

Today's Paper » FEATURES » BOOK REVIEW

January 22, 2013

In the land of oil and money



Mohamed Nazeer

The story of the early phase of Kerala's exposure to the Gulf countries is also the story of how generations of youngsters in the State were enchanted by the idea of another kind of gold rush that promised a life of prosperity and wealth. The early days of migration of Keralites to the Gulf in the seventies and through the eighties were amazing as the State during that period began to experience rapid changes in tastes and trends as also in the landscape.

The Gulf, as the Arab states bordering the Persian Gulf are collectively known, was the land of dreams for the young Keralites in those days as the remittances from early emigrants brought prosperity and new meaning in the lives of large number of people. Kerala's Gulf Connection, 1998-2011: Economic and Social Impact of Migration authored by K.C. Zachariah and S. Irudaya Rajan, both Professors at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Thiruvananthapuram, explains the later impact of what captured the imagination of the young generation in the early periods of migration to the Gulf countries. Statistical details are the stuff this book is made of as tables, figures and charts shed light on social and economic aspects of the dreams of a better life that drove hundreds of thousands of Keralites to the lands of wealth. The authors have been monitoring the current status of emigration from and return emigration to Kerala under the periodic survey of the CDS since 1998.

Displacement

The history of migration of Keralites to the Gulf countries is not always a chronicle of riches and success that propelled the educated and the uneducated, the skilled and the semi-skilled, to try their luck in the proverbial land of 'milk and honey'. It also has its share of periods of distress, displacements and repatriation. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, for example, and the ensuing Gulf War in the 1990s were major events that took the charm out of the Gulf. The global recession was thought to be another major adversity to have hit the emigrants. Not so much. The authors show with the support of figures that the recession has not triggered any mass return emigration. On the contrary, the large increase in emigration is at odds with the common belief that emigration from the State decreased as a result of the recession. Here are the facts: the number of emigrants from Kerala has increased from 1.36 million in 1998, to 1.84 million in 2003, 2.19 million in 2008 and 2.28 million in 2011. Return migration being an inevitable aspect of any migration process, there was also an increase in the number of Gulf returnees from 0.74 million in 1998, to 0.89 million in 2003, and 1.16 million in 2008 which slightly came down to 1.15 million in 2011. The study also finds that there has been a decline in the unemployment rate in Kerala since 2003.

The remittances from the Gulf cannot but have a significant effect on the State's economy and the living condition of its people. The emigration to the Gulf has brought about a marked change in social and economic life of Kerala. The total remittances in Kerala in 2011 were approximately Rs. 50,000 crore as against Rs. 43,288 crore in 2008. The survey does not overlook the regional disparities in the prosperity brought about by the remittance economy. Only 17.1 per cent of the households in the State have benefited directly.

There are also inequalities among different communities. While there are 60 emigrants per 100 households among Muslims and 30 among Christians, the Hindus have only 19 emigrants per 100 households. Amid all the features of dynamism of the emigration experience of Kerala, the one sticking point, according to the authors, is that the proportion of households in the State exposed to the remittances has remained static since 1988.

The Gulf boom in Kerala has not yet lost its social and economic relevance, despite recession-driven prophecies of decline in remittances and of mass return migration. The Gulf countries may not be as attractive for migrant workers from Kerala as it was in the past. But they will

continue to be major destinations for people from the State, for the simple reason that the Gulf economy, as the book argues, is completely reliant on foreign workers. This compilation of the results of the survey with facts and figures culled out of the migration survey over the past decade and more will be of use for development economists as well as policy makers.