

**Leela Gulati.** *In the Absence of their Men: The Impact of Male Migration on Women.* New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1993. x+174 pp. Hardback. Indian Rs 200.00.

Among the neighbouring countries of South and South-East Asia who responded to the demand for labour following the oil price hike in the Middle East in 1973, India had sent out an estimated 75600 workers as migrants to the Middle East by 1987. Of these, 30100 workers had migrated from Kerala alone (Appendix I on p. 147 of this book shows). Gulati's book sketches the profiles of ten such households.

The book is a simple and direct narration of the effects on the women left behind on account of the absence of the men of their households who went to work in Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait from the mid-seventies. The analysis is based primarily on the biographies of the wives of ten migrants. The consequences of migration are assessed with reference to other family-members of the migrant as well, particularly women other than the wife (i.e., mostly the mothers and sisters).

The households in all cases belonged to the low-income groups. The sample was selected from two sub-wards (Alakad and Bhimapally) of Poonthura, on the outskirts of Trivandrum, where the author's husband (an economist at a research institute) was posted in 1972. The author, herself a housewife, became interested in the lives of the women "who sold fish in the market, ... helped with household chores, and ... who worked at the nearby construction sites" (p. 9). These women took the author to their homes and introduced her to their lives. As a consequence of the qualitative insight she acquired into the lives of these women, Gulati decided to write a book about the effects of migration on the life of the families of the migrants. She realised that a social perspective was lacking in the assessments made by her husband and his colleagues about migrants, whom economists tend to treat as "rational agents maximising utility in a perfectly competitive market" (p. 10).

Trivandrum District (of the same name as the city) accounted for 11 percent of the migrants from India to West Asia in 1987. It ranked third among the districts with the highest number of migrants to the Middle East. Of the ten profiles that constitute the core of the book, one belongs to a christian household; five are of muslim households; and four of hindu households. The households of the hindus were also among the lowest in the hierarchy of castes. They were engaged exclusively in coir-related manual work. The occupation of the muslim households was principally fish-vending.

The categories covered in the profiles (which also provide comparisons among the ten cases) relate to the role of the migrant's family in assisting him logistically and financially to undertake the migration; the relationship of the wife within her close family circle as a result of her husband's absence; illiteracy as a drawback

when the remittances arrive; the effects on her fertility as a consequence of the husband's periodic visits; her own entry into the labour force; the effects on her mobility; and communication with the husband during his absence. The differential situations of the migrants who returned permanently, and those who were able to stay on for some more years at the time the biographies were recorded (in 1987), are also described. The concluding observations reiterate the trends of the migration process; its impact, and its aftermath on the family members, particularly the wives in terms of access to modern facilities and the upgrading of their socio-economic status. The book ends with an expression of faith in the potential of women to cope with the activities from which they have been traditionally excluded, in the event that they are duly empowered.

The strength of the book lies in the empirical data that it presents. The biographies relate the actual phenomenon of migration, as it is lived by the ten households. As such, the cases are a glance into the network of socio-economic relations that are relevant to the advancement opportunity provided by migration. The effects of the changes on the status and composition of the household as well as the possibilities for the future are summed up in a postscript; the latter records the impact of migration on the household of the migrant seven to ten years after the migration first took place.

The five chapters of the book include a brief Introduction and a Conclusion. The Introduction (which identifies the topic and the relevance of qualitative data as opposed to cost-benefit analyses generally undertaken by economists such as the author's husband) is followed by an equally brief description of the "Locale of Migration". Chapter III contains the ten profiles and, hence, constitutes the substance of the book. It is followed by a commentary on how the family, particularly the wife, copes with the absence of the migrant in matters such as decision-making, handling money, child-rearing, etc. The two Appendices at the end of the book are "References" and "Index". Appendix 1 contains some estimates of Kerala's share in the migration flows from India to West Asia, and the major characteristics of the migrants in terms of their education, skills, etc. Appendix 2 contains comparisons of some of the broad characteristics of the migrants and their families, such as distribution by religious and occupational grouping, distribution by age, length of stay, number of family-members, educational levels, marital status, wife's age, and fertility status, etc. The main text is thus complemented by some statistical data in the Appendices, whereas the former are sought to be placed in the larger social context.

As the style is narrative, the biographies tend to lack the kind of theoretical and analytic strength that a discussion in the context of the existing literature on women and the migration phenomenon would have permitted, and which could explain the data more meaningfully. For instance, the author selected her sample

from three religious groups. The descriptions in the profiles and the comments that follow, however, make no mention of any differences (or of the lack of differences) on account of religion in the indices covered. An appraisal of any section of the population is better understood with reference to the differentials by economic strata, urban/rural residence, and changes (on-going and potential) over time in the local and the larger global context. In the absence of such a framework, the scope of the data remains limited.

Moreover, the sample is too small to be representative of either the region or the nation; nor has the representativeness of the sample been discussed with reference to the larger regional context (despite the tables given in the appendix designed to make this connection). Had these tables been discussed in the main text or had a little more cultural content of the sample village been incorporated in the descriptions, the narratives may have gained more depth. Also, situating the case-studies in the local context, and comparing the emerging trends of future transformations in the cases studied with respect to the region and nation, may have rendered the study more holistic.

Lacking in contextual explanations thus, the biographies are likely to be valuable primarily for readers already familiar with the culture of the society in question. Because the author provides no such framework, her data remain descriptive. She focuses on issues related to the monetary gain as a consequence of the migration of a man or men from the sample households. She also questions her informants on issues of health, education, and changes in social status (which she judges as pertinent). In the absence of cultural explanations, she tends to make a mistake similar to the one of which she accuses her economist husband, namely, the mistake of remaining within the realm of the indices universally important in the modern urban context and "the rationality of economic agents and the nature of markets in which they operated" (p. 9).

Even though the sample is small—it lacks qualitative insight and the author fails to situate her data in a theoretical and cultural context—the book is a useful contribution towards the much-needed information on women and on the various issues related to them. The exercise is also commendable insofar as it is an initiative by a housewife "to be useful and sensitive to her surroundings". An active involvement in the lives of the women in Trivandrum earned the author the post of Associate Fellow at the Centre for Development Studies in that city.

**Soofia Mumtaz**

Pakistan Institute of  
Development Economics,  
Islamabad.