

Book Reviews

In the Absence of their Men by Leela Gulati, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1993, 174 pp. Rs. 200.

Migration, Remittances and Capital Flow: The Indian Experience by Deepak Nayyar, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994, x + 134 pp. Rs. 220.

The two books from renowned scholars on emigration, basically to the Middle East, have significantly extended our knowledge on this important issue but the two authors have very different perspectives. While Gulati is concerned with micro level issues as to what happens in the life of women and their families when husbands/sons migrate to earn a livelihood in a foreign country, Nayyar is examining macro issues, particularly if the remittances and capital flows affect the national economy, and if so, in what way. Both are looking at the total size of emigration from India. While Gulati's canvass is only the Middle East countries, Nayyar examines migration to the developed countries as well.

Gulati presents the case studies of ten women — five Muslim, four Hindu, and one Christian, all living in two different rural wards of Trivandrum city — with whom she talked at length as personal friends. They depict the stage at which their men had migrated to the Middle East, mainly to Saudi Arabia, for improving their material lot. The urge for having higher standard of living was so great that they did not mind, at least openly, separation from husbands for long years. Probably, many of the young brides had very little say in such matters.

Migration of any one male member to West Asia seems to have a major impact on the family members, especially the women left behind. All families had to make major adjustments in their lifestyle and shoulder greater responsibilities as a consequence of this emigration. The impact of migration on the family starts long before the migrant actually leaves home, since all aspirants who want to work abroad must obtain a work permit and also arrange for the passage money. When the work permit is obtained through a recruiting agent, a migrant must arrange for a down payment ranging between Rs. 15,000 to Rs. 30,000. An aspiring migrant from a low income family (generally a semi-skilled or unskilled worker) must sell or mortgage all their jewellery, immovable property, and raise loans for meeting out the necessary expenditure. He depends not only on his relatives but also on friends and neighbours (pp. 1120- When a work permit is secured through a relative or a friend, the expenses involved in emigration reduce to one-half to two-thirds. Probably that would be the case if the work permit is obtained through a government agency encouraging and promoting emigration (there are some seven agencies in various parts of the country engaged in such activity), but none of Gulati's women indicated her husband/son succeeded in getting a work permit through a government agency.

All aspirants in Gulati's study did not succeed in the first attempt and a couple of them after spending several months in Bombay on the assurance of the travel agent, lost very

substantial amounts to unscrupulous travel agents. Still, they made attempt to emigrate and succeeded in their efforts.

Once a migrant reached his destination, he started sending regular remittances either to his parents or wife, or partly to the parents and partly to wife. A few deposited the money in their own accounts in India. This was done basically to have accumulated savings which could be used for buying land, constructing a nice house or renovating the old one, and improving living standards. The first charge on the remittances in and every case studied by Gulati was, of course, the repayment of loans along with meeting essential household expenses.

Usually migration of one person does lead to migration of other relatives, friends and even neighbours. In Alakad area of Trivandrum city, in the 17 Muslim migrant households it was possible to count 34 migrant relatives, other than the migrant themselves. In the non-migrant households, on the other hand, Gulati did not come across any migrant relative.

Since many of the wives of the migrants (or their mothers) were functionally illiterate, they had to depend on neighbours and friends to help them read and write letters. Understanding their own limitation, all the women, mothers and wives of the migrants, were very anxious about the education of their children. This has led to a remarkable improvement in school attendance and a noticeable decline in the drop out ratio since the mid 1970s, particularly with respect to girls from the Muslim households.

It is noteworthy that women from migrant households have to learn to deal with institutions like banks, post offices and others, where relationships are secondary and impersonal. They had to make trips to those institutions and deal with documents like bank passbooks and identity cards, responsibilities unknown to them previously (p. 119) but they handled them well.

The uncertainty of the tenure of the overseas job of the male worries every household regardless of the length of his stay abroad. In the initial years this uncertainty is more worrisome because of the overhang of debt that practically every migrant household incurs and which has to be paid basically out of the emigrant's earnings. When the debt is cleared and some assets are built up, the weight of uncertainty becomes somewhat more bearable and less onerous (p. 133).

Odd though it may seem, the women, especially the wives, are far more worried about the premature return of their male supporters from their overseas jobs than about having to face the problem of managing the house on their own in their absence (p. 139).

In conclusion, Gulati feels that women from migrant households start with a number of handicaps. To overcome those problems they need considerable support not only from close family members but also from a network of relatives, friends and neighbours which has stood well by these women. It is also remarkable how well the women have coped with the situation created by the long absence abroad of their husbands or sons, be it in the matter of running the household, management of funds, child care and education or their own loneliness (p. 145).

Gulati's study points towards a strong urge among women to have at least a comparative standard of living, if not better, than those households that have earned a standard by their

men working overseas. The case studies point towards the concern of uncertainty in employment but not so much about the emotional tensions the young wives undergo during long years of separation from their husbands.

With men away for long durations from the households studied by Gulati, why women of those (or other migrant) households did not engage themselves in income earning activities, particularly when the debt had to be repaid. Considering the socio-cultural ethos of the Muslims in the area, she feels that it is not possible to give an affirmative or negative answer to this question. One factor may be that the migrants' wives were already receiving regularly large sums of money from their husbands; hence, the need factor was not pressing. There is, however, the uncertainty factor that operates in the opposite direction. There is also the factor of boredom and loneliness of a 'single but married' existence with one's in-laws. These could push migrants' wives into income earning activities but it was generally not the case in the low income households studied by Gulati.

Gulati's canvass seems to be limited as she studied, by and large, poor women households alone from where men have migrated generally as unskilled or semi-skilled workers from areas very close to Trivandrum city. She did not go to other districts in the State which have also been sending workers abroad in large numbers. She has also not studied households from where the skilled or white collar workers have migrated. Their inclusion would have probably changed the profile of the migrants as also of their households.

Gulati's focus is mainly qualitative although she has presented certain statistics of migrants from Kerala to different countries in West Asia, unemployment pattern, some socio-economic and demographic profile of the migrants in Appendix 1, and a statistical profile of 50 migrants and their families from Alakakad and other parts of Trivandrum in Appendix 2.

In contrast to the above individual and household perspective, Nayyar examines the macro implications of emigration of labour from India to the developed countries — USA, Canada, and the United Kingdom — and to the Middle East, and of the remittances and capital flows from those countries on the Indian economy. Nayyar's main objective in this book is to outline the contours of the labour flows and the financial flows associated with international labour migration, to analyse the macro-economic impact of such migration on the labour exporting country (basically India) and to examine the issues and problems that arise particularly since the mid 1970s (p. 12). It does not explore why do people migrate and what are the factors underlying the decision or the ability to migrate or how does the movement of the people across national boundaries affect the economic welfare of migrants or their households which is quite in contrast to Gulati's concern.

Nayyar distinguishes between emigration to the industrialized countries of the world and the one to the Middle East. The first type of emigration, largely to the USA, Canada, and the United Kingdom, has been made up almost entirely of permanent migrants in so far as the proportion of emigrants who return to India is almost negligible, a large proportion of them are with professional expertise, technical qualifications or other skills perceived to be scarce, or needed, in labour importing countries, who would be at the upper end of the spectrum of India even before emigration and, thus, represent the brain drain. The students

who go abroad for higher studies and return back are either out of Nayyar's consideration, or a large number of them stay back and are a net loss to the country. Probably Nayyar considers them along with other migrants. He has also not talked much about the skilled and semiskilled labour migration from Punjab which took place during the 1960s and the early 1970s before the rules governing migration of residents of Commonwealth countries, particularly to United Kingdom and Canada, became stringent.

In contrast to the above, migration to the Middle East, which basically started from the mid 1970s, is generally of persons who are at the lower end of the skills spectrum and of incomes before their departure from India. Secondly, an overwhelming large proportion of them are temporary migrants who return to India after a few years of work abroad. While the data base on both types of migration has been very weak in India, Nayyar has taken great pains to chart out the course of migration flows from the country to various destinations and by their skills. It is noteworthy that over the past 15-20 years, labour migration to the Middle East has formed almost four-fifths of the total emigration from India.

International labour migration from India has been associated with two types of financial flows — (1) remittances which represent unrequited transfers from migrants to support their families, whether for consumption or investment, and (2) capital flows in the form of repatriable deposits. Nayyar analyses the available evidence on the dimensions of the above two categories of financial flows and finds that the remittances per capita from the migrant population in the Middle East were far higher than remittances per capita from the migrant population in the industrialized countries (p. 48).

Unlike remittance flows that represent unrequited transfers in the current account, capital inflows which originate from Indian migrants overseas take the form of deposits that are repatriable; these are entered into the capital account on the balance of payments (BOP). Nayyar analyses the macro-economic impact of the two types of financial flows which were very significant for the Indian economy. He concludes that the two major impacts of the international labour migration from India on the BOP were (1) through inflows which financed a large part of the balance of trade deficits, and (2) through repatriable deposits which financed a part of the current account deficits. The impact on the exports was positive, even if not large, insofar as migrants created a demand for ethnic food and thus induced some export expansion. The impact on imports, through direct or indirect leakages, was probably small as a proportion of the remittances (p. 94).

Nayyar discusses the several problems associated with the export of workers, inflow of remittances, and the movement of capital in the wider macro-economic context. The permanent migration of persons with professional expertise or technical qualifications, mostly to the industrialized countries, represents a privatization of benefits and a socialization of costs, where the benefits in the form of higher incomes accrue to the migrants as individuals, while the substantial costs of their higher education are borne by society as a whole without any tangible return. The temporary migration of unskilled, semiskilled or skilled workers, mostly to the Middle East, is different insofar as the social cost of school education or vocational training is modest and the social benefits derived from remittances or skill formation are significant, but there are problems of poor working conditions in employment abroad and of the reabsorption of the returnees into the labour market. The

distribution of gains from international migration between labour exporting country and the industrialized economies or the oil-exporting economies as the labour importing countries is obviously unequal and remains a neglected issue (p. 121). In this analysis Nayyar does not even mention about those who go as students to the developed countries and return back after acquiring new skills. Probably the size of such returnees is quite small.

Nayyar's analysis shows that 'repatriable deposits' by the NRIs, although helped in financing a part of the current account deficits, have been costlier to the nation than borrowings in the foreign open markets and should not be made as a means for easing the BOP situation. He has instead advocated ways and means to encourage remittances by individuals.

To cope with various types of problems and issues, to enable to monitor trends on a disaggregated basis and to discern changes in per capita remittances, as any scholar interested in studying international migration would like, Nayyar suggests that proper development of a data base on the dimensions and the composition of labour outflows and return flows, and on remittance inflows by country of origin is essential.

Nayyar's macro-economic perspective generally neglects the individual behaviour regarding decision to migrate and also to make remittances for the welfare of his family presently and in the future. The migrant probably does not even perceive if the remittances made by him are going to affect the national or the state economy, he is concerned about himself and his immediate family; probably this aspect, although important, was not Nayyar's concern (pp. 1 If).

Both the studies reviewed here have paid little attention to the migrants, particularly those in the Middle East, as to the manner in which they live there, long hours of work they devote on their jobs, missing their family life just to enable them to have little higher savings for a better future at home.

The two studies are very meaningful for any scholar concerned with international migration as also for the policy makers.

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Migration, Remittances and Capital Flow : The Indian Experience by Deepak Nayyar,
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The book presents an interesting profile of international labour outmigration from India and attempts to provide some impact on economy of labour and associated financial inflows. The book, basically divides the emmigration flow towards Western world and Gulf/oil rich countries. While the analysis made on the basis of the number migrated and economic inflows in the form of remittances to India since early seventies from West and Gulf countries presents a good analysis, some of the major outflows towards Oceania and African continents have been altogether neglected in the book. Also, while the book deals with the remittances being sent back to India by the migrants from Gulf countries at length, it could not give the similar attention to the remittances being sent and received from the Western

countries. The book would have added to its worth, if it had dealt with State level out-migration flow—as it is important in the wake of out-migration concentration from a few states like Kerala and Punjab; and also the impact on the local economy at that level of the remittances received back. Another important omission in the volume is the return migration from the Western world.

In sum, the book is a good attempt and useful review of the volume of out-migration and quantum of remittances being sent back from major part of the world.

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