

Male Migration From Kerala

—Some Effects On Women

SINCE the second world war the emigration of Indian skilled and semiskilled labour has fallen into two categories : to the United Kingdom in the 1950s and early 1960s, and predominantly to the Middle East in the 1970s.

The state of Kerala has made a significant contribution to migration to the Middle East, far out of proportion to this state's share of the country's population. Due to certain historical and religious links, the Muslims of Kerala have been the pioneers in this recent upsurge of migration, Hindus and Christians having joined the outflow subsequently, often with the help of their Muslim neighbours.

Most of the migrants are young men who primarily see their work as temporary and as a means of earning high wages and saving as much money as possible. Their educational level is generally low, most of them not having completed 10 years of schooling. Most of them are unskilled or semiskilled.

Today, one out of every 12 households in Kerala has a member living and working away from home. Remittance receipts are estimated to have increased fivefold between 1976 and 1981, and, as a proportion of the state's domestic product, to have risen from five percent to 17 percent, showing the increasing importance of these receipts to the economy.

Remittance receipts comprise the major source of income for most of the migrant households. Living standards have improved in migrant households. As an investment, house construction and renewal has been found to be a priority and, according to one study, one third of the households had built new houses within five years of the migration of the worker.

Frequently, one male migrant follows another from the same family. As a result, many households become female dominated and the sex ratio in villages of high migration has been found to have changed considerably.

'Gulf boys' are considered prize bridegrooms and command a higher dowry than local boys. However, they are keener on family status, land, education and good looks than cash. Possession of land is still considered an easier route to respectability than wealth in any other form and has lately been appreciating the fastest in value. A young man wishing to migrate will be likely to choose a bride from a migrant household, not only because of the larger dowry that she is expected to bring, but also because he can hope to migrate more easily with the help of his wife's father or brother.

Since the length of absence of migrants has been increasing, women have started to take on a more active role in the management of family affairs and, as a result, have become less dependent. They will be required to deal with men outside the circle usually encountered and transact with dealers the sale of the gadgets the migrant brings home with him every one or two years.

Muslim women from migrant households have started operating bank accounts independently and some banks have opened special counters where women can be catered to without being seen by male customers. This has increased the need for women to learn to read and write, not only to deal with bank forms but also to communicate by letter with their husbands without the mediation of a third party. In such villages, the community is making efforts to organise literacy classes for women. In the absence of their husbands, women have been found to take more interest in the supervision of land transactions and house construction activities as well as in their children's schooling.

Depending on their age and relationship to the migrant worker, women in migrant households face differing kinds of pressure, tensions and conflicts.

Very often, a migrant worker gets married during a brief visit home, leaving his new bride to the care of his relatives. Conflicts between her and her in-laws can arise over sharing remittances. If the draft is addressed to the parents, the wife is at their mercy. If she receives it, she can be suspected of not sharing it sufficiently with her in-laws.

Even not so young wives face the danger of their chastity being questioned the moment they start taking an active interest in financial affairs which involve dealings with men. They may also meet hostility from male relatives who take offence when they are not entrusted with the running of the household.

Leading psychiatrists in Kerala are said to be alarmed at the increasing incidence of mental disturbance in migrant families, the worst victims being women between 15 and 25. Incompatibility with their in-laws is seen as the major cause of mental breakdown.