knew Joop and would like to meet him. Andries wrote an e-mail on my behalf to him.

Joop came to meet me after 45 days. He very well understood my struggle in a country which language I didn't speak. And how difficult it was for me to have such little contact with my family, and not to be sure if I would ever meet my children and wife again. He told me to visit me every two weeks. I wholeheartedly thanked him for supporting me.

He asked me the same question as pastor Andries: "Where will you go when you are free?" I still could not find an answer to this question. He gave me his house address and phone number. For me Joop and Andries were messengers of God.



Mr. Singh (with turban) at a demonstration in Amsterdam, November 2012: 'No human being is illegal'.

I want to live with my family

Now I live in Joop's home. I have gone through lot of struggle and want to return to my country, India. I know very well, when I go back to my home town in India, I will be killed as Puran Singh is my neighbour and he will surely murder me if he can catch me. I will live in another state far away from my home town and start my construction work again. When I have earned some money, I will shift my family from Punjab to my new place.

After losing a son in accident, I have three children now: a daughter and two sons. I have to earn money to give a good education to my children. That has stopped in 2007. I also have a duty as a father to get my daughter married in a respectable family and as a husband I also need to give a nice future to my wife, who has been struggling all alone these years, taking care for our children, without any money and support from my side.

I didn't see my family since 2007. I could not attend my parents' funeral. My parents last days were very sad and it should not happen to any other parents. They were longing to see me before their death. But death walked faster to them and I could not leave Holland. At least I hope to see the rest of my family.

I am in my mid 50s, an age at which people in my country have their duties completed and lead a peaceful life, visiting temples and spending time with grandchildren. But for me, I still have many duties and the only hope I have is my self-confidence. It tells me I can fulfill all my duties and be happy with family in the future.

My self-confidence has been tested time and again. I lost my son recently in August 2012. The last time I have seen him was five years ago, when I left to work in the Caribbean. I never knew that it would be the last time to see him.

I want to cry aloud and share my feelings with someone. But I smile every time I leave my house. I do not want to be a burden to others and I keep my feelings to myself. I visit the park near my house and see parents with their children. I get peace watching them playing. I also became a friend of Claire, one of the other visitors of the park. She is another new life at my journey.

In prison again

I went to the IOM (International Organization for Migration) office in Amsterdam. I heard they could arrange a ticket and give me some help to start my life again in India. An IOM official told me they needed documents to process and hence advised me to go to a police station to state the loss of my passport. I did as advised by the IOM. The police told me to come back after fifteen days. The Foreign Police from Holland has not supported me. They gave me a letter, extending my stay in Netherlands for fifteen days every time. Time passed by.

I was already in Joop's house for a long time. Joop asked me not to stay longer than six months, because he would like "to help another migrant to find his way in the Netherlands." I understood his position. He has helped me by giving me a space in this unknown country and has been one of those few people who cared about me. I was not sure who to ask for help. I explained my situation to Claire, and she offered me to help me allowing me to stay at her home.

I lived in her house for a month. One day at midnight, suddenly she asked me to leave. I was not prepared for the situation and did not know the reason for her behavior. I requested her to let me stay for the night and told her that I would leave the house the next day morning. But she called the police and I was arrested and kept in the Zeist migrant prison for four months. Later on I was kept several months in the Zaandam prison boats.

When I left the jail, the government gave me 1200 euros as the judge found I was kept in prison too long. This incident, though not pleasant, had been useful for my family. I sent 1100 euros to them and kept 100 for me. That was the time I realized I had not sent any money to my family since 2007.

I met Claire again and asked her why she behaved in such an unexpected manner that night. She had no answer and again offered me a place at her home. Since I didn't know where to go, I accepted the offer and stayed with her. After few months again she called the police and I was sent to Zeist jail for another seven months. I did not understand why she behaved like that. In the end I explained my situation to Joop. He allowed me stay in his house again, and since then I live there.

I am five years in Holland now and I have been sent so many times to jail. Every day I am wondering myself for what crime I have been imprisoned five times. But I could not find an answer to this question.

Request to reconsider Dutch law

When I lived in the Zeist migrant prison, I met many people who were arrested as illegal immigrants in Holland. They told me about the mental torture being imprisoned without having committed any crime. One of them told me something that shook me. He said an illegal immigrant shot two Dutch people when he went back to his country because of out his anger for being imprisoned.

What shook me was that this incident is not one exceptional case, what we don't have to take seriously. This is one of many such incidents happening with many Dutch people when they visit countries like China, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Suriname or Sri Lanka. What shook me the most was that innocent Dutch people are being punished, who are not even aware of our situation in the prison.

I have met many Dutch people like Andries, Mr. Joop who have showed me love and have been very supportive. I have been jailed many times, and I would like to ask the government to reconsider their rules. Though my stay in Holland is not pleasant because I have no documents, I don't like it when innocent Dutch people will suffer because the Dutch laws are harsh towards us. The Dutch laws have to be reviewed to save us and also the Dutch.

Criminals in Holland are released after three to six months in jail. But we, illegal immigrants, are sometimes kept in jail more than nine months. Are we a bigger threat to the Dutch society than criminals? I don't think there is any European law which has the imprisonment term more than eight months, then why was I imprisoned for nine months? Lawyers have not supported me much. They say we have to be at least six months in jail before they can take any action. In France I was detained in jail for ten days only because I did not have any document. My question is: "Why is the six months a minimum term for illegal immigrants in Holland? And why do lawyers not take any action before six months?"

Once, when I stayed at the Zeist migrant prison, I had to go to the doctor. The guards wanted to handcuff me. I requested them not to do this, because it is very painful. Earlier I was sent to several

other jails and in no one there was such a rule. They told me when I didn't allow them to handcuff me, I could not visit the doctor.

The next day they informed me I had TB (Tuberculosis). Initially I did not believe it as I knew it was a trick to handcuff me, because I had no cold, cough or fever. They told me to wear a mask and I was brought to a separation cell for eight days. I requested them to allow me to speak to my lawyer, but no one listened to me. I got scared and started thinking "Maybe I really have TB". I wanted to go to the hospital to get confirmation because the fear in me was building up like a mountain.

When I visited the doctor and had the checkup, he told me I was perfectly fine and there was no trace of TB. Why was I put in a separation cell with a mask for eight days? The authorities in jail did not give any documents why I had to be handcuffed.

There are also many other incidents which scares us. For example: once I was offered a tablet, which was different from the one I got earlier. I told the unit head that the medicine was different. But he said that I was given only those medicines that were prescribed for me. After taking the tablet my blood pressure increased and I started to shiver. Later I came to know that this tablet was prescribed for someone else. I complained about the unit head, but no one listened to me and no action was taken against him. The unit head later said 'sorry'. But would just one word be enough for all the fear I suffered?

An Iranian, who stayed three doors away from my cell, cut his veins to take his life, because he could not stand the mental stress. The doctor somehow saved him. But would this really stop him from another attempt? There was an Indian who also tried to commit suicide and was also saved by a doctor. There was a Sri Lankan who lived two cells away from me. He cut his veins and died. Common people in Holland don't know that, due to mental stress in jail, many attempt suicide and that quite a lot of them die.

A Nepalese student stayed in a nearby cell. He was imprisoned for five months. He was very frustrated about what was happening to him and said that he would give these people pain when they would come to his country. The people who actually get affected by such laws are not only us but also innocent Dutch people. The government is creating criminals in jail, where in fact criminals should be sent to jail and not created there.

In the prison we are locked up in our cells for sixteen hours a day. From 6 pm till next morning 8 am. Also from noon till 1 pm, and from 4 till 5 pm .

After all the injustice we can speak only two sentences

When we are sent to court, we go in a group of about five migrants. Each of us has to wait for about eight hours in a locked room before we are called for our case. We have to wait till other cases are completed. We get only some bread and juice for that eight hours.

When the time has come for our case, we see a judge, a translator and two lawyers; one of them to support us. The lawyer who is appointed to help us, never speaks on our behalf and we self are allowed to speak only two sentences to describe our entire situation. Can our struggle in Holland be expressed in just two sentences? I believe the court case is deliberately made so tiresome that no one would like to come to court to seek justice again.

Each time when I was locked up in jail, I never heard how long my imprisonment would be. This is the same for every other illegal immigrant. We are put in prison without informing us about our release

date. In Holland every item being sold in the supermarket by law has to have an expiration date. But there is no law to tell us our 'expiration date' in jail. Are our lives and worries not important at all? Even people from whom it is proved that they are criminals know their date of release. Why are we never informed? Why are we treated worse than criminals? Is it only because they have documents and we don't?

Though my struggle in Holland has been very tough and tiring, I am thankful to Joop, Andries, Lilia, Mr. Freek, Claire, Matlina, and the Indian community for supporting a complete stranger like me.

Gurucharan Singh, end of 2012.

More information

= About Carillion PLC see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carillion

= About Anguilla see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anguilla

= in this letter 1 US dollar is 50 Indian rupees

The names Andries, Joop and Claire are fictitious.

With thanks to Priyadarshini Mohan who noted down the story of Mr. Singh and translated it from Hindi to English.