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## **Migration Selectivity from Rural Areas: Evidences from Kerala\*\***

LARGE scale out-migration to other states or countries has considerable socio-economic implications for the sending and receiving regions. For example, when the better educated, the better skilled and the economically better off populations migrate, the implications will be different as compared to a situation where the poorest and illiterate migrate. It, therefore, becomes imperative to broadly identify who in a society shows higher propensity to migrate than others. It is this aspect of migration selectivity that the present article focuses on.

The study of 'who migrates' entails a comparison of the characteristics of migrants with that of non-migrants at the place of origin. It is generally presumed that migrants and their households in rural communities represent a particular group and they have certain characteristics that distinguish them from other villagers (Comer 1981; Grasmuck 1984; Rigg 1989). In this sense, migration is selective, picking those in a community who are more enterprising and can afford the costs and risks involved.

In addition to the migrants' individual characteristics like sex, age, marital status and education, the economic position of their families in terms of land ownership, income and assets are also considered important in effecting out-migration. There are studies which show that the more poor and socio-economically deprived an individual is, the greater the chances of his migration in search of better living conditions (ILO 1960; Myrdal 1968). However, the notion that the poorest has the highest propensity to out-migrate has been questioned (Friedlander 1965; Banerjee 1986). It is argued that the migrants are economically better placed than those who remain behind. This is more so in the case of international migration where the cost of emigration is quite high, making it difficult for the poor families to finance the process. On the other hand, Connell *et al.* (1976 :197) argue that "It is both the rather poor and the rather rich who migrate, rather than, in general, the very poorest, the middle, or the very richest". They clarify that for the poor, labour migration is a survival strategy whereas for the better off, it is a strategy of accumulation. Migration as part of survival strategy is essentially in the nature of rural to urban movements. When it becomes a strategy for amassing wealth, it is mostly in the form of international migration, though there could be exceptions to this in the nature of illegal emigrants.

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Apart from the economic factors which provide the means for the individual to migrate, the non-economic factors are equally, if not more, important. They are vital in the sense that they enable the persons to decide whether or not to emigrate. "It is important to realise that economic factors provide only the necessary conditions of migration, the sufficient conditions are the motivations to move, presence of resource networks and access to informationflows" (Rao 1986:31). Thus, the debate on who migrates, should not be limited to only whether the rich or the poor have the highest propensity to migrate, it is equally important to examine the decisive roles of communication, family networks and earlier migration experiences.

It is, thus, obvious that migration selectivity is yet a subject of considerable speculation. Against this background, an attempt is made herein to examine whether the emigrants have characteristics similar to those of the non-migrants, or they constitute a distinct group. Drawing on observations from a study<sup>1</sup> on labour migration to the Middle East from Kerala State, the paper argues that the emigrants are more likely to be from the lower and middle class, rather than the poorest or the very affluent section of the society. This is because out-migration, particularly to foreign countries, involves some costs (material and psychological) which the poorest are unable to meet and the very affluent are reluctant to risk. The paper further argues that kinship connections and previous migration experiences of the families have a decisive role in migration selectivity, particularly from rural areas.

The data for this study was collected through a sample survey of 280 Gulf migrant and 80 non-migrant households from two villages, namely Kadappuram (Chavakkad block in Thrissur district) and Valavannur (Tanur block in Malappuram district). These areas are generally referred to as 'Gulf pockets' in Kerala because of the high concentration of Gulf emigrants. In the sample, the migrant households were those from which at least one member was working or had worked in Gulf countries, while the non-migrant households were those from where no one had gone to the Gulf countries.

The ideas are discussed herein over two sections. The first looks into the individual characteristics of Gulf migrants to understand the type of people involved. The second attempts to identify the most important determinants of migration selectivity from rural areas to the Gulf countries by comparing the household characteristics of migrants with that of non-migrants.

Several studies on migration from Kerala have provided profiles of Gulf emigrants from the State (Prakash 1978; Mathew and Nair 1978; Radhakrishnan and Ibrahim 1981; AERC 1981; Nair 1986; Government of Kerala 1988). The studies broadly agree that majority of the migrants are young, unmarried males with low level of education. Most of them are either unskilled or semi-skilled, largely unemployed at the time of their emigration and are predominantly Muslim.

These individual characteristics of Gulf emigrants were, more or less, reflected in the sample of the present study. Both study villages being Muslim dominated, in the sample

<sup>1</sup> The survey was carried out in the year 1990 as part of the author's Doctoral work.

nearly 80 per cent were Muslims and the remaining Hindus. There were no female emigrants. Table 1 presents the profiles of the sample emigrants from the two villages of Kadappuram and Valavannur

TABLE 1 : PROFILE OF GULF EMIGRANTS  
(At the time of their first emigration to Gulf countries) (N = 280)

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1    Less than 20 years	13.21
20 to 29 years	63.59
30 to 39 years	17.14
40 to 49 years	5.71
50 Years and above	0.36
2    Marital Status	
Single	66.79
Married	32.86
Seperated	0.36
3    Educational Status	
illiterates	8.21
Literate below matriculation	69.64
Matriculation (SSLC)	14.64
College educated (Pre-degree and degree)	4.29
Professionals	3.21
4    Activity Status	
-    Employee	48.21
-    Self-employed	10.00
-    Employer	3.93
-    Unemployed	35.36
-    Student	2.50

The age distribution of migrants clearly shows that an overwhelming majority of them were very young at the time of their first emigration. Nearly 76 per cent were less than 30 years of age and around 94 per cent were below 40 years of age. Majority of them were unmarried when they first went to the Gulf. These migrants were basically poorly educated. More than three-fourth of them were not even matriculates and nearly 8 per cent were illiterates. This low educational attainment among the sample migrants is indicative of the educational backwardness of the study region. Besides, the attraction of Gulf jobs also made a few discontinue their studies when they got offers from abroad, mainly through relatives.

However, interestingly most of them (58 per cent) were gainfully engaged in some activity other (either as wage earners or self-employed) at the time of their emigration. The number of unemployed at the time of emigration was comparatively less (35.36 per cent). This questions the widely held notion that unemployment at home was the major reason for Gulf<sup>1</sup> emigration. Although lack of job opportunities in Kerala was to some extent responsible for <sup>1</sup>^fttt CAudut, the attractive wage/salary offered in the Gulf countries was the crucial factor in tafarfng migration from these rural areas

### Occupational Status

Another characteristic that throws some light on the composition of Gulf emigrants is their occupations before emigration. For the purpose of analysis, the occupations herein have been broadly classified into four groups—unskilled, semi-skilled, land owners/business and professionals (Table 2). People from all walks of life joined the migration stream. But the major chunk (55 per cent) belonged to the unskilled and semi-skilled occupational groups. Only a few persons belonging to the big land-owning /business families (mainly employers in their villages) participated in Gulf emigration. Emigration to the Middle East involves risks, in the nature of difficult working and living conditions, which the persons from well-to-do and affluent families were reluctant to face. Only when they got some good offer/opportunity, these people migrated. The few professionals who went abroad did so by availing leave from their parent-institutions at home.

TABLE 2: OCCUPATIONAL STATUS OF MIGRANTS ON THE EVE OF FIRST EMIGRATION  
(N = 280)

<i>Sl.No.</i>	<i>Occupational category</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Unskilled labour (cook, porter, agricultural labour, fisherman, beedi-roller, petty trader, salesman)	32.14
2	Semi-skilled labour (Driver, mechanic, electrician, plumber, welder, carpenter, mason, tailor, goldsmith, typist)	22.86
3	Big land owners/business men (merchants)	3.93
4	Professionals (Doctor, engineer, teacher)	3.21
	Unemployed (including students)	37.86
	Total	100.00

The occupational characteristics of the migrants in the sample reflects the nature of job requirements in the Gulf countries. Following the oil boom in the early 1970s, the demand for labour in these countries was mainly in the construction sector, requiring unskilled and semi-skilled persons. In fact, majority of the contract workers from Kerala to Gulf countries belonged to this category (Government of Kerala 1988). In this context it needs to be mentioned that persons with certain skills like carpenters, masons, electricians, drivers, welders and plumbers were in much demand and had better chance to secure jobs in the Gulf than others. It is clear from this that emigration to the Middle East was not determined by professional qualifications only. This is in sharp contrast to emigration to the Western industrialised nations and cannot be described as 'brain-drain', although there is some shortage of semi-skilled persons like carpenters and masons in the local labour market.

## II

At this point, it is important to state that the characteristics of emigrants are not sufficient to explain the selectivity in the migration process. These individual characteristics can only give some idea about the type of people participating. But to understand the selectivity process in totality, it is very important to examine the characteristics of migrant households at their place of origin. This is because the decision of a person to emigrate is largely dependent on his family background.

The characteristics of migrant households are examined here in comparison with the characteristics of non-migrant households. This has been done to have a better insight as to why some families participated while others did not. A cursory look gives the impression that the characteristics of non-migrant households are, more or less, similar to those of the migrant households, particularly with regard to educational and occupational background. But, it cannot be denied that there are some basic underlying features which distinguish the two. Accordingly, an attempt has been made here to understand the difference.

### **Methodological Issues**

It must be mentioned here that there are some inherent problems in identifying the differentiating factors between migrant and non-migrant households. First, there are data difficulties in making comparisons between the two types of households. It would be improper to compare the present position of migrant households with non-migrant households as there are significant changes in the socio-economic position of the former category after they started receiving remittances. To tackle this problem, the comparison is made here between the status of migrant households at the time of first emigration with the conditions of non-migrant households at the time of survey on the assumption that there has not been any substantial change in the non-migrant households over the years. The discussions with the people during the field survey substantiated this assumption to some extent.

Secondly, some non-migrant households are non-migrants simply because they do not feel the need or compulsion to emigrate. It would, therefore, be methodologically appropriate to isolate these non-migrants from others who wish to participate but do not have the means to do so. However, it is very difficult to differentiate the non-migrant households in terms of those willing to migrate and those not interested. This is because the opinion in this regard may differ between individuals within the family itself and also over a time period. In the present study, the clubbing of all non-migrant households as one can be justified on the ground that, when questioned about their intentions, majority of them expressed their desire to engage in Gulf emigration given the right opportunity or the means. At this point it should be mentioned that Gulf migration is 'money making' and nobody will say 'no' if given an opportunity. The underlying motivations, evident from the verbal responses of the sample, made this obvious. But the fact that only some could make it to the Gulf and not others is itself an evidence that there could be some factors clearly distinguishing these two groups.

### **Comparison of Households**

Based on field observations, it was presumed that migration selectivity was determined by certain socio-economic characteristics of the households. For purpose of analysis, six

household characteristics were identified which may be considered as important in influencing emigration. They are—household size, land holdings, Income, assets, previous migration experiences and kinship connections in Gulf countries. On the basis of these characteristics, the migrant and non-migrant households were compared to understand the prominent factors affecting selectivity (Table 3).

TABLE 3 : CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRANT AND NON-MIGRANT HOUSEHOLDS

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Migrant HHs(%)</i>	<i>Non-migrant HHs (%)</i>	<i>Total HHs(%)</i>
1.	Household Size			
	1 to 4 persons	10.0	6.3	9.2
	5 to 7 persons	39.6	68.8	46.1
	8 to 10 persons	33.6	22.5	31.1
	11 and above persons	16.8	2.5	13.6
2.	Landholdings (in acres)			
	Land-less	9.6	5.0	8.6
	Less than 1 acre	37.5	42.5	38.6
	1 to 2.5 acres	25.0	5.0	20.6
	2.5 to 5 acres	20.0	22.5	20.6
	5 acres and above	7.8	25.1	11.7
3.	Annual Income			
	Less than Rs. 2,500	14.3	23.8	16.4
	Rs. 2,500 to 5,000	20.7	22.5	21.1
	Rs. 5,000 to 10,000	42.5	6.3	34.4
	Rs. 10,000 to 25,000	18.9	27.5	20.8
	Rs. 25,000 and above	3.6	20.0	7.2
4.	Assets (value in Rs.)			
	Less than Rs. 25,000	21.8	43.8	26.6
	Rs. 25,000 to 50,000	16.4	3.8	13.6
	Rs. 50,000 to 1 lakh	37.5	6.3	30.6
	Rs. 1 lakh and above	24.3	46.3	29.2
5.	Previous Migration Experience			
	Some experience	59.0	8.8	47.8
	No experience	41.0	91.3	52.2
6.	Kinship Connections			
	in Gulf countries			
	Relatives in Gulf countries	70.7	21.3	59.7
	No relatives in Gulf countries	29.3	78.3	40.3
	Total number	280	80	360

*Note:* Value of assets is calculated on the basis of rates at the time of survey.

### Household Size

The general belief is that migrants are mostly from large households. Several studies have confirmed this argument. For instance, Upton (1967) found that migration is positively correlated with family size. For larger households, it is easy to spare members to go outside for work. In other words 'extended families are better able than nuclear ones to promote migration' (Connell, *etal.* 1976:47).

The data from the study villages support this proposition. As can be seen in Table 3 most of the migrants were from relatively large households. The average size of migrant households in the sample was 7.3 members which is much higher than the average household size of general population in Kerala (5.75 members as per 1981 Census). However, strong distinctions cannot be made between migrant and non-migrant households in terms of family size because in this sample the non-migrant households were also comparatively large (6.7 members). The overall large size of the family in sample can be partly explained in terms of the fact that the study villages have a predominately Muslim population which, on an average, have bigger household size in the State (6.64 members as per 1981 Census).

### Economic Characteristics

Another important aspect wherein comparison can be made between migrant and non-migrant households is in relation to their economic status. This can be done by looking into three characteristics—land holdings, annual income and assets of the family.

However, it should be mentioned here that data on these economic variables, as given by the families, need to be taken cautiously. This is particularly so in case of migrant families who have a tendency to overstate their economic position prior to emigration and understate it after the emigration in order to undervalue the extent of their prosperity. Moreover, the income and assets of migrant families on the eve of first emigration is considered here for analysis. The figure may not be very accurate as the time period between the first emigration and when the survey was carried out could be anything in the range of 20 years from 1960s to 1980s. Besides, as is the problem in any empirical study, it was quite difficult to verify and exactly estimate the value of different kinds of assets and income of the families. But, since the purpose here is not to quantify the economic status of the households, the information gathered will broadly help in understanding and comparing the financial position of the households.

In the first place, land holdings of the households were examined. This can be a powerful force in explaining migration pattern, particularly in an agrarian economy where the people are mostly dependent on land for their living. A number of studies have been carried out to examine the relationship between migration and land ownership. One major reason for rural out migration is small land holdings and the pressure on land due to the growth of rural population (Sovani 1961; Samsuddin 1981). In other words, high out-migration from rural areas is closely associated with unequal distribution of resources, particularly land. The poorer and the landless have a greater propensity to out-migrate than the richer and the landed (Hill 1972). However, the assumption that the poor has highest propensity to migrate is not completely substantiated by the findings in the study.

Most of the migrant households in the two high-migrating study villages were small and medium land owning families having land between 1 to 5 acres. In comparison, the non-migrant households were either big land owners having more than 5 acres or marginal and landless families.

More or less, a similar pattern is observed with regard to the income and assets of the households. As observed in Table 3, majority of the migrant households (43 per cent) in the sample are from the middle income category (Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10,000). The non-migrant households, on the other hand, are mainly poor with annual income less than Rs. 5000 (46 per cent approximately) or quite rich with an annual income more than Rs. 10,000 (48 per cent).

Although the reported annual income of the migrant household is low, further probe into the family assets gives a slightly different picture. If the total assets owned by these families (land, livestock, gold and financial deposits) before emigration are considered, many of them were in a position to mobilise the money needed for emigration. They mustered the required amount either by selling or mortgaging their assets, mainly land and gold.

An overall examination of the economic position of migrant and non-migrant households, thus, reveals that migrants are mainly from households in the middle income group having some assets. On the other hand, the non-migrant households, broadly, belong to the two extremes—either the poor or the rich. These findings can be substantiated by the fact that international migration involves higher financial burden on the families than rural to urban migration. The lowest strata in the rural society cannot afford these expenses.

Although few landless and poor families joined the migration stream, these were generally the earlier migrants who had gone out in search of livelihood to cities, mainly Bombay, and subsequently managed to reach Gulf countries. They mostly went illegally in the launches of Arab traders, without having any proper documents. These migrants cannot, therefore, be considered as direct international migrants from the villages. Rather, theirs can be viewed as 'two-stage' migration in which the first movement was from rural to urban areas and later to the Gulf countries.

### **Social Factors**

The foregoing analysis has provided some idea about migration selectivity to the Gulf countries in terms of economic factors. There are also certain social factors like previous experiences and family connections which can be considered important in facilitating emigration.

(a) *Previous Migration Experience.* Earlier migration experiences in the family are found to be closely related to future migration of individuals. Besides exposing the family to a process of socialisation, the experiences also provide information for future migration decision-making. In other words, the exposure to the outside world from previous experiences reduces the reluctance of rural people to leave their home community. Thus, the tradition of migration 'acts as a 'social force' and many an element which may not have an economic reason to migrate are drawn into it" (Aurora 1967: 27). A study conducted in the Kachchh district of Gujarat (Visaria and Visaria 1989) also subscribes to the idea that long tradition of emigration from an area influences future migration flows.

The long history of migration, both internal and international, in the two study villages, can therefore be considered as an important determinant in inducing labour flow to Gulf countries. Over a period, quite a number of people from these villages had worked in various cities of the country. So, at the time of the rising labour demand in Gulf countries in the mid-seventies, many of the families in these villages had some experience in migration. It was this earlier experience which enabled the families to react swiftly to the opportunities opened up in the Gulf region after the oil boom. As shown in Table 3, 59 percent of the migrant households had earlier migration experience while most of the non-migrant households never had such experience. This experience, however, does not necessarily refer to international migration, though a few had already worked in countries like Malaysia, Burma, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. In majority of the cases, 'migration experience' meant working in cities, away from their homes.

(b) *Kinship Connections.* Another non-economic determinant of migration to Gulf countries is the presence of relatives working there. In general, people prefer to move to areas where they have friends, relatives and members of their community as this helps them to overcome their inherent inhibitions and psychological barriers against venturing into unknown places. In fact, most of the emigration from Kerala to Gulf countries is in the nature of 'chain migration' defined as "that movement in which prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants" (Mac Donald and Mac Donald 1964:82). Besides, providing necessary information and monetary support before the move, these 'primary social networks' also play a supporting role after the arrival of the emigrants at the place of destination. In other words, kin ties are significant facilitators of emigration.

In the sample, nearly 70 per cent of migrants had some relatives working in the Gulf states at the time of their first emigration. The presence of these relatives was an immense source of help for them in their effort to reach the Gulf countries. Many migrants openly acknowledged that, but for the help rendered by the relatives, they could never have realised their dream of reaching the Gulf. In fact, when interviewed, many non-migrants attributed the lack of family connections in the Gulf countries as a major handicap in their bid to go abroad.

The importance of kin ties in promoting emigration can be appreciated by looking at the place of destination for the migrants from the two study villages. The emigrants from Kadappuram village mostly went to Abudabi (UAE), while a large number from Valavannur village went to Saudi Arabia. This is a clear indication of the operation of chain-migration brought about by kinship connections. Support and guidance provided by relatives working abroad made migrants from the same place of origin to move in the same direction.

It is thus evident that although economic factors are important, it is the social components that play a decisive role in migration selectivity from rural areas. This is very well supported by the evidences from the study villages. Even though handicapped by low education and skills, people from these poor and backward villages could overcome their drawbacks and emigrate in large numbers, mainly because of the social characteristics like kinship contacts and migration experiences of their families. Studies of Gulf migration from Kerala have,

however, not properly focussed on these important determinants of migration selectivity. At this point of analysis, it would be useful to identify which of these six household characteristics, assumed to be determining migration selectivity, are more important in affecting the decision to migrate or not to migrate. There are a variety of multi-variate statistical techniques to predict such binary dependent variables (to migrate or not) from a set of independent variables such as:

- **Household size** (demographic variable)
- **Land holding**
- **Income** } (economic variables)
- **Assets** }
- **Previous migration experiences** } (social variables)
- **Relatives in Gulf countries** }

But, in this case, step-wise logistic regression model is considered most appropriate because the dependent variable has only two values and there are fewer assumption. This model could, therefore, be used to identify which variables are more significant for estimating the probability of the event 'occurring' (to migrate).

It was observed (see Table 3) that the economic variables influenced in a quadratic way, that is, it was the middle group which had higher propensity to emigrate rather than the very lower and the very higher groups. Hence the square of these variables are taken and the step-wise logistic regression is estimated here. As there are more than one independent variables, the model can be written as

$$\text{Probe (Event)} = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-Z}}$$

where  $Z$  is the linear combination,

$$Z = B_0 + B_1 X_1 + B_2 X_2 + \dots + B_p X_p$$

where  $B_0$  and  $B_1, \dots, B_p$  are coefficients estimated from the data, ' $X$ ' is the independent variable, and ' $e$ ' is the base of the natural logarithm (2.718 approximately). The dependent variables are defined as '1' for migrating and '0' for not migrating.

#### Determinants of Migration

<i>Variables</i>	<i>B- Coefficient</i>	<i>t-value</i>
Relatives in Gulf	2.5434	6.6045
Previous Migration experience	2.9787	6.3852
Land holdings	-1.1483	-3.9031
Assets	0.7774	0.3079
Constant	0.0472	

The variables presented above are in the order that they are chosen statistically in the step-wise method. The results support the argument presented earlier that the social characteristics of

the households are most important variables influencing the migration selectivity. From among the social characteristics, the model identifies kinship connection in Gulf countries as the most significant variable influencing the probability of the event occurring or not occurring. Previous mobility experience in the family also had a significant influence. Apart from these two social variables, land holdings and assets also mattered. This argument in no way seeks to undermine the fact that the preference for persons with certain skills and from certain communities for employment in Gulf countries is also an influencing factor in selectivity.

How well the above model fits in identifying the important factors can be assessed by comparing the predictions to the observed outcomes. Out of the 80 sample non-migrant households, 55 households and out of the 280 sample migrant households, 263 households were correctly classified. Overall 88.33 per cent of the 360 cases were correctly classified.

### Conclusion

From the above analysis it can thus be said that economic factors, mostly assets, provide the means by which the emigration can take place. The ones who migrate are mainly from the middle income group, rather than the poor or the rich. The rich did not go because jobs in Gulf countries involve risks and hardships which they are not ready to face. The very poor, on the other hand, did not have the required resources at their disposal to meet the cost of emigration. However, the factors that make the crucial difference between those who migrate and those who do not, are the social characteristics of household namely, the kinship connections in Gulf countries and previous migration experiences in the family. While the former act as a 'link mechanism', the latter provide new psychological thrust on the people to make the move. In conclusion, it can thus be said that these factors constitute the necessary social conditions which enable the rural people to make the final decision to emigrate.

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