

THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: IMPACT OF GULF MIGRATION ON WOMEN LEFT-BEHIND IN MALABAR.

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Abstract: Significant section of Kerala society is immigrant and their remittance constitute the back bone of Kerala's economic advancement. Malabar in the north of Kerala had unbreakable relationship with Gulf countries from the ancient times onwards and today at least one individual of every single households of Malabar are migrant workers in Gulf countries. This paper examines the condition of women left – behind in Malabar and their untold stories of struggles for survival. Though there are changes in almost all fields like science, technology, material life, standard of living etc. and though it had changing implications in the life of women left behind, patriarchy continues to function without any change and its gender specific, sex oriented stereotypes continue to condition and control the life of women especially the life of women who are left behind in home. The change in family structure and the autonomy asserted by some women after the migration of their husbands is temporary as the changing roles will revert once he is back from abroad. The experiences of women left – behind home is greatly varied according to the family set up and social structure. A more general tendency shows that on the one hand the women of extended families experienced strict supervision and control over their mobility and autonomy and on the other hand the women of nuclear families exercised more powers and have decision making rights in the absence of their husbands. While some women figured out a way to cope with the emotional turmoil many others even went in to the stage of psychological illness commonly termed as 'Gulf syndrome' in Malabar region. The life of these women however is not stagnant as every day they are struggling to survive and pushing the life ahead.

Key words: Migration, Malabar, gender, patriarchy, Gulf syndrome, mobility, kathu pattu,

Kerala, popularly known as the God's own country has been hailed for its unique developmental model for the last many decades. The indicators of Kerala model of development were even compared with the developed countries. The human resource of Kerala constitutes its basic unit of achievement and progress. A significant section of Kerala society is immigrants and their remittance constitute the backbone of Kerala's economic advancement. The migration and the flow of remittances had resulted in unprecedented economic changes in Kerala's economy since the mid 1970s¹. Although Keralites have been immigrants to many countries, the migration to Arabian Peninsula which started in 1960s and reached in its peak is remarkable². The present paper is an attempt to unveil the veiled life of women left behind in migrant Muslim families of Malabar in northern Kerala.

The geographical unit of Malabar constitutes the present day districts of Malappuram, Kozhikode, Kannur, Wayanad, Kasargod and Palakkad. The demography of Malabar shows that the Mappila Muslims were one of the dominant communities in the region following the Hindu community. According to some scholars, the Mappilas are the oldest settled native Muslim community in South Asia. In general, a Mappila is either a descendant of any native convert to Islam or a mixed descendant of any Middle Eastern — Arab or non-Arab — individual. Muslims in Kerala differ from North Indian Muslims mainly by the strong Arabic influence in the former³. Arabs came for trade, settled and married women of the region and sermonized Islam in the coastal regions of Malabar. Most of the untouchables were converted to the religion as there was unbridled caste system. This was the beginning of the Muslim civilization in this division of the country⁴. These deep rooted affinities and affiliation between Malabar and Arab lands were not broken rather affirmed through Gulf migration.

As far as the Gulf migration is concerned, a considerable section of Muslim families of Malabar are migrants in Gulf countries. Factors like prevailing economic backwardness, social insecurity, prevalence of wide spread unemployment, religious similarities etc. attracted large scale Muslim migration to Gulf countries. The Gulf migration and the inflow of Gulf money brought drastic changes in all walks of life of the Malabar Muslims. Malabar is now ranked as one of the best regions in India in terms of 'physical

quality of life index' and the inflow of Gulf money had a major role in Malabar's transformation from an economically and socially backward area to one of the most advanced regions of India with all the amenities to make life easier and faster. Gulf countries had offered high wages and which became the locus of attraction in spite of troubles and pain. The economic betterment and the social security were the prime factors which prompted people to migrate, leaving their family behind. The pattern of migration in Malabar more generally is that the male member of the family will migrate in search of employment leaving his wives and children in home. Many of the migrants could achieve financial stability, though there were untold stories of exploitations and sacrifices. The financial advancement of migrant families in fact became a veil to hide the stories of their pain, emotional imbalances etc. caused by migration in their family.

There are plethora works which is specifically attributed to the study of the economic and social impact of Gulf migration on Kerala Muslims. However, these studies give less attention to the life of women, who were left behind in the migrant families and their day today life. It is important to unveil their veiled stories and this paper is an attempt to reconstruct the life of these women who were invisible and whose voice has been silenced in the pages of history.

The patriarchal family set up hailed adult men as the decision makers of the family and their presence is crucial for house hold security and mobility. The unwritten yet the socially constructed firm laws of patriarchy makes man as the bread earner of the family and attribute the refined title "house maker" to the woman folk. For this classification and subsequent marginalization, the constructed notion of gender and the biological difference are the finest tools employed by patriarchal family set up. Along with this the religious restrictions also forced the Muslim womanhood of Malabar to stay back in home and to perform their expected roles as wives and mothers or in other words she was forced to dedicate her whole life for her man and children. In fact, religion itself is patriarchal where the rules and regulations are framed by men, for men. The identity of a woman shrinks in to the term 'house wife' and above all she was conditioned to accept this label with satisfaction and contemplation. Men defined and designed the life of these women and they were mere 'service providers' to the men folk of their family. The success of patriarchy is that the process of making women as mere spectators of their own life is with their consent and approval. It is interesting to note that the bringing up of a girl child is in such a way that the patriarchal values and moral messages are instilled from the childhood onwards and hence her voice was silenced and invisibility became her visibility. Her life was designed by men and consequently she was destined to live for him which ensured her dependency over him. Thus the social conditioning and mental training in order to become a "good woman" starts from the childhood onwards and if a woman deviate from this invisible but "straight" path of patriarchy interestingly the conditioned women or the finest products of patriarchy are the first to blame her or will try to guide her again by using the "user manual" of male dominated world. Patriarchy can be considered as one of the best hackers who could even hack the thought process of woman and condition her as it wants.

Gulf migration had contributed for the prolonged absence of men in the home and hence it has implications on family life, particularly changes are visible in the day today life of women. They have to face new challenges and responsibility in order to cope with the new reality. The absence of men prompted women to take leading roles in family. Women have been called upon to take charge of a number of house hold tasks, have become responsible for financial management of the house hold and have developed new expertise and confidence⁵. Here we can see that the absence of men forced women to manage house hold and family which were earlier completely hegemonized and monopolized by the dominant male figure of the family. The absence of men in fact enabled women to break the barriers of dependency to some extent and to become self-confident and assertive individual. The need for family inter dependence and jointness becomes no less while the migrant worker is living abroad⁶. However, these changes are not full-fledged and the Muslim women were indirectly controlled by the decisions of their men from the migrant countries.

While there were changes which enabled Muslim women to make a gaze into public sphere, their private life was haunted by other challenges. The Gulf wives (the wives whose husbands are working in Gulf country) were leading a life of emotional turmoil. The impact of family separation due to migration severely affected the life of these women. A considerable section of them especially young wives were affected by 'Gulf Syndrome'. They had experienced loneliness in all walks of life and which was an adverse consequence of migration in relationships. The age old mothers were in consistent need for the presence of their sons and their absence created emotional imbalances in their old age. But the fact is that the emotions, feelings and agony of these women were belittled while glorifying the sacrifices of men who had migrated for the welfare of the family. The wives and children of the immigrant are deprived of those

forms of emotional security that a husband and father normally provide. The wife is likely to suffer the most, surrounded as she is often by the in laws only, sometimes hostile, any protection she may had from her husband is no longer available to her⁷.

During 1980s and 1990s the means of communications were limited and it was mainly carried out through letters. Migrants and their family members were communicated through these rarely send letters. Letters which is termed as 'Kathu' in Malayalam carried the feelings and emotions of these women and through which they communicated to their beloved ones. 'Kathu Pattu' (letter songs) genre of 'Mappila Pattu' (Mappila songs) are very famous among the Muslim community mainly because it was connected to the lives of migrant workers and their families. 'Kathupattu' was the popular way of recording history, memory, emotions and traditions and it was particularly popular among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar. There are two varieties in Kathupattu consisting of the letter written by the wife to her husband and the 'Marupadi kathupattu' which is the husband's reply to his wife. 'Dubay Kathu pattu' was a popular Mappila song written by S.A. Jameel during 1970s and even today the song topped among the mappila songs through stage shows and programs. S.A.Jameel who was a psychologist by profession written these 'kathupattu' by collecting information from the wives of migrant workers in Gulf countries and hence the songs could portray the emotional instability and the mental trauma of women left behind rather than show casing the glamour and richness of Gulf money.

Following are the few lines taken from his 'Dubay Kathu Pattu' and an analysis of the lines of this song clearly conveys the emotional turmoil experienced by the wives of Gulf migrants.

“Ponnum muthalum panam pandam bhangeesum
Foreign thunikalaninjulla pathrasum
Naalu per kaane nadikkunna naamoosum
Naattil ettam valiyoru veedinte anthasum
Udenikk sakalam ellamellam undayittenthu phalam
Anaadhayay inathunayatta
Gunamanamulla pen malaray virinje
Virahathin venneeray ventharinje”

This 'Kathu Pattu' is written from the perspective of a wife, whose husband was a gulf migrant. The lines clearly delineate the pain and loneliness of a Gulf wife, which says that even though she has a luxurious life including gold, foreign cloths, big mansion, she is experiencing the trauma of loneliness in the absence of her husband. Another stanza from the same 'Kathu pattu' addresses the questions and anxieties of this wife.

“Arabi ppon vilayum marumanal kaattilu
Akala Abudhabi Gulfinte naattilu
Adhwaanikkum ningal sooryante chottilu
Njan onnu chodikkunnu
Ee kolathinu enthinu sambadhikkunnu
Onnumillenkilum thammil kandu kondu nammal randum
Oru pathrathil unnamallo
Oru pay virich onnichurangamallo”

In these lines the wife asks the purpose of earning money from abroad if it only brings the pain of missing and loneliness. She prompts her husband to comeback to home so that at least they will be able to see every day and live together. These lines explain the severe pain as well as the desire of a Gulf wife, who is always longing for the presence of her beloved. 'Kathu pattus' like this are in fact a picturisation of the feelings and emotions of women who were destined to live alone even in the midst of luxurious and glorified life. It shows the severity of emotional turmoil experienced by these women in their everyday life. The speciality of this kathupattu is that every husband in the Gulf countries and the lonely wife in the home could connect their emotions with the characters in the kathupattu.

During the early days of Gulf migration making a phone call was a luxury. And the common custom was to send a bunch of letters to the beloveds in Gulf countries with the person who came to a short span of home visit may be for one or two months and now going back to abroad. Gradually the time of letters and the practice of writing letters became extinct. Today those letters became the symbol of Gulf nostalgia. In the twenty first century means of communications are not limited or restricted like earlier. Telephones and then mobile phones could make communication easier and faster. Video calls and various social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp etc. could reduce the severity of feeling missing in migrant households. While analyzing the changes in the life of women who were left behind in home, there

were changes in the life of women in joint and nuclear families. The women in nuclear families could assert more autonomy and have decision making powers while managing the responsibilities however women in joint families were not able to extend the same as their autonomy and mobility were restricted by the other male members of the family. Many of the newly married young wives whose husbands has to go back to the abroad within short span of time may be like one or two months experience mental trauma and emotional imbalances and this psychological illness is termed as 'Gulf syndrome'. The number of gulf wives who are destined to experience this psychological illness in increasing day to day and factors like lack of support from in laws, restricted mobility, controlled autonomy, increased dependency on relatives etc. are playing vital role in creating tension in their family life. In fact, the un demographic, gender biased, sex roles oriented patriarchal family set up is the basic unit of this trauma. As long as this organization remains unquestioned the problems will continue without any sound solutions.

Traditionally, migration is a practice based on gender roles. While sole female migration is increasing (Zlotnik 1995; Roberts 2002; Shah 2004), particularly for specific occupations such as nurses or domestic workers, it appears that human capital, family responsibilities and gender roles will continue to ensure that labor migration will remain dominated by male migration in years to come (Donato 1993; De Jong 20000)⁸. While men were migrating the left – behind women in home are responsible for managing house hold duties and more importantly they assume the role of financial planning though the source of income is the husband working in abroad. In most of the migrant households women are destined to look after children, age old parents, doing day to day home duties. In the absence of husband, they are entitled to going outside and completing duties like children's education, shopping home necessities etc. this provides them an opportunity to be self sufficient to some extent while earlier their life was exclusively centered within the four walls of kitchen. At the same time the man who leaves the family and works in the abroad forced to take up the duties which he earlier hesitated to do like cooking, cleaning etc. However, it is important to note that this role revision is temporary as he returns back to home from abroad the traditional gender roles attributed by patriarchal family set up to male and female will soon continue to operate again. Hence the changes occurring in family structure as a result of migration is temporary as it will revert when the male member returns back to his family.

The experiences of women whose husbands are migrants of Gulf countries are greatly varied. The interviews conducted as a part of this study clearly shows that some women were able to assert their voice in family management and decision making, while some others faced strict supervision and guarding. Sajitha, a 28 years old woman and mother of 2 children is living along with her husband's parents in Malappuram district. Her husband Siraj is a migrant worker in Qatar for past eight years and will come for the home visits for every 2 years. In the absence of her husband, Sajitha is the decision maker of her family and she is able to manage the house hold and other affairs with improved autonomy and mobility. She says "when my husband is here for home visit, he will manage everything and I am responsible only for treating the whole family well. But when he is not here, I have to take care of the entire family, managing money, meeting relatives and others, shopping and other activities. I was a person with fear of living alone and always depended upon someone for managing my own things. But now life taught me to manage not only myself but my whole family. I have also learned to drive and now I am self sufficient. I am always longing to reunite with my husband. Though his absence will always haunt me, I am no longer scaring uncertainties of life⁹." The words of Sajitha makes it clear that her experience of living alone with children and age old parents in the absence of her husband made her stronger mentally and her freedom for mobility and powers of decision making has also increased highly. However, the experience of Sulekha is contrary to this. Her husband is working in Yanbu in Saudi Arabia for the last thirteen years in a construction company. Sulekha is the mother of three children and she is 36. In the absence of her husband she is living in an extended family and hence had to experience severe restriction and supervision from the in laws. She says that "I have to get permission from a number people to get out even for very important things like visiting my daughter's school for parent's meet, for visiting my own home etc. I used to think if Ali (her husband) is here I need to get his permission only. No need of convincing my each and every in law for basic needs like this. I have my best days when he comes home and then I will have greater freedom when compared to this situation of living with my in laws in this extended family. It's been years now and I am familiar with these consistent controls over me. My daughter is in eighth standard now and I used to think that when she grows up and reach her age of marriage. I won't sent her to a man who is working abroad and leaving her behind. At least my daughter shouldn't have a fate like me¹⁰". These words of Sulekha clearly conveys her feelings of pain and she hate the amount of control extended over her by her in laws and express her concern as a mother of a girl child that she won't let her daughter to experience the same pain once she reaches the age of marriage. Swapna who is a twenty years old wife of Adarsh is

struggling with psychological problems like mood swings and melancholy immediately after Adarsh went back to Abu Dhabi for work. They were stayed together just for two months after marriage. After husband's departure she couldn't cope with the pain and loneliness in husband's home and Swapna went in to depression. She is in her house now and taking periodical treatment and counseling in a nearby psychiatric clinic. Her mother in law is blaming Swapna's mother and family by arguing that Swapna was a psychiatric patient even before the marriage and the marriage only helped to spoil her son's life. Swapna's mother says that "my daughter doesn't experience this kind of emotional problems prior to her marriage. Once Adarsh left she became gloomy and then day by day her situation became worse. The only good thing is that Adarsh keeps supporting her to recover from the depression and trying to take her along with him¹¹". This is the experience of a newly married young girl whose husband is in abroad. This psychological illness is common among the wives of Gulf migrants in Malabar and some has to consult with a psychiatrist in order to prevent the condition from becoming severe while some others try to manage their unending pain and emotional imbalance within themselves and without letting know others as it may further bring them blame and many others are familiar with the conditioning and controlling and hence living a silenced and suppressed life.

The recent economic, political and cultural changes happening in Gulf countries have been adversely affecting the migration to these areas. However, Malabar could not easily break up its ties with Gulf countries. Though the number of migrations was considerably reduced, still many of the Muslim families have at least one member, who is working in any one of the Gulf countries. In this twenty first century the educational advancement and economic betterment enabled the Muslim women to take leadership and assert their self sufficiency in both private and public life. The technological progress reduced the distance between migrants and their family, though the pain of separation is there. Progress has been registered in material and technological spheres, but till today patriarchy functions with the same gender roles and stereotypes and hence there is no change in the sufferings and struggles of women left behind in home. It is important to note that the Gulf money enabled Malabar and Kerala for great economic advancements and achievements. At the same time the Gulf migration has another story of the forgotten life of women who were struggle to survive in the midst of the most painful process of migration.

END NOTES

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