

## **MIGRATION OF SRI LANKAN WORKERS TO THE MIDDLE EAST: A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT**

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### **Introduction**

Almost all accounts of the temporary migration of Sri Lankan workers to the Middle East point to, or recognize, the importance of economic considerations as factors inducing the outflow of workers. They have thus fallen in line with the general trends in migration studies which have tended to interpret the phenomena of migration mostly in terms of economic, spatial and demographic factors (Peterson, 1978). The survey data gathered by many researchers through interviews with return migrants, have also been interpreted in such a way as to point in the same direction as the informants usually attribute migration to economic motives. While it is not intended here to question the validity of these inferences, it is nevertheless relevant to ask whether the interpretation of the process of migration in terms of isolated or discrete economic factors is not an oversimplification of a complex social process. This question is particularly relevant in view of the fact that the decision to migrate or even not to migrate is often guided by socio-cultural forces.

The main purpose of the present paper is to offer a sociological interpretation of some of the available empirical data. In the section that immediately follows, an attempt is made to examine some national-level data from a sociological point of view. On the basis of this discussion, an attempt is then made to develop a conceptual framework that could be used to analyse the process of migration at the national level. In the final section, micro-level data gathered from three small communities in Sri Lanka are discussed in the light of the conceptual framework already outlined.

### **Background**

As mentioned before (Hettige, 1990a), when the opportunities for migration to the Middle East were opened up in the late seventies, it was mostly the low income groups in and around Colombo who first made use of the opportunity. Later it spread into the outlying areas and more and more rural people also followed suit.

For the present account of the phenomenon of migration, a general understanding of the characteristics of the migrants is necessary. Since some researchers have already classified migrants in many different ways (i.e. Wignaraja, 1987), no attempt is made here to engage in a similar exercise. Instead, identification of major groupings suffices for the purpose.

Firstly, the majority of the migrants come from Colombo and its environs. In 1979, over 57% of the migrants were from the district of Colombo the population of which constituted only 11.4% of the total national population. The other area which had a proportionately higher share of migrants (15.8%) was Gampaha district. This is very much an extension of the district of Colombo owing to its close proximity,

efficient transportation and communication linkages, etc. In fact, over 77% of the migrants in 1979 originated from Western Province consisting of Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara districts the combined population of which in 1981 was 26% of the national population. Migrants from all the other districts, on the other hand constituted much less than their share of the national population. In many districts, the share of migrants was less than 1% while the share of the national population was several times higher.

Secondly, the vast majority of the migrants have been young, 85% of them being in the age cohort of 20-39 years. However, the female component of the migrant population has been increasing over the years. In 1979, females constituted about 47%, while their share in 1984 had increased to about 57%. Most of the female migrants have also been young, 85% of them between 20-39 years of age.

Thirdly, the majority of the migrants (66%) have also been married. The proportion of those who were married was higher among females (71%) than among males (62.5%).

Fourthly, in terms of educational attainment, less than 2% of the migrants had not received a formal education, while 62% have had primary or post primary education. A small percentage of migrants, had higher levels of educational attainment. Educational attainment was higher among male migrants than among female migrants.

Fifthly, the majority of the migrants (56%) have been unskilled workers before they migrated. A sizable share of the migrants (23.9%) have been unemployed before migration (Wignaraja, 1987). The share of females among the unskilled workers has been very high, i.e. 80%. As is well known, most of them have been domestic workers in the Gulf countries. On the other hand, the number of females in skilled, clerical/hotel and professional categories has been very low, 1.8%, 12.8% and 14.5% respectively (Migration Statistics, 1980).

And finally, a word about the ethnic composition of the migrants. The Sinhalese who constitute about 74.1% of the national population had 63% of the migrants. On the other hand, Muslims who constitute about 7% of the population had a proportionately much higher share i.e. 22%. The Tamils were represented among migrants almost proportional to their share of the population, i.e. 12%. The higher share of Muslims is generally attributed to the fact that, being faithful to Islam, it is easier for them to find employment in Muslim countries than for non-Muslims. Some job advertisements specifically ask for Muslims.

Looking at the brief socio-economic profile of the Sri Lankan migrants given above, the following tentative observations can be made:

- (a) they are the least constrained by structural and cultural factors
- (b) many migrants have more to gain than lose by breaking away from the prevailing weak structural relationships
- (c) migration as a phenomenon became so pervasive in some communities that the prospective migrants only have to follow the footsteps of the others with very little regard to cultural constraints.

Many of the migrant groups identified earlier can be subsumed under (a) above. The unemployed young men and women from the lower rungs of urban society, self-employed and casual workers in the urban petty commodity sector, skilled workers, both rural and urban such as masons and carpenters, who freely move about looking for work at the completion of each short work assignment, the educated unemployed etc. are not tied down by structural relationships such as those associated with agrarian structures. So, unlike for rural peasants who own agricultural land or possess cultivation rights, for most migrant categories, moving away for a few years does not involve a major dislocation in their way of life. For instance, a mason, if he so wishes, could find work immediately after returning from overseas employment. For the unemployed, the problem does not arise at all.

As mentioned above, migrants in general tend to be least tied down by cultural constraints. If there are cultural prescriptions which prevent the free movement of women, then, they cannot migrate without breaking these barriers. In fact, there exist such barriers in Sri Lanka, particularly in rural areas, which impose restrictions on the movement of women away from home for long periods of time. These restrictions are enforced through primary group relations associated with family, kinship and neighbourhood and are less effective in urban areas where there is a higher rate of geographical mobility and a weakening of traditional family and kinship bonds.

Most of the female migrants from Sri Lanka are from its urban areas, mainly from urban slums and shanties. In these communities, those who advocate traditional cultural prescriptions are either a minority or nonexistent. Those who come from urbanized villages where such cultural prescriptions are upheld at least by some villagers, women who migrate tend to value the newly gained lifestyle and independence more than the social esteem that would otherwise be bestowed upon them in return for upholding traditional values. For some women and their families, the loss of such esteem is not too much of a price to pay for an improvement in their material circumstances which, they feel, might lead to an improvement in their social conditions at least in the long run. This is particularly true for the unemployed or underemployed rural women who migrate to the Middle East owing to sheer economic necessity. Ironically, they themselves don't want to be identified as deviants in the public eye. As discussed elsewhere (1980a), at least in some areas, they resort to traditional ritual practices to convince others that migration does not necessarily involve a violation of culturally and socially sanctioned behavioral norms, particularly those related to social and family life.

It was also asserted that some migrants have more to gain than lose by breaking away from the existing weak structural relationships. This applies particularly to groups such as domestic workers and unskilled wage labourers employed in the urban petty commodity sector in which not only very low wages are paid but the other working conditions are poor as well. For instance, workers' rights as defined by state legislation hardly applies here. In other words, they have no immediate future to look forward to, let alone a distant one. These circumstances encourage workers to migrate resulting in the breaking away from existing structural relationships, no matter how loose they were. When they return after a spell of temporary employment in the Middle East, these uprooted workers often do not wish to revert

back to their previous sources of subsistence. Since they cannot often find work in the formal sector, they usually live on their savings and seek to migrate again when the savings are exhausted. This has given rise to a group of internationally mobile workers within the labour force who are accustomed to repeat migration. It should be noted that these unskilled workers, even in the Middle East do not earn very much more than what is required for the upkeep of their families who by now have slightly elevated consumption patterns.

Migration of Sri Lankan workers to the Middle East is very much a social movement. When they first began to migrate towards the end of the 1970's, the 'urge' to migrate spread very fast that it gave rise to long queues at the immigration office in Colombo where passports are issued. Ever since, this office remains perhaps the busiest and the most crowded public office in the country. During the short period between 1977 and 1980 over 400,000 passports had been issued. While only 1797 passports were issued in January 1977, the corresponding figure for January 1979 was as high as 12,244 (Dias, 1983). Not that all those who obtain passports succeed in securing employment in the Middle East but the fact is that more and more people want to follow the crowd. They do not want to be left out. As mentioned before, the phenomenon had a ripple effect in the country, radiating from Colombo and its environs to other urban centres and from there even into the rural hinterland.

Migrants who returned after a spell of employment abroad quickly became a reference group for the others in the neighbourhood who come from the same socio-economic background as that of the migrants. It is these people who rush to the passports office in Colombo in large numbers. They cannot afford to lag behind as migrants have already created an anomalous situation in the local community by adopting new consumption patterns and lifestyles. This is particularly so for the young, coming from similar social backgrounds, who are constantly searching for a niche in a fast changing society.

The urge to follow the crowd is particularly important for young women, both married and unmarried, as they often have to face the socio-cultural barriers against migration, particularly in the rural context. When those who have crossed the barrier do no longer constitute a small minority, the task is not so difficult for those who want to follow suit. Certain 'pockets' of migration that have emerged in some rural districts are very much a product of this social movement. The phenomenon is particularly evident in poor rural neighbourhoods where women have joined hands to migrate to the Middle East.

The discussion so far in the present section points to three main factors that have a bearing on the process of migration. They are :

- (a) structural factors;
- (b) cultural constraints;
- (c) migration as a social movement

To these, a fourth one has to be added, namely access to infrastructure, for it is an important factor facilitating the process. Under this variable can be subsumed aspects such as state policies and patronage, financial resources, information,

contacts and opportunities. As is well known, though the demand for expatriate labor in the Middle East grew from the early 70's Sri Lankan workers began to make use of the opportunity only towards the end of that decade. This delay can be explained in terms of this variable.

The relationship between these four variables on the one hand and the process of migration on the other is no doubt complex. This is due to at least the following reasons:

- (a) In a given situation, these variables may influence the process either separately or in combination
- (b) the variables themselves may influence each other, reinforcing or neutralizing the other;
- (c) Influence of a particular variable in a given situation is often a matter of degree; i.e. cultural constraints can be very strong, mild or very weak;
- (d) Migration process itself influences the above variables, at least in the long run.

While the interplay between the above variables in a given context may produce a particular result, it is not altogether difficult to draw some generalizations with regard to the Sri Lankan situation. Such generalizations can be made at both national as well as local levels.

As already mentioned, a striking feature of the Sri Lankan migrant population is that they come mostly from urban areas, particularly from Colombo and its environs. Their numbers become less and less significant as one moves further and further away from urban areas. Even though migrant statistics are not available for urban and rural sectors separately, it appears that the migrants, particularly females, from rural districts come largely from and around the urban centres.

Another significant feature of the migrant population is that, in many rural areas, male migrants outnumber female migrants while this pattern is reversed in Colombo and its environs. Female domestic workers as a proportion of unskilled workers is as high as 80% in the District of Colombo and Gampaha while the corresponding figures decline substantially in some rural districts such as Ampara, Jaffna, Mannar, Kandy, Galle, Puttalam and Batticaloa. This is in spite of the fact that it is much easier for unskilled females to find employment in the Middle East than for unskilled males.

The above pattern is further reinforced when the skilled workers who are usually males, are added to the picture. In many rural districts, skilled male workers outnumber female domestic aids. In other words, the female component in some rural areas becomes much less significant i.e. Galle, Ampara, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Puttalam, Mannar, Vavunia and Kalutara. In some rural districts, females constitute a large percentage but the numbers involved are very small i.e. Ratnapura, Monaragala, Badulla and Nuwara Eliya.

An overriding feature that emerges from the above statistics is that the tendency to migrate is weaker in rural areas than in urban areas. This is evident from the fact that the share of migrants in the outlying districts is much less than their share of the total national population. This, in fact is the case for most districts, the only exceptions being the three districts in the Western Province. The other districts with somewhat significant shares of migrants are Kandy, Galle and Jaffna all of which have large urban concentrations.

**Table 1 : Composition of skilled and unskilled migrant population, 1980**

District	(1) skilled workers	(2) Unskilled workers	(3) House maids	(3) As % of (2)	(3) as % of (1) + (2)
Colombo	2484	8309	6755	80%	63%
Gampaha	1066	2174	1754	80%	55%
Galle	405	509	294	59%	33%
Jaffna	632	385	117	35%	12%
Kegalle	72	204	160	79%	58%
Baticaloa	36	70	18	26%	17%
Amparai	29	22	8	36%	16%
Kurunegala	95	224	174	78%	55%
Kandy	302	966	643	67%	51%
Puttalam	112	213	95	44%	30%
Hambanthota	24	177	158	90%	79%
Matara	83	107	77	72%	41%
Mannar	3	7	2	29%	20%
Vavunia	6	7	3	43%	23%
Anuradhapura	12	32	22	69%	48%
Kalutara	258	494	369	75%	49%
Matale	52	142	102	72%	53%
Nuwara Eliya	17	43	32	77%	54%
Trincomalee	40	71	56	19%	51%
Polonnaruwa		7	5	72%	
Badulla	34	100	79	79%	59%
Monaragala	2	6	5	84%	63%
Ratnapura	22	39	32	82%	53%

Source : Migration Statistics, 1980

Can the above state of affairs be explained in terms of the four main variables delineated above? Since aggregate migration figures can't be subdivided in terms of more detailed socio-economic and cultural factors due to the nonavailability of detailed data, apart from making a few general remarks, a comprehensive analysis cannot be attempted here.

Firstly, in urban centres in general, the four variables take a positive character and operate in such a way as to encourage migration. Conversely, in the rural hinterland in general, the variables acquire a negative character and tend to have the opposite effect of discouraging migration. Secondly, there are situations where the tendency to migrate or otherwise might be disproportionately influenced by a particular factor. Thirdly, tendency of an individual to migrate or not is usually reinforced by his particular position in relation to each of the four variables irrespective of his place of residence, i.e. whether rural or urban. So, even within the same community (i.e. village, slum and shanty settlement), individuals, families and social groups may behave differently in the sphere of migration depending on the nature of their relationship to these variables.

### **3. The Process of Migration of the Grass-Roots Level**

The general observations made above can now be brought down to a more concrete level. The question to be addressed here is how do these general statements measure against empirical reality in specific communities. In the remaining pages, an attempt is made to do this in the light of empirical data gathered in three communities surveyed in the context of the present study, namely, Bogollagama, Matale Housing Scheme and Siduhath Lane squatter settlement in Colombo. Since these communities have already been introduced elsewhere (Hettige 1990a), they are not described here again.

#### **a. Bogollagama**

First to turn to Bogollagama, as discussed elsewhere (Hettige 1990a), most migrants, both male and female, from the village are not tied down by structural relationships. In other words, they could move away from home for an extended period of time as such a movement does not involve an uprooting of the individual from a firmly established system of production and exchange relations leading to a dislocation of his or her way of life.

As has been already identified, cultural constraint is also a major factor influencing the process of migration. As is evident, the vast majority of villagers in Bogollagama do not wish to send women to the Middle East. These include even some of the families whose female members have either already gone or are planning to go. But, for the poor and the downtrodden, there is virtually no choice. For them it is largely a matter of survival (Eelens & Schampers 1987). Most of these families, wherever they are tend to depend on irregular, uncertain and meager incomes drawn from wage labour, self-employment, etc. Their housing and other living conditions are also invariably very poor. Under such circumstances, their self esteem tends to be very low. They can hardly lay claims to modern life styles which not only bestow prestige on those who adopt them but also often offset the handicaps that arise from lowly origins. So the poor cannot afford to be guided entirely by high moral ideals and cherished cultural values. In other words, the poor villagers are much less tied down by cultural constraints.

On the other hand, the leniency with which the poor migrants have treated the cultural considerations has further widened the already existing gap between them and the more affluent villagers in terms of social status. Prior to their migration, female migrants were treated as innocent, humble, poor women struggling to survive; now, in extreme cases, some may even treat them as immoral 'prostitutes' as if they have gone to the Middle East to sell their bodies! Their husbands, who often unwillingly allow their wives to go, may be treated as worthless, incapable men who have virtually sold their wives for money. Unmarried female migrants are perhaps the worst affected: they are no longer believed to be 'virgins'. In other words, they are not acceptable as marriage partners to many young men and their families. This handicap may be overcome by some migrants who have amassed considerable wealth. Ironically, according to some migrant women, this is possible only through immoral means! An unmarried village girl who returned with 60,000 rupees after two years in the Middle East as a housemaid spent a major part of her savings to renovate the house, perform Pattini ritual buy jewellery<sup>1</sup> and other household requirements. She thought that she could now get married and live happily. Yet, many marriage proposals were turned down by prospective bridegrooms on account of her Middle East trip. Those who were willing asked her to give a dowry of about 100,000 rupees to offset her handicap. Since she did not have such large amounts of money, she was forced to return to the Middle East for another spell of employment. At the time of the completion of fieldwork, she was still in the Middle East, paying a heavy price for her 'alleged' immorality. In actual fact, she is paying a price for her not being immoral because she did not resort to 'immoral' means to earn money!

Social stigma attached to female migration has not discouraged the poor, particularly poor women seeking refuge in the Middle East. Migration to the Middle East is the dream of almost every young female in the poor households. This is largely due to the fact that Middle East migration is virtually a social movement in the country. That is why most village families, both poor as well as not so poor, wish to have a family member in the Middle East. The only difference is that relatively well-to-do villagers want to have a male member, while the poor families do not necessarily have such a clear preference. This is largely due to the fact that sending a male member abroad is often beyond their means. This is due to a number of reasons. Firstly, the male members of many such families are the breadwinners while wives are either underemployed or housewives. So, it is easier for women to move away without solely disrupting the livelihood of the family. Secondly, it is easier for women than for men to migrate due to high recruitment fees and scarcity of vacancies for male recruits. Thirdly, the men from poor families who are often unskilled labourers do not possess the skills that are usually required for employment in the Middle East. So, they end up allowing their wives or sisters to leave for employment abroad.

As is well known, female migrants do no longer constitute a small minority of women who could be cornered and stigmatized by the rest of society. They in fact constitute a majority of all migrants. This is true to a certain extent in the local context as well. This has no doubt given them and the prospective female migrants a psychological strength. So, they do not necessarily feel isolated and helpless. When more and more women join them their position is further strengthened. This

is exactly why female migrants have already become a reference group for prospective female migrants from poor families; the latter's only wish is to follow the footsteps of those who have already made it. Some, of course do not possess adequate resources to accomplish their goals. They should at least possess something which they could sell or mortgage in order to secure the necessary finances. In other words, the poorest families who possess no movable or immovable property can rarely migrate.

As already mentioned, infrastructure is another important factor that facilitates the process of migration. In this regard poor inhabitants in remote rural areas usually have least access to such infrastructure. But Bogollagama, being located close to Matale town and the housing settlement which is more urban than rural in character, was in an advantageous position. They had access to information and recruitment agents in the town who had already sent many recruits to the Middle East. Many returned migrants in the area also have personal contacts with agents and prospective employers.

Most female migrants do not have ready cash to pay recruitment fees. They nevertheless have some landed or housing property belonging to their families which they could mortgage and raise the necessary funds. Some female migrants had gone to the Middle East through agents who charge little from their recruits. When the first few migrants found employment abroad few of them managed to secure placements for others and even purchase or organize air tickets for them. Those who have already been to the Middle East can often find their way back as they now not only have the necessary contacts but also possess other necessary resources.

So far an attempt has been made to examine the process of migration in Bogollagama in terms of the four fold conceptual framework outlined earlier. As is evident, the four factors involved, in combination have guided the process of migration in the local context. So, the migrants and even the prospective migrants are not randomly scattered in the social fabric of the village. For instance, the cultural constraint is so strong in the village that it not only does not release women of certain social layers for Middle East employment but also leads to the stigmatization of women who migrate.

On the other hand, there is no particular cultural constraint discouraging male migration but, access to infrastructure is so unequally distributed that men from certain social layers have an advantage over the others. Yet, who actually opts for Middle East employment depends largely on the nature of the structural linkages that individuals and families have with the system of production and exchange relations both in the locality as well as in the country at large.

#### **b. Matale Housing Scheme**

A general description of Matale Housing Scheme (HS) is given elsewhere (Hettige 1990a). So, what is intended here is briefly to indicate how the migrants from this community relate to the structural, cultural, social and infrastructural variables which are assumed to guide the process of migration in the local context.

The Housing Scheme, though located in a rural setting, almost adjacent to Bogollagama, is more like an urban settlement, mainly in terms of its social structure and the economic base. The residents own no agricultural land and rely on external sources of income. While some make use of their home gardens to cultivate some food crops, they do not constitute a significant source of subsistence for most families living there.

Though most of the original settlers who moved into the settlement when it was first established a few decades ago were low income families of artisans, unskilled workers, petty traders etc., there has been some social differentiation in the recent past. While some belonging to the second generation have secured lower-level, white collar employment through education, a few have established small businesses in the nearby town. Yet, unemployment, particularly among young men and women, has continued to be a major problem in the locality.

The diversity of origins among the families in the HS has prevented the formation of status groups based on primordial identities such as caste and family. So, whatever the status differentials that exist are mostly based on occupational and consumption patterns. Moreover, in the eyes of more traditional inhabitants in the area such as those in Bogollagama, the residents in the HS in general are lower in social status owing to their unclear origins and almost lack of respect for local traditions.

Today, the area surrounding the town of Matale is widely known as a 'migration pocket' owing to the large number of people who have migrated to the Middle East from there. This high concentration is partly due to the fact that Matale has a considerable Muslim population. As is well known, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has contributed a disproportionately higher share of migrants from the country. While Muslim families from and around HS have sent migrants to the Middle East, their Sinhalese and Tamil neighbours have not failed to follow suit.

Muslims are well known for their cultural norms restricting women's mobility. Yet, in order to take advantage of the employment opportunities in the Middle East, many poor Muslim families have virtually disregarded such traditional norms. This they could do without much difficulty as the prospective employers are mostly Arab families who are expected to extend a brotherly hand to their Muslim employees from Sri Lanka. Though the actual relationship might be different, such notions nevertheless provide an adequate cultural cover for Muslim women who sought to migrate. When large numbers of them began to migrate, individuals and families faced little difficulty in taking decisions in favor of migration because migration is no longer an individual affair but a social current pervading large sections of the local population.

With more and more people leaving for the Middle East, many recruitment agents and sub agents appeared in the area. Though some agents exploited prospective migrants by charging exorbitant fees, there were at least a few whose charges were affordable for many prospective migrants. Yet, since there were many more prospective migrants than the available vacancies, exploitation and cheating

by unscrupulous agents could not be avoided. Nevertheless, the presence of recruiting agencies in the area allowed many people to find overseas employment.

### c. Siduhath Lane, Colombo

As discussed elsewhere (Hettige, 1990a), migrants in general are marginal to the mainstream of the urban economy because they operate very much within the petty commodity sector. So, if they are wage earners, they do not enjoy the benefits of formal sector employment such as regularity of work, overtime payments, paid leave, subsidized loans and pension or provident fund facilities. If they are self-employed as street vendors, shoe repairers etc. they compete with many others for a share of the already congested market. Earnings from such small enterprises are usually not very much and are only adequate to meet the bare necessities of the families involved. The slightest calamity such as illness or physical injury can disrupt their precarious existence bringing them down to the level of sheer starvation. It is not necessary to mention that the position of the unemployed is worse. They either depend on the other members of the family or resort to irregular income generating activities such as theft, robbery, prostitution and domestic work.

Given the above background, it is not necessary to emphasize that the migrants from Siduhath Lane are 'free' to migrate as they were not tied down by strong structural relationships within the urban economy. Since most of them are also unskilled and uneducated, they have little hope of getting incorporated into the dominant sector of the urban economy. Even when self-employed, they do not usually possess fixed assets such as buildings, equipment and machinery, so that they can easily wind up their 'business' before migration. In most cases, small businesses are no more than 'minute' income generating activities, often not generating enough income to meet the needs of the persons and families involved, so that their winding up in favour of migration does not involve a great opportunity cost.

As mentioned above, the vast majority of the migrants from Siduhath Lane are young, married females who have gone to various Middle Eastern countries as housemaids. While conforming to the general pattern in the urban areas, (the general sample survey carried out in Colombo by the research team of which the author was a member elicited similar patterns this tendency<sup>2</sup> has been due to a number of reasons. Firstly, as already mentioned, it is easier for females to secure overseas employment than for men due to low recruitment fees for females. Moreover migration involves little opportunity costs for females as they are often either unemployed or marginally employed.

Secondly, unlike in traditional rural settings, poor females in slums and shanties are not constrained by cultural restrictions emanating either from their own communities or from the larger society. As is well known, norms of modesty, privacy, family life and sexual behavior generally applicable in traditional villages are usually not tenable in squatter settlements, where familial relations are fluid, unstable and more flexible. Young boys and girls who drop out from school prematurely, secure their subsistence from some source or the other and establish casual relationships depend very much on the economic circumstances which often do not provide a

sound material basis for stable and contented family life in the settlements of the urban poor. Moreover, there is very little group pressure or support for individual families to survive during turbulent times. So, separation, desertion, relationships outside marriage, etc. are not uncommon phenomena. Unlike many old rural women who are outraged to learn about possible violations of the norms of virginity and chastity in the Middle East by Sri Lankan women, old people in the slums and shanties who were interviewed did not appear to be much concerned about this facet of Middle East migration. Their general attitude was clearly summarized by an old woman from Siduhath Lane who said that, "unlike those days, we don't have to worry about them any more as they are safe with 'operation'" (sterilization). As for their husbands, most of them express anxiety over the possibility of their wives getting 'involved' in the Middle East but they unlike their rural counterparts, do not lose face for sending their wives away as their neighbours do not perceive the phenomenon in the same manner.

And finally, a word about the influence of the external society. Since the stereotyped view of the outsiders of slum and shanty women is to consider the latter to be immoral in their ways, migrant women had virtually no social esteem to lose so they could not care less about what the outsiders feel about their migration. The social and cultural pressures which discourage women to migrate in traditional rural setting is virtually nonexistent among the inhabitants at Siduhath Lane.

As mentioned at the outset, Middle East migration in Sri Lanka was mostly an urban phenomenon at the beginning. Most migrants hailed from the lower rung of urban society, mainly from Colombo and its environs. This pattern is in keeping with the main argument in the present paper, namely, the process of migration in the local context is guided by structural, cultural, social and infrastructural factors. Accordingly, the lower class urban setting is a typical case where the four factors in their positive form tend to converge. As we have already seen, structural and cultural factors acquire a positive character at Siduhath Lane and thereby encourage migration. Moreover, the remaining two factors also tend to have a positive influence on the migration process there.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that there are no settlements of the urban poor in Colombo from where at least a few people have not migrated to the Middle East. From many such communities, large numbers of men and women have already made the journey. So much so that it is the dream of many, if not most, men and women in these communities to go to the Middle East. Those who return from the Middle East invariably have more material possessions and usually upgrade their shelters. A few may even embark on new businesses using their savings as the initial capital. Occasionally, a migrant may leave the settlement altogether in favour of a more prestigious residential environment. All these make migration appealing to most young men and women. This is particularly so in the slums and shanties where opportunities for social mobility are scarcer and the urge to follow the crowd is stronger.

Another factor which facilitates Middle East migration from shanty communities like Siduhath Lane is access to what has been referred to as infrastructure. In this regard, easy access to information and recruiting agents has been significant.

Though many would-be-migrants do not have the necessary capital at hand, they could obtain credit, though at very high interest rates, i.e. over 100% per year.<sup>3</sup> Most of those who require credit cannot avoid such high interest rates as they do not possess valuable property such as gold which can be pawned at banks to obtain credit at much lower interest rates. On the other hand, some are reluctant to obtain credit as migration involves a certain degree of financial risk. As is well known, cheating by recruitment agents is not uncommon. This makes the local money lenders to insist that those who require credit provide some guarantee, at least a recommendation by someone who is credit worthy. The result is that the poorest people who cannot provide such assurances often tend to be left out.

#### 4. Conclusion

So far in the present paper, an attempt has been made to look at the process of migration of Sri Lankan workers to the Middle East from a sociological point of view taking into account four major variables that have a direct bearing on migration in the local context. The analysis has been attempted in the light of empirical data gathered through a series of micro-level studies involving rural, semi-urban and urban situations. The four-fold conceptual framework outlined involving structural, cultural, social and infrastructural factors used in the analysis of data is intended to contribute to an understanding of the process of migration as a sociological phenomenon. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that the phenomenon at hand does not conform to the general patterns of migration; the process involved here is a cyclical movement of people whose presence and behavior exert influence not so much on the host country as on the country of origin itself.

The paper has thus attempted to go beyond the most common explanation of the process of migration - the explanation in terms of simplistic and general 'push' - 'pull' factors and offer a distinctly sociological interpretation of the phenomenon. Such an interpretation is required not only because the dynamics and the variations involved in the local milieu cannot be fully accounted for in the context of a general push-pull theory but also because, unlike in many other migrant situations, the arena in which the migrants enact their roles is not so much the host country as the country of origin itself.

Admittedly, the relationship between the four variables identified on one hand and the process of migration on the other is complex. As has been already pointed out, these variables, though they operate as independent variables, are in turn influenced by the process of migration as well.

Ideal conditions for migration are found in situations where all four variables of the conceptual model are present in the positive form. They are structural marginality, cultural marginality, the presence of a sizeable number of migrants and access to infrastructure. On the other hand, unfavourable conditions for migration are present in situations where all four variables are present in the negative form. They are structural integration, cultural integration, rarity of migration and lack of access to infrastructure facilities.

In actual fact, the above variables might be found in different combinations in different locations which would fall in between the above two extremes. However, at least in theory, a large number of combinations are logically possible. (see figure 1). Moreover, the overwhelming influence of one or two variables may either reinforce or neutralize the others thereby determining the outcome. In other words, the variables themselves are not static and are subject to change over time.

**Figure 1 - Possible combinations of variables**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Structural Marginality	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	1
Cultural Marginality	+	+	+	-	+	-	-	-	2
Social Pressure	+	+	-	-	+	+	-	-	3
Infrastructure	+	-	-	-	+	+	+	-	4

Values +, -  
 + Conducive  
 - Unconducive

The presence of conditions conducive for migration is not a spatial phenomenon, for the inhabitants of a given locality might be differentially influenced by these conditions. For instance, not all inhabitants of a village are structurally or culturally marginal. Moreover, not all residents have equal access to infrastructure facilities such as finance and job opportunities. These variations in turn manifest themselves in the migratory process.

In the three locations mentioned earlier, the above patterns were clearly evident. In a recent study undertaken by the author in a Muslim village in north-central Sri Lanka, these processes become further evident (Hettige 1990). As discussed there, the residents there overcome traditional cultural constraints they were faced with and migrated in large numbers to the Middle East.

#### Notes

(1) Pattini, "the goddess of purity, chastity and virginity" (Obeysekera, 1987), occupies a major position in the ritual and religious life of the villagers who are mostly Sinhalese Buddhists. The young female migrants, both married and unmarried, who are sensitive to the moral issues involved in their migration to the Middle East, usually make a vow and perform a puja at the Pattini Devale (Shrine room dedicated to goddess Pattini) before leaving the country and, on their return, fulfill

the vow by offering alms to 'seven mothers' in the name of Pattini. The main purpose of the ritual is to establish that the migration of the female concerned did not involve a violation of sexual norms relating to chastity and virginity. The performance of the ritual helps convince those who believe in the powers of the goddess that the migrant concerned had 'well behaved' in the Middle East but has not softened the hard negative attitudes towards female migration that have already been formed in the village.

(2) The household survey based on a multi-stage random sample drawn from a few low income wards in Colombo and several other local government areas covered both migrant as well as non-migrant households. The total number of households covered were 2164. While there were 1757 migrant families, the rest were non-migrants. Over 73% of the migrants in the sample were females.

(3) Interest is normally charged on a monthly basis, ranging from 10- 20%. Those who borrow money at such high rates of interests usually pay it back within a few months.

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