

Suma

—The Migrant's Wife

ALL my life I have lived in this village. My parents had seven children, three boys and four girls. My father now is 67 years old and my mother 48 years old. My mother is almost 15 years younger than my father, as she is his second wife. My father divorced his first wife because she did not produce children. This is a common and accepted practice here. His first wife has not remarried, and is taken care of by her relatives. Though my mother is a cousin of my father, her father still had to pay a dowry of Rs 300 which was not a small amount in those days. This was because my father had a regular job in the army. Though he worked in far-away places, we continued to live in the village. All of us children were sent to the nearby government aided schools but only I had enough interest in education to stay in school for 10 years and passed SSLC at the age of 16.

I was married off when I was 19. My husband, Shafi's village is about 15 miles away from Alukad. He was 24 years old but had studied only up to the fifth standard. The difference in our education did not seem to bother anyone. We had heard of his family through some common relatives. They were impressed that my father had a regular job in the government. I wonder whether the fact that I was educated mattered, but I think it was a plus point. My parents thought Shafi was handsome. He was working and making regular money as a plumber.

My parents gave a dowry of Rs 1000 in cash and 50 grams of gold in the form of jewellery. They also promised to give away the house in which they were living, along with the piece of land on which the house was built. The question of handing over

the house immediately did not arise as they were living in it. It was taken for granted that Shafi and I would get the house and the land when my parents moved to another place. I cannot figure out to this day why they promised to give so much. Perhaps it was because he was young and handsome with no drinking or gambling habits. He came from a family that was well regarded. Also, this was the first wedding in our house and my parents were in a generous mood.

After my marriage, I continued to stay in my natal village. Ordinarily, I would have gone to my in-laws' village. But Shafi, was keen on living closer to Trivandrum city. Demand for workers was much better there.

We decided to put together Rs 10,000 for Shafi to migrate. My jewellery was naturally the first to go.

Luckily, among the Muslims in Kerala, there is no taboo against men living with their in-laws. We lived in one of the five rooms in my parents' house.

When we got married, large scale migration to the Middle East had not yet started but Shafi had already heard of work opportunities there. He had applied for and obtained a passport. An uncle of mine, who lived in Bombay, made a contact who offered to secure an employment permit ; it was to cost Rs 500. Shafi would have to go to Bombay and stay on his own till he received it. Since Shafi was very keen on working in the Middle East, we decided to put together something like Rs 10,000 for the purpose. My jewellery was naturally the first to go. Rs 5,000 had to be given straightaway to the agent. The balance was to meet the cost of his train travel to Bombay, air ticket to the Gulf, his stay in

Bombay and the clothes and other things he needed.

About three years after our marriage, Shafi left for Bombay. We were given to believe that he would be able to depart from Bombay within a month. However, once he got to Bombay, things did not work out as he expected. He was kept in suspense week after week. Then weeks turned into months and his turn to go never came. He spent 10 months in Bombay, living out of his own pocket. Ultimately, he had to come back to Trivandrum. While he got back Rs 5,000, the amount which was given as advance to the agent, the balance of Rs 5,000 went up in smoke.

While Shafi was away in Bombay, my second child, our second daughter, was born. My health was weak and my infant daughter was even weaker. I took her to the hospital when I realised she was in a serious condition, but it was too late and she could not be saved. This was a very depressing period in my life. There was no word of hope from Shafi. My father was sent home from his army job on premature

retirement. It took, nearly four years for Shafi to make another attempt to go to the Middle East. In this period I had one more child, again a daughter. I did not go to the hospital for her birth either. When I was expecting my fourth child, my uncle, who had himself now become an agent in Bombay, offered to send Shafi to the Middle East : more and more people were now migrating there. The price of an employment permit had almost doubled but still it appeared worthwhile. There was clear evidence that people were doing very well within a short period of time.

Shafi had been promised the house and land in dowry. My parents agreed to give him an equal portion of land elsewhere instead of the portion on which the house stood. Although it was not spelt out, they felt that this land they gave would take care of their contract with him. Shafi sold

*All names of persons have been changed, to protect their identity.

the land, raised the additional money and went to Bombay once again. He had to wait in Bombay for just two weeks before flying to Alkhobor in Saudi Arabia. We received a cable from him saying he had reached his place of work.

Within two months of his going, Shafi sent the first bank draft for Rs 1,000. The draft, which was in my name, was sent to my sister's husband. This was according to the arrangement worked out before Shafi's departure. It was sent with full instructions about what was to be done with the money : part of the amount was meant for my brother-in-law in repayment of the loan Shafi had taken from him.

I went with my brother-in-law to the local bank and had an account opened in my name. My brother-in-law took part of the money and most of the rest was spent on distributing food to the poor and on a feast for friends and relatives. The decision about how the distribution was to take place was mine. We distributed rice to all the needy families, especially those who were without male economic support. This was the first time I took a major financial decision and handled so much money.

Shafi, wrote letters in Malayalam. In these letters, he told me about his work and life conditions. He shared a house with some other migrant workers and they cooked their own food. From time to time, he wrote, not only to me but also to the children and to other relatives. We all replied promptly, giving all the news. Our contacts with the post office and postmen, which had been infrequent before, suddenly became very regular.

When Shafi left for Saudi Arabia, I was expecting my fourth child. I delivered at home with the help of the midwife. We were hoping for a son but it was a daughter again. Frankly, it was a great disappointment to me. Shafi too must have been greatly disappointed when the news reached him. Although I had not gone to hospital even for my fourth delivery, I did go to the local Family Planning Foundation unit for advice during my pregnancy, whenever I did not feel too good. The doctors and the health workers in that unit were always very sympathetic. After my

delivery, when the health worker met me, she suggested that it was time for me to consider undergoing sterilisation rather than risk another pregnancy. I too felt my health was not good enough to think of having more children.

Even though I wanted to have a son, how could I be certain that the next one would be a son ? I could not, however, decide on my own. So I wrote to Shafi for instructions. He did not disapprove of it. I got sterilised only after he consented.



During the first two years or so of his stay in Saudi Arabia, Shafi also sent several parcels with friends. The parcels usually contained toys and clothing for the children and occasionally a few saris.

After a little over two years, Shafi came back home on his first and so far only visit. Our whole family went to the airport in two taxis to receive him. This was the first time many of us saw the airport. When Shafi finally arrived after hours of waiting, he looked really different. His clothes were better. He walked and talked more confidently. He arrived loaded with gadgets. It was like Id. There were gifts for every one in both families, mine as well as his own, and for some of our close neighbours. Shafi spent the first few days at my parents' house and then we all went to his village.

There were gadgets, albums, toys, clothes and plain synthetic material for saris for all the family members. There were also several tins of Tiger Balm, a favourite, particularly with older people. Men and women in Alukad feel that this balm cures headaches better than the balms we get locally. Distributing the gifts fairly between family members was a major problem. Since Shafi's family was not there when we gave gifts to my family members, his sisters were aggrieved, thinking that his family did not get a fair share. The gifts, instead of increasing happiness, created complications.

Shafi could stay for only 39 days. Naturally, life was very hectic during those days, with relatives and friends walking in and out of the house. Our house at any time is very crowded, with all the married daughters, including myself, continuing to live there. So there is never much privacy, less so when the whole neighbourhood is walking in and out of the house.

Also, one of my cousins, who was under the guardianship of my father, was to be married during those days. This wedding caused a misunderstanding between my father and Shafi.

A few days before the wedding, they had come to ask if they could give some rich rubber land in dowry instead of the cash that had been agreed upon, or

otherwise, pay cash at a later date. My father is known for his short temper and can be very difficult and unreasonable. He insisted on cash and on its being given immediately. So the girl's party had to sell off their rich rubber land at a throwaway price. We were all helpless and could not make my father see sense. Shafi too did not approve. The house my father lived in belonged to us or was to be given to Shafi. Shafi had been reasonable and why should my father not be reasonable towards others? Shafi kept getting angry with me and saying someone would have to teach the old man a good lesson.

While Shafi was still with us, my younger brother, Zakki, was getting all set to migrate. He was working as a shop assistant in a grocery store in the Trivandrum city wholesale market. He had already paid through an agent the money necessary for obtaining the employment work permit. He left for Riyadh some months after Shafi had gone back to his job.

Although Zakki went to Saudi Arabia a little after Shafi had gone, he had to come back after two years to get a renewed work permit. He was not married at that time. Zakki sent my father regular bank drafts. The amount raised for his employment work permit and the loans for his travel were paid back. It was possible to run the house better and put some money aside.

While Zakki was waiting in Trivandrum trying to organise his second work permit, my parents thought it was a good time for him to get married. He was 28 years old already, much older than most Muslim men are when they marry. But no party had come forward with an offer of dowry that was sufficient in my father's eyes. Now we were getting anxious, so we started a serious search and found a girl for Zakki. The dowry was settled.

Just when the wedding ceremony was taking place, some women found out that the jewellery the girl was wearing did not match what had been promised. The news spread like wildfire. When the girl's parents were confronted, they conceded that it was so, explaining that they could not buy the promised amount of gold immediately.

They promised to make up for the shortfall soon. However, my father was adamant. Although the wedding ceremony had been performed, he had the marriage annulled there and then. This came as a great shock to everyone. I do not know how Zakki felt.

I was glad Shafi was not in Trivandrum. He would have supported the bride's party and quarrelled with my father in public. When he heard what had happened, he wrote me a very angry letter, calling my father all sorts of names and vowing to avenge the insults inflicted on the girl's party. I do not know how he heard the news. I did not write to him about it because I knew he would not like what

had happened. But people are constantly moving back and forth and he had heard all the details. Since that time, I have not had any peace.

Soon Shafi wrote to my father, asking for the immediate transfer to his name of the house that was promised to him in dowry. So far, he had only been given the land but he had been promised land, as well as the house. He would, if necessary, pay back the money for the land, but he wanted the house at once. If this was not done, he threatened to take the extreme step of divorcing me. My father wrote to Shafi, asking him to be reasonable. Shafi already owned a large piece of land in front of our house. He had enough money to



build a much bigger and better house. My father asked why he wanted to create trouble with the people who had helped him in the time of his need ? But Shafi has so far refused to give in. He has stopped writing to me and to the children. It is over a year now since I received the last bank draft. So I am now totally penniless.

I also hear rumours that Shafi has writted to the mosque that he wants to divorce me through I haven't received a notice from the mosque. But I live in constant fear that, one of these days, the divorce may come. If Shafi does divorce me, I will not know how to support myself and my three children. We shall become completely dependent on my brothers and sisters for the rest of our lives. It is a future I would not wish even for my enemies.

I am caught in this dispute between Shafi and my father and made into mincemeat. Just because Shafi has a score to settle with my father, is it fair for him to deprive me and our children of our bare subsistence ?

True, my father deserves little sympathy. I myself hated him for what he did at the time of my cousin's marriage and even more for the way he mercilessly had Zakki's marriage annulled for the sake of a few grams of gold. I hate the way the practice of dowry has spread amongst us poor Muslims. It gives men one more excuse to rake up quarrels at their will and to discard us.

I am worried about our three daughters. If Shafi discards them, they will be reduced to the status of poor nieces of my brothers and sisters. They will probably be withdrawn from school and made to do domestic chores. If they are sick, who will take them to a proper doctor ? And, of course, since I will not be able to give them any dowry, they will end up with good for nothing men who are either too old for them or who cannot earn enough.

In the beginning, I did not take seriously Shafi's threats to divorce me. Now, it appears that he may well do so. I think my father ought to give away the house because he gave a solemn promise at the time of our marriage. Also, he should show some concern for me and our



children's future. Now I think that if my worst fears do come to pass, I shall have to fight it out. Shafi is young and is earning well, so he can easily marry again. Who will marry me with my ill health and with three daughters to look after ? It is common for men to walk out, leaving daughters to the mother's care.

I shall take him to court if I do not get justice from the mosque. I must get back the land my father gave him to pay for his

that he is prosperous, he and his family are trying to get rid of me. They need money immediately to get Shafi's sister married off. So they may want to procure another dowry by getting him remarried.

I have never regained my health after the birth of my second child, who survived for only a few months. My third child was born after a gap of only 18 months. I have lost weight in recent years too. Even though I underwent the operation five

*I am caught in this dispute between my father and my husband
and made into mincemeat...*

employment permit or I must be given another piece of land of the same size in the neighbourhood. He must also pay for our maintenance and for the three girls' education. It will be a hard fight. I do not know how much support I shall get from my own family, but I do not intend to give up easily.

When he married me and came to stay with us, he was virtually penniless. Now

years ago and am free from the strain of childbearing, I must admit that I have been quite neglectful of my health. I have always postponed going to the doctor. I take the children to the local primary health care centre. Their problem is worm infection. They walk about barefoot and get infected again and again. In a house with so many children, chickens, and goats, it is hard to prevent this.

My biggest anxiety is over my 13 year old daughter. She has complained of constant headache since she had an accidental fall. There was a big lump on her head for a while, and although the lump has gone, the headache has not. The health care centre advises me to take her to the hospital for an examination. I know something serious is wrong with her but I have no money of my own to spend. So I wrote to Shafi, but he has not bothered to send money for her treatment.

Looking back, I wonder how much I have benefited from my husband working in Saudi Arabia. Until he went away, that is, in the first seven years of marriage, we stinted on everything to save, up for him to migrate. And, for the first few years after his migration, everyone's concern was to see that we did not overspend. Although

he kept his savings in a separate bank account and whatever he sent me was meant largely to meet our day-to-day expenses, I tried not to spend more than was absolutely necessary. The children continued to go to the same school as before. I stinted on doctors and medicines, which is why I have never fully recovered my health after my second delivery. Now I find that the difficult times I have gone through in these 13 years of my marriage are in danger of going totally unrewarded through no fault of mine.

After Shafi stopped sending me money, I registered with the government exchange for a job. As a Muslim woman, I get some preference. So they came to make investigations about me. But they learnt from our neighbours that my husband was in the Gulf and doing well, and thought I

did not really need the job. My pleas that I had not received any remittances for a year and that I had exhausted all my savings from past remittances, fell on deaf ears.

You don't get anything free in Kerala, not even medicine, if they know you have a Gulf connection. I have problems even with the fish vendors, let alone the doctors. I have written to Shafi about it but he hasn't replied. He probably thinks that I have fabricated this, story to get some money out of him.

Shafi is due back on his next visit. I still have some hope that he will have a change of heart once he sees the children. In any case, the situation will become clearer to us. We cannot stay in this suspense. I cannot go to court for maintenance as I have no proof of being divorced. I will have to make sure that Shafi does not divorce me. ☐