

**SOCIAL VALUES, MORALITY AND THE MIGRATION OF FEMALE  
WORKERS FROM SRI LANKA TO THE MIDDLE EAST**

by

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The objective of the present paper is to focus attention on one of the most sensitive aspects of the process of migration of Sri Lankan women to the Middle East, namely the alleged violations of 'morality' involved. The subject matter itself is very broad as it encompasses many aspects of the issue of 'morality' such as those concerning the responsibilities of the state and society in general towards the poor who migrate, alleged sexual harassment and exploitation of female workers by some in the host country and alleged violation of norms of family and sexual behavior prevalent in Sri Lankan society by migrant women while they are away. Even though all these issues are important, for want of space and for the sake of convenience of analysis, the paper confines itself to the last of these issues.

In spite of the fact that the alleged violation of sexual and family norms by migrants is perhaps the most widely discussed issue in the popular press and in informal settings, so far it has not received any serious attention from the social scientists who have been dealing almost exclusively with aspects such as costs and benefits of migration. This obviously is a rather anomalous situation where the social scientists have been evading an issue which has aroused considerable public interest and concern. On the other hand, any attempt to deal with a value-laden subject of this kind might have appeared to them as an attempt to walk on a tight rope involving the obvious danger of falling on to one side or the other. In other words, it appears to have been assumed that this is a phenomenon which concerns nothing but 'interests' and 'ideas'. Where there is an intense battle between interests and ideas, it is of course safer to keep away from the battlefield. The conspicuous absence of any academic discourse on the issue seems also to be related to the debate on cultural relativism, which as a moral philosophy, has already been subjected to several waves of strong criticism, spear headed by many cultural anthropologists themselves and, in more recent years, by feminist writers who have devoted much time and energy to establish that 'female subordination', manifested in diverse forms in different societies, is mostly a product of social and cultural arrangements (cf. Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974).

If one follows the public discourse that has been taking place in the popular press and outside it, one gets the impression that the response of the Sri Lankan society in general towards female migration has been one of ambivalence. In other words, there has been neither unqualified approval nor outright condemnation of female migration. This appears to be due to a number of reasons. Firstly, migration is essentially an attempt to survive and improve one's life chances and the violation of moral codes, if and when they occur, are often by products. While one can easily denounce the latter, the same cannot be said of the former. Secondly, those who are disturbed over the alleged violations of moral codes are often those who can afford not to migrate and those who do not derive any direct benefits from 'migration business'. They are, however not necessarily capable of providing or suggesting viable, immediate and practical alternatives to migration. Thirdly, those who have a direct or an indirect interest in the migration of the poor can hardly worry about its moral implications. Given the increasing dependence of the country on the foreign exchange earned by Middle East migrants, it would be reasonable to assume that the state and the affluent classes have a direct interest in maintaining, and even in increasing, the inflow of remittances. This can be achieved only by allowing more and more people to migrate. Before any attempt is made to examine the alleged violation of moral principles involved in the light of empirical data and anthropological theory, a brief, general description of the migration process involved seems to be in order. As discussed elsewhere<sup>1</sup>, Sri Lankan workers, largely females, began to migrate to the Middle East on temporary employment in the late seventies. While this large-scale outflow of labor coincided with the liberalization of the country's economy that followed the election of a pro-Western, free enterprise oriented government in 1977 which promised more opportunities and 'economic freedom', later developments pointed to the fact that the two events have in fact been more interdependent than coincidental, i.e. while the widening balance of payments gap necessitated the inflow of foreign exchange through private transfers, rising prices and fast-spreading consumerism under the influence of the liberalization of imports forced many people to seek temporary employment in the Middle East where the wages were higher. The vast majority of Sri Lankan migrants are young, married and unmarried females who are employed as house maids in the Middle East. Most of them come from urban slums and shanties, largely from and around Colombo. Some rural women, particularly from densely populated and more urbanized districts have also found employment in the Middle East (cf. Hettige, *ibid.*).

As the available data on the socio-economic profile of migrants indicate, most of them are the least 'incorporated' elements in terms of structural linkages both within the rural agrarian economy and the urban mercantile-industrial economy. This is particularly so for female migrants, often unemployed or underemployed, who come from poor households dependent on casual wage labor or meagre incomes derived from diverse forms of self-employment.

In the rural setting, they do not usually come from the households of 'independent' land holding peasants or those of tenant farmers who, along with their landlords, are involved in a socially institutionalized network of patron-client relationships. In the urban setting, they come mostly from households which derive their subsistence from either casual wage labor or self-employment within the urban petty commodity sector. The nature of these sources of subsistence is such that the households involved do not only earn very low incomes but also experience a considerable degree of instability and uncertainty : unlike the wage and salary earners in the private formally organized, commercial or industrial establishments and the state sector organizations such as government departments and corporations, the people have no future to look forward to as they are usually not covered by pension or retirement gratuity schemes backed by state labor legislation.

Sri Lanka, being an underdeveloped, ex-colonial country, is still very much dependent on the export of several primary commodities such as tea and rubber. Recent attempts by the state to attract foreign investment for industrial development and promote exports of non-conventional commodities have not resulted in a significant structural change in the local economy which continues to be still largely agrarian. Even though there has been some growth, it has been mainly in the areas of services such as transport and in commerce. While import liberalization has facilitated the inflow of foreign consumer goods to the country, exerting an increasing pressure on the dwindling foreign exchange reserves, widening gap in the balance of payments has increased the country's dependence on foreign 'aid', conventional export commodities and on the export of labor to the Middle East. In recent years, export of labor has been competing neck to neck with tea to become the biggest export earner in the country. This shows how significant the export of labor is for the dependent, underdeveloped economy of Sri Lanka.

The significance of migration to the Middle East also lies in the fact that it involves large numbers of people. Though it is difficult to estimate the number of families already involved due to the fact that the process of migration concerned is cyclical in that the outflow is accompanied by a constant reverse flow, some of those who return joining the outflow again, there is no doubt that several hundred thousand families have already sent one or more members of their families to the Middle East. In other words, migrants do no longer constitute an insignificant minority. This is particularly so in the urban areas and in some rural areas as well.

Most of the Sri Lankan migrants, being unskilled workers, earn relatively low wages. Yet, their earnings are several times more than what they could earn in Sri Lanka from similar employment. This in turn creates a significant gap between the migrants and non-migrants who come from similar socio-economic backgrounds in terms of housing, possession of household goods and lifestyle. Sri Lanka, with a per capita GNP of US \$ 230 (1979) is one of the poorest countries in the world. Over 50% of its population is living below the poverty line and is entitled for state food subsidies. So, while a small minority of well-to-do rural families and the urban middle and upper class have been able to adopt modern lifestyles borrowed from the developed West, the rest of the population lags far behind. Even though the salaries and the wages have gone up substantially over the last 10 years or so, inflation has not allowed the real incomes to rise in a significant measure. In some cases, the real wages have in fact declined. On the other hand, migrants earned much higher incomes which enabled them to extend their consumption beyond a basket of 'basic' goods. When more and more migrants returned home from the Middle East and began to consume a wider range of commodities which were hitherto available only to the privileged strata of society, many others, found it difficult to resist the temptation.

It is in the above context that the moral implications of Middle East migration have to be viewed. At the level of society at large, migration opened up opportunities for a large segment of the population to rise above the poverty line. On the other hand, the nature of the migration process involved is such that it invariably posed a challenge to the underlying moral fabric of society because, to make use of the new opportunities, a large mass of young women had to move away from their families for extended periods of time. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the working and living environment in the host countries has often been conducive for voluntary and involuntary violations of sexual norms.

It is not necessary to mention that the above situation poses a challenge to a non Western society like Sri Lanka which has retained some of its traditional features in spite of significant social and cultural changes it has undergone in its recent history. While these features are more pronounced in the rural areas, they are not altogether absent even in the urban areas, particularly among the middle and the lower middle class families. It is in these social layers that the anxiety over female migration has been most evident.

### **Culture, Morality and Migration**

Ever since diverse human societies having different cultural traditions came into contact with each other in different settings, cultural change has been a common experience. Yet, these intense interactions have not paved the way for cultural homogenization, either at the global or at the nation-state levels. No doubt the nationalist movements that led peaceful and violent struggles for independence from colonial subjugation and the cultural relativist

ideas that were popularized by leading Western ethnographers like Boas, Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovitz played a significant role in the process of cultural preservation. Yet, by now, all pervasive forces of colonialism which swept through most areas of the globe and later, the world wide expansion of capitalism and western political, economic, cultural and social institutions associated with it brought about irreversible changes in both material as well as symbolic life of people who were affected. As a result, people in many societies, or at least some of them are sandwiched between alien and indigenous forces and find themselves in what has been already termed a morally ambivalent position. In other words, when they are forced to make choices in their day-to-day lives, they are not sure which way to turn to; they are caught up in a situation of value conflict. This is the kind of situation in which many Sri Lankans find themselves today.

Having gone through a long period of colonial rule by Western powers, namely the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, extending over a period of about four and a half centuries, Sri Lanka emerged as an independent nation in 1948. As is well documented by historians and other social scientists, during this period, not only traditional politico-economic and socio-cultural systems underwent change but also many Western values and institutions were implanted in the country. (cf. Hettige, 1984 chapter 6). These new institutions and values are so well adapted to the local milieu today that most people do not find it difficult to identify with or appreciate them, i.e. bureaucracy, democracy, formal education, Western medicine, science and modern technology, material progress, achievement orientation, etc. On the other hand, the nationalist movement that emerged in the country in the latter part of the British rule (1796—1948) was instrumental in preventing a further erosion of the indigenous socio-cultural system; many people who had already internalized Western values did not thus get completely alienated from indigenous values and practices. It is common that they constantly combine often conflicting values in pursuance of their individual goals. These curious combinations are evident in areas of public and private life, i.e. informality and formality, secular and sacred, achieved status and birth status, etc.

The co-existence of Western socio-cultural elements with those of indigenous origin often generates tension resulting in a movement away from one in favour of the other. This general principle also applies in the area of morality i.e. in pursuance of individual goals, people may move away from 'collective' responsibilities such as obligations to parents, close kin, etc. As indicated at the outset of this paper, migration of female workers to the Middle East has given rise to a conflict of values a conflict between individual (or collective) goals of material advancement and the social goal of safeguarding the norms of family and sexual life. Here the situation is further complicated by the fact that the conflict involved is not between two mutually exclusive sets of values i.e. violation of family and sexual norms is not pursued as a goal in itself : it is a by product of the pursuance of the goal of material advancement.

**The Position of Migrant Women in Sri Lanka**

An attempt has been made elsewhere to locate the migrants within the local milieu in terms of their relationship to both systems of production and exchange as well as local cultural traditions (Hettige, 1988a). As mentioned there, their position is 'marginal' both structurally and culturally. This is particularly so in urban slums and shanties where almost entire communities of the lumpen proletariat are considered to be residing at the margins of dominant cultural traditions.

As is well known, pre-colonial and post-colonial attempts at economic development and modernization in Sri Lanka, as in many other ex-colonial underdeveloped countries, did not bring about rapid economic growth, either in industry or agriculture. The dissolution of pre-capitalist production relations in agriculture nevertheless resulted in social differentiation in rural areas giving birth to agrarian classes ranging from landless labourers to 'capitalist'/commercial farmers. Even though agrarian reforms dating as far back as the 1930s have arrested the trend towards concentration of land in the hands of a few, in the context of indigenous peasant agriculture, they did not prevent the marginalization of a large segment of the rural population. Being virtually landless, they are forced into a precarious existence dependent on whatever sources of income available to them. The adherence to many cherished cultural ideals is often a luxury for them. Their family life is under constant pressure emanating from the material circumstances that surround them, often producing intra-family tensions affecting interpersonal relationships within the family. According to conventional wisdom of many a village elder under such circumstances, romantic notions of love and affection escape from the back door, leaving the family members in eternal misery.

As is well documented by economists, the urban industrial economy of Sri Lanka, focused on the capital city of Colombo, also failed to take off, resulting in the growth of a 'large lumpen proletariat', forced to derive their subsistence within the petty commodity sector, living under sub-human conditions in the slums and shanties. While the initial growth of these slums and shanties had been mostly due to rural urban migration which drove many displaced peasants into the city, subsequent proliferation has been due to natural growth, a high birth rate accompanied by a low infant mortality rate brought about by the spread of primary health care services.

Slums and shanties largely accommodate those who operate within the urban petty commodity sector. On the other hand, many of those who occupy lower rung positions in the formally organized sector also find their way into the slums and shanties for want of cheap accommodation in the city. As is expected, those who subsist on illicit activities such as theft, burglary, prostitution and sale of illicit liquor, are also usually resident in slums and shanties. Because of the association between the above vices on the one hand and slums

and shanties on the other, there is a general tendency to treat those who live in these settlements as 'immoral'. The fact that most residents are dependent on legitimate sources of subsistence and that they themselves look down upon illicit practices is usually ignored by the 'outsiders'. On the other hand, the presence of 'immoral elements' in their midst tends to soften their attitudes towards their conduct.

As discussed elsewhere (Hettige, 1983a), the female migrants come mostly from marginal rural households and urban slums and shanties. Why do they migrate in defiance of culturally prescribed modes of family life and sexual behaviour? In other words, how do we explain the alleged immoral behaviour of female migrants?

Moral behaviour is a subject which has drawn the attention of scholars in many disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology and social psychology (Kohlberg, 1966). While no attempt is made here to review the diverse points of view put forward by different writers for want of space, it is nevertheless useful to note that the identification of the 'driving force' behind moral behaviour varies from one discipline to another. For instance, French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, emphasized the urge to obey rules emanating from the group and backed by its authority, while many psychologists such as Freud and McDougall recognized the importance of 'internalization' in "learning to conform to rules in situations that arouse impulses to transgress and that lack surveillance and sanctions." (Kohlberg: 483). More recently, some social psychologists have placed more emphasis on situational factors such as punishment, reward, group pressure and group values, rather than on internal disposition of conscience or character (Kohlberg, op. cit: 484). While the utilitarian views have assumed moral values to be the product of "adult individuals who judge the actions of others in terms of their harmful or beneficial effects" (Kohlberg. *ibid*; 486) the main contribution of anthropology has been to emphasize the relativity of moral principles across cultural boundaries (Hatch, 1983).

It is not proposed here to examine the conduct of female migrants, both actual as well as alleged, in the light of diverse views embodied in the different approaches mentioned above for this is not only beyond the capacity of the author but also lies outside the scope of the present paper which is intended to indicate the moral implications of female migration in Sri Lanka in general terms. So, apart from making a few general observations on the subject, no detail and in-depth examination is attempted.

It should be noted at the outset that any of the approaches mentioned above is not capable of offering a complete and an exhaustive explanation of moral or immoral conduct. All of them seem to contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon to a greater or lesser extent. Nevertheless, in a given situation, the weightage of each factor tends to vary depending on the circumstances.

As mentioned before, it is generally believed that temporary migration of women to the Middle East often leads to the violation of family and sexual norms. On the home front, migration tends to disrupt family life often affecting children, particularly when the spouse left behind has no support from his close kin, friends and neighbours. In the host country, migrant is likely to violate sexual norms, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Almost all male migrants and some female migrants attest to the fact that some migrants resort to 'prostitution' as a way of making extra money. Others establish casual 'contacts' to overcome loneliness and for pleasure in defiance of the norms that they are expected to conform to. Some fall victim to those who wish to use migrants as sex objects.

Actual violation of norms seems to depend on many factors. Among these, the socioeconomic background of the migrant, migrants' own personal characteristics and the situational factors in the host country seem to be the most important. It is not easy to generalize about the violations of norms. Nevertheless, what is important is not the extent of actual violations but the widespread belief that female migration involves such violations with the implication that female migrants are in general tend to be treated as morally inferior. But this does not mean much for many female migrants, particularly those coming from urban lower class backgrounds, because their social esteem has never been high. Moreover, moral devaluation involved is often compensated by the material gains which normally help improve one's social status, particularly through the acquisition of status symbols such as modern housing and household requisites.

Why are the migrant women considered morally inferior? This question can be answered only with reference to traditional behavioural norms prevailing in Sri Lankan society. In other words, the social stigma associated with deviant behaviour is expected to operate as an adequate sanction discouraging the violation of norms. However, as the phenomenon of large-scale migration of females amply demonstrates, many Sri Lankan women seem to act in defiance of the norms in pursuing the goal of material advancement and economic independence. What does this mean?

Given the highly differentiated nature of Sri Lankan society today, it is futile to look for value consensus there. The persuasion of individual, group and class interests constantly leads to value conflicts. The process was accelerated in the late 1970's when the liberal economic policies introduced by the newly elected government brought such conflicts into the open. As was expected, the process of rapid change that followed resulted in the erosion of certain traditional values, bringing into the forefront the aggressive persuasion of naked material interests, often at the expense of human bonds. The fast spreading consumerism no doubt facilitated the process. It is against the above background that the phenomenon of female migration should be



discussed. The relaxation of exchange and travel restrictions in the late seventies allowed prospective migrants to make use of the expanding employment opportunities in the Middle East. While many men also migrated for skilled and unskilled work, majority of those who migrated from Sri Lanka were young married and unmarried women.

Individual female migration was an unprecedented phenomenon in the recent history of Sri Lanka. As the author has discussed elsewhere (Hettige: 1988b), poor rural women in certain parts of the country migrate seasonally to agricultural districts outside their own in search of wage employment, but they usually travel in groups consisting of adults, family members and neighbours. On the other hand, those who migrate from rural to urban areas permanently are usually young men. The movement of young females was restricted in keeping with traditional behavioural norms. For example, a young rural boy could easily move away from his village looking for work elsewhere, but a young rural girl could rarely do so without creating a controversy. Moreover, whenever young females travel, they are often accompanied by somebody, at least by a younger sibling. In the rural setting, they may not even be left alone. While this is partly to overcome 'loneliness' which is believed to render women more vulnerable to demonic attacks, the practice also tend to protect them against possible violation of sexual norms associated with virginity and chastity.

The above behavioural norms prevalent in rural areas have been challenged by female migration because the migrating women not only stay away from home for extended periods of time but also are insulated against conventional mechanisms of social control. The challenge has become still more forceful as more and more evidence, both factual as well as perceptual, of the violation of norms comes to the surface. Frequent media reports and occasional first hand evidence of such incidents have made it impossible for anybody to deny that such violations take place. How do the different groups involved cope with the situation ?

Female migrants from urban slums and shanties have almost no difficulty in coping with the above situation. To begin with, traditional behavioural standards are virtually non-existent in these communities, so traditional social and cultural sanctions do not restrain prospective female migrants. Moreover, poverty has already forced some women to engage in activities which are considered immoral by the society at large. This means that social stigma associated with Middle East migration, another source of living, is almost of no significance in the context of urban slums and shanties. Nor is it something totally alien to them, for many of them have already been living with such realities.<sup>2</sup>

Economic life in poor urban communities is very different from that in the countryside. Sexual division of labour in rural peasant households assigns dominant roles to male members of the family such as father, husband and elder male siblings. On the other hand, in poor urban households, adult family members, irrespective of their sex, often share domestic economic responsibilities. So women, far from being dependent on, and protected by, men, usually engage in income generating activities.

No description of the locations or the conditions of fieldwork is given here as this has been done elsewhere in the present publication (Hettige, 1988a). What is attempted below is an examination of the issues raised in the present paper in the light of empirical evidence gathered from the three communities concerned, namely, Bogollagama, Matale Housing Scheme and Siduhath Lane. Towards the end of the discussion, an attempt will also be made to offer some comparisons between the locations.

Bogollagama is not a traditional, pre-capitalist peasant community. So, there no longer exist traditional patron-client bonds binding different social layers together. Nevertheless, since many village families have been sharing the same habitat for generations, there exists a feeling of belongingness among most villagers. Since everybody knows virtually everybody else, one cannot remain totally ignorant of the evaluations the others make of one's conduct.

As discussed elsewhere, female migrants of Bogollagama are from the lower strata of village society. They were concerned about the fact that the villagers in general tended to treat female migration with disfavour, but at the same time, the material gains to be made from migration were too great for them to have foregone. This led the prospective female migrants to explore ways of minimizing the negative effects of migration. In other words, what has been attempted here by migrants is to turn a culturally unacceptable means into a culturally acceptable one (cf. Merton: 1957).

The response of the migrants in Bogollagama to the allegation that migration involved the violation of cultural norms has not been to ignore it but to demonstrate that they are not a party to such violations. They themselves admit that there are migrants who violate norms but, at the same time, are quick to point out that they are innocent. Knowing that such a denial alone is not going to be an adequate measure in the face of widespread allegations, they have resorted to protective mechanisms available within the local culture.

Beliefs and ritual practices pertaining to the cult of goddess Pattini (cf. Obeyesekere, 1977, 1984), are widespread in the area in general and in the village in particular. Villagers turn to Pattini, the goddess of purity, virginity and chastity, on various occasions, to seek relief, protection and assistance or even to avoid being punished for misconduct. Migrant women usually make a vow at the local shrine of goddess Pattini seeking protection during their stay abroad. The vow is fulfilled immediately after returning to the country in the form of an alms-giving at the shrine. Since it is generally believed that the goddess does not tolerate misconduct including the violation of sexual norms, the ritual process is effectively used to demonstrate that the migrant women concerned has in fact been 'clean'. The very fact that she could go before the goddess and fulfil her vow without inviting the wrath of the goddess is considered to be an adequate proof of her good moral character.

Having access to a culturally prescribed defense mechanism does not mean that migrant women in the village can get themselves cleared easily of the allegations levelled against them. This is due to two reasons. Firstly not all villagers strongly believe in Pattini. Some, particularly new settlers, do not have much faith in the goddess and a few even tend to be cynical about the whole affair. Migrants efforts to prove their innocence have little influence on the thinking of these people. Secondly, outsiders, do not necessarily share the villager's beliefs relating to goddess Pattini. They thus continue to subscribe to the widespread belief that migrant women often violate sexual norms. So, the attempts by migrant women in the village to prove their case through the ritual process have virtually no effect beyond the village boundaries. Though this may not be a major worry for the married women, it can create problems for unmarried female migrants who seek marriage partners outside the village. As mentioned elsewhere (Hettige, *op. cit.*), one village girl who returned after a spell of employment in the Middle East, in spite of the effort she made to prove her moral integrity, failed to convince the prospective bridegrooms who insisted that she brings with her a handsome dowry, about 100,000 rupees in cash in compensation for the alleged loss of her good moral character. Since she did not have such a large amount of money, she had to return to the Middle East for a second spell of employment there in order to save enough for an attractive dowry. According to her, a house-maid could earn hundreds of thousands of rupees only if one resorts to 'immoral' means to supplement ones normal income. Since she did not resort to such means, she failed to do so. At the time of the completion of fieldwork, she was still in the Middle East.

Now to move from Bogollagama to the Housing Scheme (HS). Female migrants in the HS do not respond to the allegations levelled against them in the same manner. Unlike the migrants in Bogollagama, they do not go into pains in impressing upon the others that they are innocent. They in fact demonstrate a marked insensitivity to such allegations and carry on regardless.

On the other hand, beliefs and practices relating to the cult of gooddess Pattini are not as widespread in the HS as in the village. While a few women there had had resorted to the ritual practice mentioned above, many had not bothered about it at all. This widespread non-compliance, on the other hand, has been pointed out by the believers as a proof of the guilt of those who did not fall in line. Their contention is that the latter, because of their 'bad character' cannot stand the ritual test which those with a clean character could easily face without any anxiety. In other words, the non-adherence to the ritual process by many migrant women in the HS has further reinforced the belief held by many that the latter have violated sexual norms.

Most migrant women in the HS in turn have lost face in front of those who level moral allegations against them. The latter, particularly those in the Bogollagama, do not wish to have any personal relationships with the former. These migrant women, on the other hand, carry on as if they could'nt care less about what others think and say. It seems that, for them, their enhanced life-style is an adequate source of social esteem. The significance of their elevated life-style is further reinforced by the presence of many who are prepared to follow their foot-steps and emulate them.

And, finally, to turn to Siduhath Lane squatter settlement where the female migrants are least constrained by traditional cultural prescriptions. Living under harsh material and social circumstances, most women here are not fortunate enough to enjoy stable family-life or high social esteem. While marital breakdowns are quite common, married women are often left behind by their husbands who may even leave the settlement altogether. A deserted wife in turn may establish a relationship with a new partner leading to a relatively stable marital union. It is also not uncommon for squatter settlements such as the present one to harbour a few prostitutes, either known or disguised.

It is not necessary to mention that, under conditions such as above, family and sexual norms tend to be relaxed to a considerable degree and the level of tolerance of the violation of traditional norms increased. In fact the inhabitants at Siduhath Lane expressed little or no concern about the possible violations of sexual norms by migrant women. The degree of tolerance was evident in the statement made by an elderly woman that the migrant women involved have no worries as they are safe with 'operation' meaning that they are sterilized. In other words, the normative barriers which rural migrants have to face are virtually non-existent in a settlement of the urban poor like the present one. Moreover, many sources of subsistence on which the poor urban women are dependent are not positively evaluated by outsiders, yet the people involved can hardly afford to discard them. In this regard, Middle East employment is no exception.

**Concluding Remarks**

So far, an attempt has been made to examine in some detail the issue of the alleged violations of traditional sexual and family norms involving female migrants. As is evident, the phenomenon of large-scale female migration is yet another instance where an underprivileged segment of society has taken advantage of an opportunity, made available to them by certain circumstances, in order to better their material circumstances, even at the risk of flouting some age-old behavioural norms subscribed to by society at large.

While there has not been a dearth of evidence pointing to the fact that female migration involves both voluntary and involuntary violation of norms, the general social response has been one of moral ambivalence. This is largely a product of an intense battle between material interests and traditional cultural values, the outcome being tilted towards material interests.

The dissolution of pre-capitalist production relations in the countryside meant that lower social strata are not necessarily linked to the upper strata through traditional patron-client bonds which allowed the latter to exercise moral authority over the former. On the other hand, the marginalized urban poor, concentrated in the slums and shanties, have little in common with their affluent neighbours. Social distance between the latter and the former and the segregated nature of the poor reinforce the tendency towards social and cultural subordination of the poor by the affluent urban social layers.

As discussed before, most of the female migrants originate from the lower rungs of rural and urban society. They invariably find the performance of menial tasks in the Middle East is more lucrative than the positions they otherwise have to occupy at home. Moreover, many of the latter are not any more prestigious either. For example, being a domestic servant in an affluent local household can be even more demeaning than Middle East employment.

The alleged and actual violations of sexual and family norms constitute yet another challenge to the established moral order which has been already disturbed by many forces in recent years. While the balance is already tilted towards the side of material interests, of both dominant and subordinate classes, a reversal of the process of change seems to be an almost impossibility.

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1 For details, see Hettige 1988a.

2 Informal sector activities such as domestic labour and street vending in which most of the poor urban women are engaged do not carry much esteem in the eyes of the more fortunate members of urban society.