

The other GAP: Souk Al-Bengali

By Raymond Barrett
Kuwait Times exclusive

Friday in Kuwait, like in all Gulf countries, is a day of both prayer and trade. Once prayers are completed the Souk Al-Jumah (Friday Market), located between the fourth and the fifth ring roads, turns into one of the largest retail venues in the country. Friday is also the traditional day when the lower paid workers of Kuwait dress up, head out (if allowed), and do whatever shopping they can afford.

Unfortunately, most of the markets and malls only offer items that are way out of the price range of the cleaners, maids and drivers who lean against the lowest rung of Kuwait's economic ladder. However, proponents of free-market economics argue that we can trust 'the market' to fill any vacuum that might exist. So it has happened in Mahboula, where an alternative Souk Al-Jumah has sprung up around the local mosque to service the needs of one of the lowest income brackets in the country: the Bangladeshi cleaners

ture of broken English and Arabic, we managed to communicate and exchange some information. I asked him where the fish came from. "Shuwaikh, with net" was his reply.

When I asked about his prices, he pointed to the four good-sized fish in front of him. "Four pieces, one dinar." I then asked him how much money he expected to earn for his days work. "Two, three dinars," he answered. I was shocked by how little he expected to earn, but then I did some calculations: if his salary was only KD 20, over the course of a month, he could boost it by around 50 per cent by selling the few fish he managed to catch and sell.

Across Jangil's stall, there was another trader with a range of Hindi and Bengali VCDs and CDs, at considerably lower prices than their Arabic and English language counterparts in other parts of the country. There was even one man, who declined to have his picture taken, selling sunglasses to the more fashion conscious among the crowd.

Like any place of commerce, the Souk Al-Bengali was awash with the



Jangil (centre) displays his catch for potential customers.

subcontracted out to a variety of private companies and governmental organisations for around KD 20 a month.

Last Friday, I paid a visit to see what was on offer. The first thing that struck me was how quickly the market springs in to action. What is an empty patch of sand from Saturday to Thursday sprouts in to life a few hours before the Friday prayer, the traders keen to get the prime spots, in the shade of the few trees providing protection from the noonday sun.

The goods on offer are indicative of the purchasing power of the punters: mainly a range of fruits, vegetables and spices. There is also some fish, kept cool and free of flies by the wafting of a twig removed from a nearby shrub.

One of the fishmongers I talked to was a man named Jangil. Though originally from Bangladesh, he now works as a cleaner subcontracted to one of the oil companies in Kuwait. In a mix-

buzz of trade, as the stall owners tried to persuade each passer-by that they offered the best value. The customers ranged from off-duty cleaners and uniformed security guards, to more professional looking South Asians who live nearby.

This impromptu display of 'the market' in action is all in marked contrast to the new multi-million dinar Souk Al-Kut opened recently just down the road in Fahaheel, which caters to Kuwaitis and well-heeled expatriates. For years, high earners living south of the sixth ring road were forced to drive to Salmiya or Sharq to satisfy their high-end retail needs. However, given the significant demographic shift in Kuwait over the last five years that has seen major construction and development in the south of the country, it was only a matter of time before entrepreneurs stepped in to fill this void.

No goods or services are produced

Traders display their wares and catch of the day at the Souk Al-Bengali. The informal souk caters to lower wage earners like cleaners, drivers and maids. — All photos by Raymond Barrett

without utilising some or all of the four factors of production, defined by economists as land, labour, capital and enterprise. Out of these four, it is the latter that is the hardest to quantify and characterise. The need to be enterprising has been forced upon a large percentage of the Bangladeshi community here in Kuwait, due to the miserable salaries that many of them earn.

This entrepreneurial spirit can be seen everywhere in the country and not just by Bangladeshis, but also by other lowly paid workers from places such as India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. In Fahaheel, men will guide you to a parking spot and wash your car while you dine at a restaurant or wander around the souk.

In Mangaf and Abu Halifa, they cast nets in to the sea and look for shellfish on the shore. In Mahboula, they're gathering drink cans from rubbish

skips: one kilogram (about 80 pieces) nets the enterprising recycler 200 fils.

On the other hand, not all the enterprise displayed by low earning expatriates is of the legitimate variety. The local news sections of Kuwaiti newspapers are regularly filled with reports of poorly paid expatriates from countries such as (to name but a few) Bangladesh, Egypt or Pakistan arrested for a litany of money making rackets: be it pimping in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, sorcery in Farwanya or acting as drug mules at the airport. Despite the severe penalties reserved for expatriates convicted of such offences, there are still a small number who feel that it is worth the risk.

Is it because they feel there are no viable alternatives, or are they just filling yet another gap in the market?

raymond.barrett@gmail.com

