

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF EMPLOYMENT IN THE MIDDLE-EAST — A STUDY OF KURUNDUWATTA VILLAGE IN AMBALANGODA. 331.1.1981

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This study carried out at the end of 1979 attempts to investigate the nature of the socio-economic impact of remittances, which has occurred between 1976 and 1979 in the villages of those who emigrated to the Middle-East for employment.

The village called Kurunduwatta, close to Ambalangoda, situated about 53 miles away from Colombo formed the area of our study. The emigration of a large number of residents of this village to the Middle-East for employment was a special reason for the selection of this village. In view of this large-scale emigration, the local villagers have named the road which traverses the village as the "Arabi Mawatha". About 177 families live in Kurunduwatta which covers an area of roughly 50 acres. Kurunduwatta has earlier been a typical village with a rural setting situated in the West Zone. Many of its villagers depended on carpentry, masonry and other related forms of self-employment for their living. A high social or economic position in the village was occupied then by a few families which had in them certain categories of government employees such as teachers and clerks. However, this situation changed after 1976. Consequent to the interest generated for jobs in the Middle East about 78 persons (including 8 females) had gone abroad. While some persons have proceeded about thrice to the Middle-East for employment, in certain families either two or three were employed there. In view of the largely uniform conditions which prevailed in the village, about 20 families formed the sample selected for our survey. This was preceded by preliminary discussions held with persons who knew the village intimately. The survey included

persons who had returned from foreign employment and also those who had come temporarily on holiday. Information, especially regarding changes that had occurred, was collected by interviews and observation.

A majority of the Kurunduwatta inhabitants who were interviewed have patronised private sector agencies rather than the Labour Department to secure foreign employment. Accordingly, depending on the contacts established by those agencies, countries such as Oman, Saudi Arabia and Dubai appear to have received preference. (See Table I)

TABLE I
Countries selected for foreign employment

Country	Percentage
Oman	32
Saudi Arabia	28
Dubai	16
Iraq	8
Jordan	4
Sharjah	4
Abu Dhabi	4
Bahrain	4

All who had left for foreign employment from Kurunduwatta are persons who had received some education. About 80 percent of them had studied up to Grade 10. Many of them had been self-employed (mainly as carpenters, masons and labourers). That persons falling into the unemployed category also had taken a special interest in Middle-East employment opportunities is evident from the fact that 16 percent of the sample consists of persons from this group.

TABLE 2
Previous employment position

Previous employment position	Percentage
Carpenter	48
Mason	28
Nurse	4
Labourer	12
Unemployed	16

Apart from those who had earlier been employed as masons or carpenters, those in the unemployed group too have secured employment in these same fields and proceeded to the Middle East. Table 3 makes clear that 58 percent have left the village as carpenters. Accordingly, these forms of employment now possess a high social value; a trend which did not exist earlier. Those who have been to the Middle East for employment appear to be gaining more recognition and receive prominence at village weddings as well as other social functions.

It was revealed that the 23-24 year age-group had displayed the highest interest to secure foreign employment. As indicated in Table 4 as many as 64 percent fall into this age-group.

TABLE 3
Types of foreign employment received

Occupation	Percentage
Carpenters	58
Masons	26
Housemaids	8
Nurses	8
Tailors	5

TABLE 4
Age Group of persons who have secured foreign employment

Age Groups	Percentage
Less than 18 yrs.	—
18 — 22	4
23 — 28	28
29 — 34	36
35 — 40	16
Over 40	16

The personal background of the persons in these age-groups appears to have been specially responsible for the generation of this interest in foreign employment. Nearly two-thirds of those persons who had been employed prior to proceeding abroad have been receiving monthly incomes of Rs. 300 - Rs. 500. The interest in foreign employment had increased, depending on the sizes of their families and problems of seeking an existence based on these incomes. According to disclosures made by 84 percent of those surveyed, they had applied for

foreign jobs due to economic problems and indebtedness (See Table 5).

TABLE 5
Reasons for seeking foreign employment

Reasons	Percentage
Economic problems	84
Unemployment	4
To know the country	4
Personal problems	8

Reduction in the disparity in material conditions which had existed among the villagers earlier, appeared to be an important feature evident in the post — Middle East employment situation. Even though it was difficult to ascertain exactly the total incomes they had earned, different investments made by them make it clear that they had earned a considerable amount. 90 percent of the foreign-employed persons have utilised part of their earnings for house-repairs or to purchase or build new ones. The interest thus displayed for houses and house-property has been mainly responsible for raising the price of a perch of land from Rs. 100 (in 1976) to Rs. 500/- at present (1979). Foreign employment has also helped many persons (about 75%) to settle outstanding debts.

Apart from their interests in housing and land was observed a change in the type of material goods (such as furniture, clocks and radios) they own. Some of the clearly evident changes could be summarised as follows:

- Prior to 1976 only 28 percent were bank-account holders. According to this survey, all families having foreign-employed members now possessed bank-accounts. This has facilitated the spread of the banking habit.
- All households were in possession of cassette recorders, electric clocks, foreign clothes and various foreign made articles.
- About 55 percent of the homes were having new furniture. 75 percent of them have obtained electricity.

- An interest in changing their food habits was also observed.
- There appears to be an enthusiasm to provide better schools and tutory education for their children.
- There was a small group (4%) which was reluctant to get back to their former type of work or to similar jobs.
- About 30 percent of the villagers have either become indebted in trying to spend money to get back to the Middle East or sold/mortgaged the foreign-made goods which they had bought.
- Socially, there has been a virtual disappearance of thefts and robberies and village 'loafers' or anti-social elements in this area. Economically, the gap which had prevailed between different households has changed.
- A change in social levels in certain families has been accompanied by changes in the pattern of family relationships as well as the emergence of extra-marital relationships by wives of some who had proceeded abroad.

It is possible that the earnings of these migrant workers have been spent more on consumer goods, often as conspicuous sumption and therefore to this extent could not be considered as having been beneficially invested. More important, however, is the social factor where these migrants have been exposed to a life style and level of consumption above that which they had previously enjoyed in their villages. This has given them rising expectations which cannot easily be fulfilled locally. This is a problem therefore, that needs to be carefully considered; namely, that of fruitfully reabsorbing these migrants when they finally return home. There are possibly feelings of disappointment arising from among groups and timely action by the relevant authorities can help to avoid this situation.