



5 NUANCING THE ‘MIGRANT EXPERIENCE Perspectives from Kerala, South India’*

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INTRODUCTION

A major problem in the existing literature on Kerala’s (and more generally South Asian) Gulf migration is an aggregation of Gulf migrant experiences. This is born both of a reliance on statistical data and survey work and of the use of such generalizing glosses as ‘migrant’ or ‘Gulf’.¹ In this essay, we are contributing to moves towards nuancing the picture of ‘the Gulf migrant’ and unpicking some of the different influences in play.² We shall also think through some of the factors of difference involved in determining a family’s migration experience and the extent to which migration alters family culture, taking issue along the way with strong hypotheses proposing migration’s transformative or rupturing effects. In this high migration state of India, we also critique the commonly painted pictures of tragic ‘Gulf wives’ and dysfunctional ‘Gulf families’.³

In Kerala, migrants, would-be migrants and stay-behind families imagine and experience places very differently. Strongly articulating with this, we find, is the factor of migrants’ own community. Factors such as original social class and family status, own age and age of one’s children are equally influential in orienting decisions, experiences, and evaluations of Gulf migration.

Both image and actuality of the homeland and the receiving state are important, as are perceived articulations with the migrant’s base cultural practices. Experience and knowledge which enable migrants to make sharp distinctions between places and links across places are overlooked in discourse in order to construct what we call a ‘rhetorical difference triangle’ in which Malayalis imagine and pit places against each other. Under discussion are not empirically existing locations so much as imaginary zones which exaggerate perceived negative and

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positive characteristics. Thus, we have the *nadu* or 'homeland' of Kerala for migrants almost inevitably romanticized and supersaturated with positive cultural meaning even as it also becomes a subject of negative comparisons with destination states. The migration destination of West Asian Gulf states, actually very distinct and nuanced in migrant accounts of preferences and differences between these states is generalized into cultural imagining and when spoken of among migrants in opposition to Kerala as a generic *Gulf*. Europe and the USA is another zone which is understood by many to be highly differentiated but from which the difference is popularly elided in discourse to make it stand (as the West) at a third point of the rhetorical 'cultural difference triangle,' against the Gulf and Kerala. We will suggest that migrants themselves hold a folk notion akin to *habitus*, a conviction that children are strongly formed by their surroundings,⁴ and that this notion exerts pressure upon ideas about suitable migration destinations and decisions about whether or not family members should accompany the male migrant. We also find that female migrants have a great influence within the family and peer group, and a clear voice in family decisions about migration strategies, partly by virtue of their special responsibility as caretakers of children.

In examining concerns about transnationalism or bifocality, we finally move to argue that migration's outcome in terms of cultural identity cannot be predicted; that Kerala Gulf migration (partly by virtue of the nearness of the Gulf to Kerala), does not necessarily lead to significant rupture and is not most usefully theorized as transnational or as productive of bifocality; that migrant ambivalence about home need not be a product of migration, but pre-exists and may sometimes be a motivation towards migration; and that *habitus* predisposes migrants later in life towards certain strategies and evaluations of places within the 'difference triangle'.

TRANSNATIONALISM, RUPTURE, BIFOCALITY?

In 2001, searching for trends and patterns to migrant experiences, Pries (following in particular the work of Glick Schiller) suggested that an additional category be added to sociology's existing three.⁵ Pries delineates sociology's classic emigrant, expected to leave home and integrate in a new society; the return migrant, who maintains the home country as base and referent and plans to return; and the diaspora migrant, characterized by suffering and a continued reference to the

motherland even in the face of long-term separation. He then turns to the latest to appear in the sociological record and the fastest-growing category—the transnational migrant, characterized by ambiguous relations to both home and host countries, and with no determined time-frame or location on movements. Pries suggests that transnational migrants are engaged in accumulating (economic, social, cultural) capital in more than one location and endorses arguments tracing shifts in identity consequent upon the pursuit of this multi-sited project of the self. However it is nuanced, a condition of transnationality among international migrants has by now become the most widely accepted first assumption in analysing migration data).⁶

Some, seeking to characterize this condition of transnationality more precisely, make reference to concepts such as Rouse's 'bifocality' whereby a migrant learns to see the world through a 'double habitus', a set of impulses and unconscious motivations which are structured by both places.⁷ The most daring theorists dissolve doubleness into a hybrid, third space, where migrant identity becomes something more than the sum of its pluri-focused parts—an identity actually defined by the experience of movement and marginality, and the person's consequent fluidity.⁸

Waldinger and Fitzgerald urge us to be careful to disentangle the international from the truly transnational—something which transcends and goes beyond the national.⁹ Studies of immigration, they point out, tend to reveal 'highly particularistic attachments' or 'long distance particularism', a 'bi-localism'. They urge caution in any attempt to move towards generalization and point out that considerable variation exists between migrant experiences and shaping of identity politics, not least because of the range of different experiences in the receiving states, where public policies and popular viewpoints on migrant activity and bifocalism may be hostile or supportive.

Even a cursory consideration of our data confirms that as soon as we make a statement, we find the need to qualify it many times. Among those Malayalis we know we find migrants drawn from several communities (including high- and low-caste Hindu; Syrian, Protestant, and Catholic Christian; high- and low-status Muslims) and class backgrounds (for example, highly educated professionals; big businessmen; petty traders; diploma-educated technicians; non-matriculate labourers).¹⁰ They are engaged in a vast range of legal and illegal activities in a wide variety of settings across different states. Migrants may also have more or less exposure to new cultural

patterns, in some social classes and situations moving overwhelmingly in Malayali-dominated work and living spaces.

We also find that even specifically and authentically 'Malayali' culture breaks up at first analysis, as we find professional migrants in the Gulf choosing Hollywood movies rather than the Malayalam films beloved by almost all in Kerala and by labouring and middle-class Gulf migrants; meanwhile, a range of international Malayalam-language satellite television stations (Asianet, Jeevan, Kairali etc) cater to different segments of the Malayali home and migrant population (Christians, Leftists). 'Kerala' food culture is similarly segmented: *idli-sambar* is a typically Hindu and especially southern Kerala dish, while ghee rice and mussels fry are northern and Muslim specialities.¹¹

And the degree to which migration entails rupture or change is certainly not stable: as one migrant (female professional, Protestant, in UAE) remarked:

The labouring classes and the qualified workers are living more or less the same lives as we do back home: we have the same standard of living, mix in the same sorts of social circles, do the same sorts of things. The labourers are struggling and suffering here, their families are still not economically sound, they live in poor housing; while we people have nice houses and cars, but we are working, working, working all the time and worrying about our kids' education and marriages. Only the middle groups—traders, self-employed, technicians—are seeing any difference in their lives. They are the ones whose lives are transformed. They can make more money, move up the ladder, make a difference for their family compared to life in Kerala.

Considering all this, we find that the *particularities* of one's positions in country of origin and destination are more salient in shaping experience and evaluation than any commonly *shared* features of migration. Rather than lead us to paralysis, all this confirms the conclusions made by Gardner and Osella in their introduction to a recent volume on migration in South Asia. They insist that 'the hallmark of migration is ambiguity'.¹² In answer to questions about migration's characteristics and effects, they conclude: 'The only answer we can give—and we urge our readers to be cautious of those offering anything more solid than this—is that it depends.'¹³ As such, ethnography plays its familiar role in restraining the enthusiasms of policy-makers or theorists. This also points us towards writing in a less ambitious vein: one in which the minutiae of informants' actions and statements are brought together in conversation with each other and with global concepts.¹⁴

While Malayalis are then found in a wide range of social spaces, we necessarily limit ourselves. We consider in this paper two contrastive case studies of families moving between and evaluating the three places of the ‘difference triangle’ of popular Malayali imagination.

Women make up just 10 per cent of Kerala’s migrants but their experience, so often overlooked in other accounts and yet so often determinant in a family’s migration strategies, is our central focus here.¹⁵ We are listening to what women tell us about the three points of the ‘difference triangle’ and how they are crafting transnational lives for themselves and their children.¹⁶

‘BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE’: A MUSLIM FAMILY BETWEEN KERALA, UK, AND DUBAI

Abdullah Koya, aged sixty-four and recently widowed, spent most of his adult life working away: first in Bangalore (1960s–mid-1970s) and then in Dubai (mid-1970s till late 1980s), as an engineer. Since retiring back home to Calicut in 1996, he has built a large two-storeyed villa with two-car carport and landscaped gardens. Although a professional who could have afforded to have a family visa and accommodation, he chose to work as a single male migrant, his wife staying back in Kerala to look after the children’s upbringing.

Here we are mostly concerned with the families of Koya’s son Gafoor—a doctor resident in the UK with his wife Wafa, a housewife and their three small children (aged, one, two, and four); and with Koya’s daughter, Shabira, also a housewife, married to doctor Mammud, also resident in UK with their children, a girl of nine and boy of eleven.

Since 1999, Abdullah Koya had been actively involved in supervising building work on a villa one kilometre away from his, which was being built for his daughter Shabira and her husband. Koya (and his wife, before she died in 2003) were excited that at least half of the family were ‘coming home’ to Kerala. They put up money to help build the house, worked hard to obtain admissions for their grandchildren at Calicut’s most popular English-medium schools, and planned their future around the day when the daughter and grandchildren would be nearby. Son-in-law Mammud had a job lined up at Calicut’s newest multi-speciality hospital. Mrs Koya told Caroline that her daughter’s main reason for wanting to return from UK was the grandson and granddaughter’s approaching adolescence. Of course, Shabira wanted

to come home and be in her own native place and near her ageing parents, but the main issue at stake was the children's future.

In the UK, Shabira said, there was a youth culture involving pop music, boyfriends, alcohol drinking, love marriage, and *it was all allowed by school and families there*. She was worried they wouldn't be able to keep their children out of that culture, and that surrounded by such a culture, the children were bound to go astray.

In 2003, when the family arrived from the UK, Shabira told Caroline that her son had been bullied in his (overwhelmingly White British) school for being Asian and Muslim and that she was also highly concerned to remove him from such a racist environment, which was turning ever more hostile. Shabira was confident that her children would grow up in a better moral and cultural climate in Calicut, close to the wider family, moving among Calicut Muslims. Here she would have the support (and surveillance of course) of family and community and be able to keep them 'on track' and not risk them going 'off the rails'. She would also be near her beloved mother; although she had friends in the UK, here she could visit her mother every day and would also have her help with organizing domestic life. Her mind would be at rest, knowing that her son would finally be freed from racist bullying.

Just four weeks after the golden arrival and happy reunion, tragedy struck. Mrs Abdullah Koya had a stroke and was admitted to Calicut city's best private hospital, where a series of delays and foul-ups led to what her son and son-in-law (both doctors, both specialists) maintain was an absolutely needless death at the age of fifty-eight. Gafoor (who took emergency compassionate leave from UK and arrived with his family in just three days, in time to see his by-now comatose mother's last days and death in the ICU) and Mammud, who have both been practising medicine in UK for over ten years, argued to us that in the UK the death would never have occurred: 'There, we have strict emergency procedures and timings; here, they could not round up the anaesthetist in time. They have all the sophisticated equipment and medicines but the people are not doing their job properly. They do not answer their bleeps, do not attend quickly...'

Son and son-in-law's grief was magnified by impotent fury, and—for Mammud—a growing unease at the thought of returning to Kerala and working in a Kerala hospital. He began to echo what another Malayali UK-based doctor had told us:

I don't think anyone could bear to come back to practise medicine in Kerala after working in UK. They are so sloppy here, and the way the hospitals work is all different, for example, the relation between nurses and doctors. Then, they do all sorts of wrong things—like the over-prescribing is terrible. Perhaps you could work in a Gulf hospital, but you could not stand it here.

Gafoor returned to the UK, leaving his wife Wafa and small children resident in Abdullah Koya's house, for company and domestic support. Shabira and her husband Mammud meanwhile continued with frantic preparations to complete the construction of the house in Calicut.

Three weeks later we passed by the house to find a sombre and tense mood. Abdullah Koya told us bitterly, 'Here, take all these people back to your place, we have had enough of foreigners.' Although made jokingly, the remark was barbed.

Shabira's (UK born and raised) children were complaining about boredom, the heat, the food, enduring visits from and to unknown relatives, attending lengthy and distant weddings, and missing their books, toys, and friends. Wafa's (smaller) children were refusing to eat, missing fruit yoghurt and fresh cheese, so easily available for infants in the UK. The younger two were not even drinking milk properly, while the four-year-old maintained that the milk tasted 'different' and 'not good'. The children's mothers, frustrated with near-confinement in grandfather's villa and with dealing with their children's complaints, leapt upon Caroline as someone who would (having brought her own children, aged two and five, to Kerala for two years) understand the difficulties of shifting from UK.

Wafa worried:

Now at last they are drinking some milk but still the elder two are not really eating properly.

Kerala is tough because the kids get spoilt; the small ones are always carried and now they have got used to it. I am alone with three under fives, how can I carry them all? You see women carrying even big kids, four or five years old here. I brought the pushchair [stroller] with me from UK but actually I cannot use it: the pavement is non-existent here and the road is too bumpy. I cannot even get out much anyway, and the kids are bored with being in the house so much. In the UK I can put them all in car seats and take them out. I go around everywhere there alone in the car, but here, you need somebody else in the car to hold the kids because there are no car seats.

Then, it is more complicated to get about—I cannot just go out alone! And I have nowhere to take them, no parks or playgrounds.

My daughter is getting bored. In the UK, she goes to nursery and plays, makes things. We go to parks, shopping centres [malls]. Here there are only her baby brothers, she is not seeing any other kids.

Also, women here are always taking the kids off me. The kids do not understand; they are accustomed to being just us in the house. Here, for forty days after the death there were so many people always in the house. The kids were totally upset at both the amount of people around and the way they would expect the kids to be picked up and taken around by them: for our kids, these people are strangers.

We have started to go out a bit now. But when we took my four-year-old daughter to weddings she was okay in an a/c hall but would always start to scream and cry as soon as we entered anybody's house. It was very embarrassing. Everyone would be asking what was going on. Eventually, I understood that for our kids the heat and crush of people here are problems. They are not used to it—they have never lived in it.

But in the same breath, Wafa also remembered the racism and alienation suffered in UK:

In the UK I put my daughter into nursery, but she is not speaking there, because she does not know English well. They make you feel something bad about all that.

At first, we rented a house, but felt the neighbours were so unfriendly. Now we have shifted to doctors' quarters, where there are other Indian doctors and their families. We feel better, as we have some company and the kids have friends to play with.

My husband wants to buy a house in the UK, but I have said to him, 'Please be careful, think about it.' I am afraid of ending up isolated and in an unfriendly area.

I don't wear salwar there, always jeans and shirt. Once I went to town in a salwar—people will stare at you. My daughter loves dressing up in churidars and ghagras but there, even for parties, we cannot use them. I let her wear them playing around the house or in the compound with other Indian kids, but would never use it outside.

We are a minority in UK, we don't fit in; but here our kids are not used to the place, and nor are we any more, and so we all have troubles adjusting. We would like to have the best from both places—it's impossible.

Wafa and her children stayed in the house until the end of Ramzan, to offer domestic support and company and then returned to UK, taking the newly widowed father-in-law with them. Wafa's husband had spent

four months—including all of Ramzan and the Eid al-Fitr festival—alone in the UK. To keep the Ramzan fast, he rose to prepare his own meal before dawn each day, before doing a full day's hospital duty.

Meanwhile, Koya's daughter, Shabira, whose furniture was in transit from the UK, on its way to the new house in Calicut, was having both adjustment problems and serious second thoughts. She confided to Caroline:

I'm worried about the kids. The schools where they have admission are the best in Calicut but they are still not good enough. We would have to go to Bangalore to get a decent standard school. We will not put them in boarding, this is not our style—we want the family to be together. Also, the style of teaching and discipline here is too different from UK. Our kids are not used to this style of working.

And we are having real trouble with the food. Even though I cook Indian food at home, they like to eat pizza, pasta, cheese, and we cannot get these things here. They are miserable here.

Even as Shabira and Mamood sat in their new and barely completed villa, surrounded by their newly purchased flat-screen TV/sound system and an array of beautiful furniture they had painfully purchased and brought down from Delhi ('cheaper and better than Kerala-made'), the couple were swiftly—and at the eleventh hour—reconsidering their decision to shift from UK back to Kerala.

Before leaving the UK, Mamood had received a phone call from a professor at one of UK's new medical schools, offering him a prestigious and interesting research job. This was an option they had not seriously considered at the time because they had been committed to leave UK for the kids' benefit. Now they were wondering if they had done right.

Shabira's father sadly remarked, 'This is a golden chance. Sometimes God puts a chance in your way and you must change all your plans and take it.' But still the family's original ambivalence about the UK remained: the racism, the alienness, and the perceived immorality of its culture.

As Wafa's small children are not yet of an age to provoke worries about dating or drinking, she is more inclined than her sister-in-law to emphasize the positive side of UK life, comparing her freedom of movement, wide availability of food items, and the range of educational and play facilities for children, all of which compare negatively with her current predicament in Calicut; she and her husband have no plans as yet to shift. But Mamood and Shabira, with pubescent children, feel

that they have hit the limit of their time in UK and are convinced that they need to get out, for the good of the children.

So it was that Mamood, still utterly disgusted and horrified with what he had seen of Kerala's medical practice, began to enquire about possibilities for hospital work and the availability of good schools in Dubai. Shabira told Caroline, 'Now we are all in utter confusion, and do not know what to do. Stay here? Go back to UK? Go to Dubai?' Four weeks later, the decision to go to Dubai was made. The children would enrol in the British school there and continue following the same syllabus they had started in UK.

Shabira told Caroline:

We have made our decision, but we are taking so much criticism! People do not understand. It is not for selfish reasons that we are abandoning our widowed father and not returning to Kerala, but for the sake of our children. Here there is no chance for their future. If we stay, we will ruin our kids' chances in life. This decision is not for my convenience, but all for the good of the kids.

In discussions, we all agreed that Dubai (cheap daily flights direct from Calicut) is nearer and more accessible from Kerala than is Delhi. Nobody, we reasoned, would hold someone guilty of 'abandoning' their Indian family if they took a transfer posting to Delhi, so why on earth should people be so mean about this decision? In any case, the family was decided upon Dubai and even grandfather Koya, determined to stick on living alone in Calicut, was pleased at the prospect of taking an occasional visiting visa and revisiting his old Gulf haunts. He even offered to mobilize his extensive contacts in Dubai to help his son-in-law to find a 'good position' in a Dubai hospital.

For Shabira's family, the Gulf represents an ideal compromise. It promises a good education for the children, a good working environment for their father, modern amenities like proper supermarkets, and easy mobility for their mother, and all within both Muslim and South Asian milieu and with a proximity to India which will permit frequent visits to and by the grandfather. Dubai is close by and, unlike UK (seen as too modern, decadent) or India (seen as not properly modern), it is appropriately and Islamically modern.¹⁷ When we went to visit Abdullah Koya in 2006 we found an empty house. A watchmen told us that he was 'out of station', in Dubai, where nowadays he spends half of the year staying with his daughter's family.

STRUGGLING TO GET TO THE PROMISED LAND:
A CHRISTIAN FAMILY BETWEEN KERALA, THE GULF, AND
'THE WEST'

Our second family consists of two brothers and two sisters and their respective spouses, Syrian Christians from a small landholding family in rural central Kerala, who have all managed to reach the Emirate of Ras al Kaima, in a chain started by the youngest sister, Baby. Baby went out in 1997 following her BSc nursing degree and marriage to a Gulf migrant (ruining the family finances in the process, through college fees and dowry). In this family, by contrast to the one discussed above, the women are not *housewives* but are all employed alongside their husbands, and the Gulf is seen as a stopping point—preferable to and superior to India in terms of lifestyle, opportunities for children and so on, but still less desirable as destination point than USA or Europe.

Youngest sibling Baby and husband George, the most skilled couple (nurse and computer engineer), are making applications for work permits and visas to the USA. Eldest brother and his wife are both working as technicians in a hospital. Younger brother Binu, a graduate in 'hospitality', working as a waiter in a luxury hotel, has married a co-worker who happens to be a European citizen, and will shift to Europe as soon as a residence permit is ready. The eldest sister, Beena, and her husband, Bobby, are both less qualified (matriculates) and are doing less well than Beena's other siblings and their husbands. They work respectively as shop assistant and casual (that is, often unemployed) driver, but Beena has many informal entrepreneurial projects on the side.

In heated discussions after Sunday service and lunch at one sister's house in Ras al Kaima, the relative merits of Europe and USA were debated. The professional couple had no doubts: USA was where the money was to be made and one's children assured the best future. Meanwhile, Natalia, Binu's East European bride, preferred Europe, but acknowledged that some of her townsfolk had been unfriendly on seeing her Indian husband when he visited with her. Binu thought that perhaps somewhere more ethnically mixed—maybe UK—would be a better bet for their plan to settle and open a Kerala restaurant. Beena by contrast is anxious that she and her husband have still to hope for some almost miraculous chance to get out of Asia, unlike her younger sister, whose access to the USA as a nurse is simply a question of time,

and whose children are still small. Sure, Beena's children have already benefited. After Beena spent two tough years alone in the Gulf, doing a variety of unskilled jobs, sending remittances back to her indebted parents and her unemployed husband, she was lucky enough (we would add, smart and resourceful enough) to be able to bring her husband and kids out, so that her son (eight) and daughter (twelve) now study at a good English-medium Indian school, in its standard way above anything that would have been available in the village back home. It is clear that unlike her younger siblings, whose children are still small, and for whom a fully *foreign* education is planned, Beena's daughter will at least complete Indian high school in the Gulf: but Beena's mind is already occupied with thoughts of college. While some good higher education institutions are opening in the Gulf, most Indians need to send their children back home at college level, and that means high fees and *donations* for admission. For Beena, it is also a step back: she has moved out of Kerala and has no desire to go back there or send her daughter. The problem then is to get settled in 'The West' before the children hit college age.

Beena occasionally also expresses anxiety about her widowed mother, now living alone in the old house in Kerala. 'I call her here when I can, but if she leaves, there will be nobody to watch the house and land, and our relatives will move in and take everything. Until I can get back and clear out that house, we dare not leave it empty.'

While the Gulf was appreciated for its ability to provide a modernized consumer lifestyle, its overall ambience leaves something to be desired. The women of this Christian family particularly bitterly resent Arab and Indian Muslim claims to superior morality. As Caroline was going around a Sharjah shopping mall with Beena, Beena pointed out the many women who wear *purdah* and the different styles: the long, black, loose *abaya* gown with headscarf (also popular among Kerala Muslims)¹⁸ and the complete burkha with *niqab* (face veil, popular among Indian Hyderabadis in the UAE). 'See these women?' she snorted, 'they have the perfect disguise. Nobody can be sure who they are under there. If we come and go, people will see us, but they can move around anywhere secretly. Lots of them have boyfriends. People criticize us [that is, Christian women] because we work, move around and talk to men, but what I do is *always out in the open*.'

We have often heard among Kerala Christians negative evaluations (such as 'backward', 'hypocritical') of Muslim and Hindu ideas about '*nanam*' (shame/ feminine honour) and '*manam*' (prestige) being

constituted through female seclusion.¹⁹ On the other hand, Hindus and Muslims alike accuse Christians of putting money above all and of caring nothing for reputation, by ‘sending their women to work as nurses to Arabs’, at times going as far as openly suggesting a direct relationship between nursing and prostitution.²⁰ Muslim and Hindu communities generally prefer—outside of the highest business and professional classes—to leave wives and children behind in favour of single male migration. When these men take their wives, the womenfolk rarely take on paid employment.²¹ Christian women answer criticisms of their activities in public spheres with assertions that their purity is in the heart and mind and therefore more authentic; they claim that though they may ‘speak with a hundred men’ they will not flirt or think improperly of them. Aspirations to shift residence to Europe or USA are partly, for Christian women, aspirations to escape the judgemental attitudes towards working women common among fellow Malayalis.²²

Hindus often imagine that Christians receive better treatment in the Gulf than they do: ‘They call us infidels, but you people are given some respect as people of the book,’ they complain.²³ Yet any affinity between different monotheisms seems to be overruled among Kerala Christians by their own self-image as Kerala’s most progressive and *modern* community (in realms of education, employment, consumption, etc.) and Muslims as its least. While Arabs are often felt to be decent people and more sophisticated than Indians in some aspects of their lifestyle, Christians tend to express a lack of fit between their values and the pervasive Islamic patterns of lifestyle in the Gulf. We have heard many tales of pork-eating and alcohol-drinking parties, and complaints about the hardships of life in Saudi, where faith cannot be practised and where the parties are necessarily clandestine and subject to police raids. The thousands of Malayali Christians living in Sharjah who flock weekly across the border to Dubai to attend church services, and the Christians of Ras al Kaima who wondered if they dare put out their traditional illuminated Indian Christmas stars, certainly also had some grouses. Liberal Dubai is of course a preferred place, but still not ideal, and is out of reach to many working-class and lower middle-class migrants.

Malayali Christians express an alienation from ‘Muslim’ and ‘Arab’ cultures and a strong affinity with European Christians, an affinity which—as we have explored elsewhere—goes far beyond co-religionism and into a sense of shared substantial ethnic identity, an expectation that things European will not be alien.²⁴ Lionel Caplan, writing about

Anglo-Indians, notes: 'Moreover, as native English-speakers, Christians, and carriers of what they regard as a European outlook and way of life, they consider themselves infinitely better qualified, culturally, than the other communities of South Asians who have found their way to the West.'²⁵

While Malayali Christians are secure in their Malayali Indian identities, with no pretence to 'Anglo' status, Caplan's arguments about 'cultural fit' can be extended to them. One Catholic remarked that in many Kerala Christian houses you cannot say a word against the USA, even during the recent war, since the USA is looked upon so favourably:²⁶ a place where so many Malayali Christians have gone; a country with an avowedly Christian culture and many practising Christians (unlike Europe, tinged with secularism and Marxism); a place where cost of living is low but the standard is high, where business can be done easily and with little interference or constraint. For Christians, the USA has the tinge of the promised land to it, and the Gulf is a clear second-best or stepping stone.

OF MIGRATION AND WOMEN

We turn now to the question of what we find specific to women Malayali migrants, compared with our earlier work focused around men.²⁷ Women's concerns may differ from those of their menfolk, typically centring around their children's futures. Men and women alike participate in the long-term, future-oriented goal of familial *progress*. But within the typical domestic division of labour, men's primary concern is with income and provisioning the family, enabling a house to be built, and the man himself to consolidate a reputation as a good provider or even local big-man.²⁸ Migration has, in large swathes of Kerala, become part of male lifecycle and a means of achieving masculine status.²⁹ Kerala is famed (notorious) for its extremely low levels of female participation in its workforce, high education levels notwithstanding, while working women must carefully assuage (their own and others') anxieties about their fitness as wives and mothers.³⁰ In short, women's primary duty is to ensure the well-being of children. It is then not surprising to find that even professionally employed migrant women focus not on their own status and satisfaction but on the future reputations and status of their children.

In the Muslim family above, Wafa and Shabira take enjoyment from their surroundings wherever they find themselves. Certainly,

neither are self-effacing or abnegating women, yet both are running their lives and making future plans on a clear understanding that what is most important is the family and, within that, the children's future. Women have an especially strong future orientation and a willingness to overlook many hardships in order to furnish their kids with a *chance*: sacrifice and struggle now for the sake of an imagined future. Women are not speaking of themselves having a comfortable old age if their children do well: the future being planned for is not their own, but is child-focused. As the case studies above suggest, for women, husband's career prospects and aging parents' expectations of support are secondary to the imperative of maximizing children's life-chances. Indeed, there is a clear expectation in both families above that older generations must cede to younger and fit in with their needs. While fathers must balance their own career or lifestyle aspirations with consideration for their children, grandparents also have to make sacrifices. While emergency arrangements can be made (as when Wafa stayed back three months after her mother-in-law's funeral), these are strictly temporary. Aging and widowed parents (like Beena's widowed mother, guarding the family fields in Kerala on her own) are a source of anxiety and guilt, but women are generally not prepared to sacrifice their children's prospects by returning to Kerala: the hope is that elderly parents will visit or stay long-term with their migrant children.³¹ Until this is possible—and if it does not become possible at all—grandparents will stay alone in Kerala. Like Beena, who struck out alone for Ras al Kaima to pay off her younger sister's dowry, some working Christian women (notably nurses) might leave parents, children—and sometimes husbands—back home for a few years until visas and/or conditions of employment allow the family to be reunited.³²

We find then that migration for women is over-determined by woman's role in the family. But here we must point out that we cannot take for granted either what may be considered as 'family' or what a family is considered to need in order to be a 'good family'. For example, despite continual moral panic in Kerala about the plight of 'Gulf wives' left alone by their menfolk, and in striking contrast to the Mexican case described by Malkin,³³ where separation of wives from husbands or children from fathers is all seen as highly problematic, we find little anxiety among many families about separation.³⁴ The conjugal bond appears very secondary to the maternal bond, while children's well-being is configured through their relationships with female carers. While women who stay behind usually look forward to

their husband's weekly phone call, and speak with pleasure about seeing him, his absence appears as taken-for-granted normality. One woman, answering the question of how often her husband gets leave, replied, 'Two months every two years, so no problems, this is fine.'

When thinking then of women and family, we have to allow for many families where women play pivotal roles and where father is less involved, to the extent that his absence is not critical. Several wives who stay back have confided to Caroline that they find it difficult when their husbands come on biennial visits, as normal life and routines get disrupted. 'We actually hardly enjoy these holidays, it is no leisure for us,' is a typical comment. In one Calicut matrilineal joint family house,³⁵ a group of women between nineteen and seventy laughed and challenged Caroline, 'Well, so long as you have a husband's money, what else do you need? Tell us, do you really need a man for anything else?' The practical and emotional support of sisters, mothers and so on is crucial for wives who stayed behind, enabling them to overcome loneliness and manage added responsibilities such as dealing with banking or children's schooling.³⁶

While education is the main component of maternal concern, moral dimensions also receive strong consideration; this is an often expressed motivation for women and children to stay behind and becomes a preoccupation for those families who migrate together.³⁷

Something also suffered by migrants, but especially by women—who by their very escape from home-town social surveillance may be assumed to be under suspicion—is the *newsflash*, reports of one's activities sent back by jealous or gossiping co-nationals. During the two years she was working alone in Ras al Kaima, Beena avoided all Malayali social events and the only news to reach her village was that she had an office job. In fact, she was working in a beauty parlour, but did not want this *newsflash* to reach home, where this activity is often viewed negatively. We have often heard that when a Saudi illicit prayer/puja meeting or drinks party is raided, it is one's own jealous Malayali neighbours who will have informed. Complaints about intra-community jealousy and competitiveness are especially marked among Hindus, who admire what they see as better cooperation and sense of solidarity among Muslim migrants, even as they criticize and express fear about it. Still, like their menfolk, women seem determined to maintain optimism about improvement through migration.

The 'Homeland' lifestyle is perceived as conservative and restricted in contrast to life in 'The West'. Social conservatism is evaluated as

irritating but morally necessary among Muslims, and as irritating and sometimes irrational, unnecessary, among Christians. Women like Beena and Bessy (whom we shall discuss below) are looking beyond the Gulf, for ways of having less restrictions upon them and for a place where their own lack of conformity to Hindu or Muslim ideas about female *nanam* will not be harshly censured; women like Shabira and Wafa are enjoying aspects of the less restricted life they lead in UK, such as the freedom to get in the car and go to the mall alone, but are terribly afraid of the consequences of this freedom if it is passed on to their own daughters. They seem to feel that the freedoms of life outside Kerala can and should only be enjoyed by adults who have already passed through and internalized Kerala's strict standards of public decency and conservatism. The Gulf seems to offer them an ideal blend of social conservatism with world-class amenities.

The particularities of women's own community identity also strongly affect the ways in which they themselves are affected by migration. For Beena and her sister, moving out of Kerala and into a space where more autonomy and free movement is possible is a positive experience. Yet the Gulf offers them only partial satisfaction, because their overall ambience in Ras al Kaima—a relatively rural and underdeveloped emirate, where they live in an Indian working-class area—is shaped by their Malayali and Arab neighbours and is experienced as conservative and ruled by hypocritical norms of *nanam* which impede one's efforts to get on in life. By contrast, Bessy, a professional Malayali Protestant Christian woman we know, who lives in an apartment block in a far more glamorous Sharjah suburb, still mainly among Indians and Arabs, but in clear sight of the ex-pat European villas, feels less constrained. While Beena wears only *salwar-kameez*, subject to the gaze of her Malayali neighbours, Bessy wears Indian clothes only on trips to Kerala, preferring working woman's uniform of shirt and pants in Dubai. Clothes are just one index of a variable gap between a female migrant's life and that of other locals. Sometimes, the lifestyles of other migrants justify a Malayali woman's choices. Christian Malayali migrant women may find other ex-pat cultures available in the Gulf more hospitable than either local Arab or 'own' Indian, among the Gulf culture mosaic. Through workplaces or mixed apartment blocks, women may come into contact with Europeans, Filipinos, North Americans, Egyptians and so on. While social contact with Europeans and Arabs is generally limited to the workplace, more social interaction with other migrants, such as Filipinos, sometimes takes place outside.

In any case, any group, however remote, can offer aspirational models. Lower-middle-class Christian women may use migration as a chance to escape obligations of family duty and conventional female respectability back home and, resisting calls to return, plan instead a larger escape to the USA and a newly configured 'Western style' family life.³⁸ Exposure to the practices of non-Indian nationals may bolster these women's confidence in their decisions and assertions.

For Muslims, the UK seems to be a space which offers advantages in terms of material comforts and opportunities for one's children; these may be appreciated in the early stages of migration but overruled as one's children approach maturity by the UK's perceived nature as a place of immorality. The suffering of minority status is, for Muslims, exacerbated by an intensified post-9/11 Islamophobia in what is perceived by them to be *at once* an over secular (atheistic and multicultural) and simultaneously Christian culture (long school holidays at Easter; large-scale almost unavoidable Christmas celebrations).

'The West's' racism and perceived cultural degeneracy are the most powerful motivations which drive our Muslim informants to consider leaving, educational and career prospects notwithstanding. In Kerala, Filippo has met male migrants on leave from UK who have immediately introduced themselves to him saying, 'I am a Muslim, but not a terrorist,' or 'I am a Muslim but do not sympathize with Al Qaeda.' Such remarks are a depressing sign of how the racist link between 'Muslim' and 'terrorist' has been drawn in the USA/UK public culture, and how much Muslims feel under pressure to clarify their distance from such activities. Racism is a major item in both Christian and Muslim experiences of Europe but is not anticipated before the fact. Wafa and Shabira have felt under threat in UK, while Natalia hopes that her husband would be safe there. Again, racism is not anticipated by migrants going to the Gulf, but it is, of course, experienced upon arrival. Saudi and Kuwait are singled out by many as especially difficult countries.³⁹

BIFOCALITY, HYBRIDITY, TRANSNATIONALISM?

WOMEN'S IDENTITIES

For women, staying back in Kerala as a 'migrant wife' is not necessarily experienced as hardship. Temporary family separations are not necessarily evaluated as problematic. Shifts of place and routine are not expected to provoke pathology. An aspect of Kerala migrant family life which we highlight, in contrast to our own experience, is lack of

guilt or anxiety about the effects of movement per se on children. In the UK, very strong normative discourses exist about the need of children for stability, continuity, and 'routine'. Any shift from predictable routine or the habitual environment—even a pleasurable holiday or a trip to visit grandparents—is assumed to be a potential source of stress and harm. Reactions to our plan to take our two small children (aged two and five) to India for two years included many negative evaluations and a few sympathetic commiserations on how the kids would adapt; even those who viewed the experience as likely to be positive assumed that some problems would result. We have seen that Malayali migrants not only routinely move children back and forth between places and willingly undertake major shifts of residence, but that migrants also involve children, on periodic visits 'back home', in a whirlwind of visits and tours, in which hardly any day will be like another. Neither do children appear to be permanently adversely affected by all this, nor do families expect them to be. While mothers fret over the unavailability of food items or the heat, they expect children to 'adjust' within weeks; adults admit to wanting the best of both worlds and to being committed to both, but do not expect any psychological trauma to result from this multifocality. The idea that people are and should be flexible and adaptable is part of a generalized early adjustment to Malayali family life and styles of sociability, and it later serves migrants well.

Movement out of Kerala is for women migrants often characterized as broadening their own possibilities of autonomous movement, enhancing the life-chances of children, and increasing the range of domestic consumption, notably in offering access to a greater range of food items for the family.⁴⁰ This gives it a positive valence. On the other hand, negativity is expressed most strongly around issues of feeling 'different' and possibly under threat in the new environment.

Other negative factors specific to and often mentioned by women may include lack of family and domestic support: Indian middle-class women are not generally used to the level of domestic labour and organization required in running a nuclear household alone. One UK Malayali housewife told Caroline: 'In India, the servant prepares all the food and hands it to me; I only have to cook it. In UK, I cook only once every two days, and the rest of the time we manage with fruit and leftovers. I cannot manage to clean, cook, and look after the children.'

Yet, even when families are not split, or wives do not suffer the left-behind 'Gulf wife' syndrome,⁴¹ or when factors such as separation or

high domestic workload are felt to be manageable, migration remains an ambivalent experience.⁴² But we want now to suggest that ambivalence about the homeland is widespread and might come even before migration; and, moreover, that there is a continuity in people's experience of ambivalence about places. With migration, the range of places with which one is familiar expands, but can we argue that this expansion of one's world beyond a national border necessarily makes a qualitative difference? The Malappuram villager may dream of Calicut or Ernakulam city; a Calicut town resident may dream of the big cities of Hyderabad or Bangalore; villager and town dweller alike may dream of the Gulf. Dubai, London, and so on form part of Malayalis' mental landscape of possible places, a landscape in which Sharjah is undoubtedly more familiar than Surat, and in which a national boundary is a matter of formal structure (visas, residency regulations) rather than cultural difference.

And again, feelings of strangeness or alienness experienced by migrants are not necessarily new. Christians and Muslims are feeling increasingly under pressure in India, liable to be labelled as alien, their religious practices no longer authentically Indian but 'foreign'. India is increasingly an ambivalent place for minorities, living under a steady Hinduization of public culture.⁴³ In 2003, Kerala's chief minister—himself a Christian—publicly reproached Muslim and Christian Gulf migrants for their supposedly 'aggressive practices' in business, education, and housing, which allegedly marginalize and alienate the 'majority community', Hindus. The increasing Hinduization of hitherto neutral public spaces (and even commercial space, in the case of attempts to ban beef sales) contributes to growing unease. The homeland simultaneously beckons and repels.

Returning to the question of transnationalism, we find that 'home' and 'away' are both highly internally differentiated and actually entangled.⁴⁴ The most commonly used Malayali concept for own place—*nadu*—is very narrow, and usually signifies a birthplace and site of ancestral home or house where one's parents live.⁴⁵ *Nadu*, to which sentiment and belonging attach, might not evoke India or even wider Kerala. For the most part, we find that migrants are international, cosmopolitan, and yet particularist and highly specific in orientation—Calicut and Muscat, Thiruvalla and New Jersey.⁴⁶ The enhanced localism and particularism of some high-migration communities is actually built upon a sense of their own cosmopolitanism, as embedded in long-term exchanges of ideas, goods, and people.⁴⁷

Foren, like *nadu*, is similarly differentiated. Thinking about ‘the West’, Beena’s family argue over the relative merits of USA, UK, and Germany, and understand that issues such as morality, religiosity or racism may not necessarily be the same across all three places. Once migrants have experience of a place, they refine their categories even further. Gulf returnees compare Kuwait (‘strong currency, but small country’, ‘the people there treat Indians so badly’); Saudi (‘marvellous place, it is really the heart of Islam, everything is done properly’, ‘it’s a horrible place, and the Saudis are all corrupt’); Oman (‘it’s a quiet backwater, you don’t make so much money, but life there is relaxed’, ‘the Arabs there are very friendly and nice, good, honest people’); and Dubai (‘It is so clean, so developed’, ‘you can buy anything there, the shops are out of this world’, ‘Dubai is just about money—no culture’) and so on. All these nuances between and within places are slipped over in discourse, enabling migrants to present an idealized, essentialized *topos* and to construct a rhetorical difference triangle, in which an imagined ‘home’ of Kerala is pitted against the (equally imagined) ‘Gulf’ and the ‘West’.

Both image and actuality of the receiving country become important. Strongly articulating with this is the factor of migrants’ own community: the USA may be imagined favourably among south Kerala Christians as promising the epitome of desirable modernity and consumer culture within a Christian way of life, with Saudi Arabia being felt to be highly undesirable, as a restrictive and hostile land; while for Calicut Muslims, ‘America’ may be feared as both fount of immorality and of global anti-Islamic influences, while Saudi Arabia may be spoken of with great approval, as a welcoming land where Muslims are accorded respect and escape the marginalized and minority status suffered within India, while also being highly sentimentalized as centre of Islam’s holiest shrine, Mecca. The UK is marked by Muslims as both decadent—too westernized and too modernized—and as markedly Christian. While Christians clearly nuance ‘The West’, we find that for Muslims, the UK is hardly differentiated from the USA, especially since the Iraqi war brought USA and Britain together against other European countries: Britain is a satellite of the US. West Asia is clearly marked by all as an Islamic space, a *topos* particularly comfortable for and favourable to Muslims. The Gulf may offer opportunities for professional and personal development or freedom unavailable to most women back in Kerala, and contact with international ‘ex-pat’ cultural practice through the workplace (and, for migrant’s children, sometimes through school) may be more significant

than contact with local Arab culture or with a locally recreated Malayali culture. But still the Gulf states are—for Christians—a second-best option: a stop-off or starting point on the way to Europe or UK for the lucky professionals, and a second-best compensation prize for the unlucky ones who cannot continue their trajectory.⁴⁸

At the same time, in practice, places are actually tightly linked and resist clear lines drawn between what is *nadan* and what is *foren*. The interpenetration and co-presence of the local and the foreign—in the case of Calicut and the Gulf, for example, something which is extremely intense—needs to be taken properly into account: The Gulf is hardly alien at all in Kerala.⁴⁹ While many Malayalis in the Gulf have reconstituted neighbourhoods, or at least virtual ones via the net, the zone's geographical nearness and cultural affinities for Muslims make this all very different from little Italies in USA. Following the logic of Shabira and Mamood, Bangalore is as far away from Calicut and as foreign as Dubai, so one may as well go to Dubai and have the advantages there.

We are suggesting, then, that migrants generally appear to conform more to Waldinger and Fitzgerald's long-distance particularism⁵⁰ than to Pries's transnationalism,⁵¹ and also that in the case of certain destinations, the Gulf being our example, the double particularism is not even necessarily long-distance. It is beyond doubt that Delhi is more alien to a Malayali than is Dubai and we want to work with the idea that the Gulf is actually part of Kerala, not necessarily a separate *nadu*.

Our reading of ethnographic explorations of migrants' shifts in identity and attempts to manage their lives across national boundaries confirms the importance of thinking about the nature of the receiving state, while hinting at an inherent ambivalence in the migrant's view of the world: cultural orientation not simply doubled, as in 'bifocality',⁵² but rendered unstable and given enhanced flexibility, shaken by the experience and knowledge of more than one cultural locus. Yet no shared 'third space' emerges, as the outcome of migration's unsettling of the self again depends upon moral and ontological evaluations of the experience: one migrant's freedom from the shackles of custom is another's bleak alienation. And however we name this proliferation of the frames of reference to places, it does not suggest bifocality, as two clearly different ways of being or an easy switching between cultural styles. Rather, we find that for migrants the one place is always present—as a ghostly desirable or undesirable—in the other, evoked through tropes such as talk of food. Migrant women indulge in Gulf or UK

nostalgia when on family trips to Kerala; they are always aware of and living mentally in both places.⁵³

We are also suggesting that, while it may be incorrect to label it as transnationalism, following Waldinger and Fitzgerald's critique,⁵⁴ exposure to migration does seem to lead women to grow more ambivalent about their home culture, to move beyond it. Here they do not move into a space with two competing different frames—bifocality—but, rather, into a space of permanent ambivalence. Wherever they are, women are always expressing how good it would be to be able to have both worlds; they can perceive the advantages and disadvantages of both places, with no 'third space' resolution. There is an underlying acknowledgement among most migrants that once a person has left Kerala and seen another reality, no one place will ever be perfect. Mamood and Shabira are currently trying to imagine the Gulf as a good in-between place which will resolve ambivalence, offer them what they want and like from both sides of their UK–Kerala long-distance particularism; other migrant accounts suggest that things will not turn out to be so simple.

Religion is something important to women in helping them deal with the hardships of migration; it is felt to shape cultural styles across places, and offers a stable framework which connects the different parts of one's life. All the women we have met rely heavily upon a benevolent God who will eventually help them get good opportunities for their children and make the right decisions. Religion, following the argument of Waldinger and Fitzgerald, *does* appear to bring about a sense of true transnationalism rather than internationalism.⁵⁵ (What we are unsure about is why they limit this 'true' transnationalism to Islamic modernity and do not include Christian charismatic orientations.) There is a certainly a feeling among the migrants we know that there is something like a broader 'Muslim culture' and equally a 'Christian culture'; the rhetorical difference triangle depends heavily upon the idea of the 'Gulf' as a Muslim topos and 'the West' as Christian. Muslims see Islamic modernity as correct, a good relationship to modernity; depending upon migrants' particular orientation, particular Gulf states are held to embody this perfection. Christians are more likely to see Gulf modernity as a distortion from what they imagine as the truly modern, missing as it does essential (for our respondents) aspects such as women's employment, dietary freedom, and renunciation of ideas about purity and pollution.

CONCLUSIONS: MIGRATION AND CHANGE?

In the rush to search for signs of change, and to make migration itself a trope of change, modernity or whatever,⁵⁶ we are in danger of overlooking continuities.⁵⁷ Beena appears to us in Ras al Kaima as substantially similar to the person she was in Kerala. She was always a go-getting, hard-working woman scornful of the demands of female *nanam* and the gender prejudices which would make claims like 'women should not drive'. What has changed for her, post-Gulf, is the degree to which she is anomalous or 'fits' into a cultural situation. In her natal south Kerala village, she was odd and constantly under criticism: the first to wear *salwar-kameez* instead of the *pavada* (maxi skirt/blouse); the first to ride a motor scooter; first to play sport. Beena has always made and blithely ignored scandal. In the Gulf, she is surrounded by other women like herself: women who, alone, have left their natal home; who are working women, not housewives; women who allow their children to have KFC chicken in a mall as a treat rather than always insisting upon home-made food. In the UK she would be considered, if anything, conservative by local cultural standards, for characteristics such as her deep religious piety and her willingness to sacrifice all for her family. Her arranged marriage—which took place amid floods of genuinely anguished tears when her parents refused to consider her requests for a different groom—is an example of this sacrificial streak; her initial trip to Ras al Kaima alone, leaving her infant children (then one and five years old) under grandmother's care, so that the debts incurred for her younger sister's dowry and nursing course fees could be paid, is another. Always under suspicion of being a bad woman in her village, she would be considered an almost impossibly good woman in the UK, her occasional indulgence of a small glass of liquor almost abstinent moderation, not the scandalous vice it becomes in Kerala or the Gulf, among Malayalis and Arabs. Nowadays she is moving away from low-paid employment to set herself as a 'broker', using her extensive connections and social skills to mediate between employers and prospective employees, to resolve everyday predicaments of fellow Malayali migrants or to generally secure 'deals' between buyers and sellers of building-construction materials. We note that back in her natal village her father—a communist activist and panchayat member—made a living and established himself as a big-man in exactly the same way. In 2006, seeing us laughing when we found her brokering a deal by talking simultaneously on two

mobile phones, she exclaimed: 'What do you expect? I'm Solomon's daughter, never forget that!'

Shabira and Wafa are also, arguably, not terribly changed by their migratory experiences. Both grew up in educated Kerala middle-class families with plenty of links to the Gulf and metropolises, already part of Kerala's most sophisticated class. Shabira grew up, following her father's career, between Calicut (residence), Bangalore, and the Gulf (on vacation visits). Her mother embodied Kerala's modern, bourgeois ideal of wifely dedication to the home and children's education.⁵⁸ Wafa grew up in Ernakulam: she would find her husband's home town Calicut, with its conservatism, restrictive whether she were coming from UK or Ernakulam. It is not then simply her exposure to UK which makes her perceive Calicut as conservative and lacking in amenities. She is used to Ernakulam's shops, parks, day nurseries, and imported food items, and she grew up in an atmosphere where women did not always veil and so on.

We find among migrants an ambivalence and ambiguity in person. But this is not doubling, nor is it hybridity, nor is it a third space. One can argue that, empirically, migrants may already have known more than one social scene: one was never stable initially, anyway, but moved between many roles and arenas. This is especially true of married women. Moreover, migrant ambivalence about home is in a continuum with pre-existing ambivalence, something one need not be a migrant to experience: Muslims and Christians especially are increasingly being made to experience ambivalence about 'home', as 'home' becomes ever more troped as a Hindu nadu.⁵⁹ And we have argued for the Malayali's widespread dissatisfaction with and ambivalence about the nadu. Migration then becomes simply another layer of one's personal complexity. In other words, everyday life is inevitably experienced through ambivalence and fragmentation, albeit an *illusion* of at least partial coherence might be generated through engagement with specific projects of self-making, such as future-oriented focus on children.

This, finally, brings us full circle to our most obvious point about women migrants in their specificity in contrast to men: that their major concern is with their children.⁶⁰ In conversations with women, and in observing family decisions about migration, it seems to us that some sort of folk notion of habitus is at play here.⁶¹ Malayali migrants feel that children's early years are indeed all-important, and are concerned to maximize material and educational opportunities for their children. But they are also keenly interested in the socio-cultural environment

and are anxious in their decisions about migration to harmonize this with their own values. While children are small, material benefit and the needs of other family members (for example, father's career) may take precedence, but after the ages of seven to nine anxieties about children begin to set in seriously. And at the same time, there seems to be a clear sense that it is too late to change children and reclaim them from any early alien influences by the time they are thirteen to fifteen years old.

But the overwhelming underlying project of all migrant families is social mobility, provision of better life-chances for children. In the rhetorical difference triangle which Malayalis construct, Kerala fails to match up to desired standards of material comfort, educational and health care, occupational opportunities and so on. Return to Kerala, for those who have shifted the entire family, comes to seem like failure, a backwards move. It is within this complex frame of material-moral understanding that Christian mothers in the Gulf fret about how to get their children away to a perceived 'Christian' country, while Muslim mothers plump for the Gulf as a site of moral and Islamic modernity. Women eventually develop a pragmatic realism which argues that one chooses to prioritize certain aspects of one's life and chooses the place which best enhances those aspects—typically the children's education; all the rest is then about sacrifice and ambivalence.

NOTES

- † Between 1989–20002 we undertook several periods of fieldwork in a Hindu-dominated rural area of South Kerala; from 2002 to date we have been conducting fieldwork in a Muslim majority area of urban North Kerala. We have also undertaken several short stints of fieldwork in various Gulf sites (UAE, Kuwait, Oman). We thank Adam Chau, Ralph Grillo, Katy Gardner, Susan Koshy, Atreyee Sen, and the participants at the conference on 'Transnational Migration: Foreign Labour and its Impact in the Gulf' (Bellagio, June 2005) for their comments. Research for this paper was made possible by generous grants from Economic and Social Research Council (UK); the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK); the Wenner-Gren Foundation; and the Nuffield Foundation.
1. For example, Zachariah et al, *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala*; cf. Addleton, *Undermining the Centre*; Amjad, *To the Gulf and Back*; Appleyard, *Emigration Dynamics*; Brochmann, *Middle East Avenue*; Eelens et al, *Labour Migration to the Middle East*.

2. For Kerala, see Gulati, *Absence of Their Men*; Kurien, *Kaleidoscope Ethnicity*; Osellas, 'From Transience to Immanence', 'Migration, Money, and Masculinity', *Social Mobility in Kerala*, and 'I am Gulf!'; Percot, 'Indian Nurses in the Gulf'; see also Gardner, *Global Migrants, Local Lives* (Bangladesh); Lefebvre, *Kinship, Honour and Money* (Pakistan); Hansen, 'Bridging the Gulf' (Mumbai); and Gamburd, *Kitchen Spoon's Handle* (Sri Lanka).
3. See Gulati, 'Male Migration to the Middle East'; and Zachariah et al, *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala*. Around 50% of all the Gulf region's migrants are drawn from Kerala; there are around 2 million Malayali migrants, overwhelmingly in the Gulf. See Zachariah et al *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala*; and Prakash, *Kerala's Economy: Performance, Problems, Prospects*.
4. See Marriott, 'Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism' and 'Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology'; Daniel, *Fluid Signs*; and Osellas, 'Quelques Points de Vue sur l'Inné et l'Acquis au Kerala, Inde du Sud'.
5. Pries, 'Disruption of Social and Geographic Space'; and Glick Schiller, 'From Immigrant to Transmigrant',
6. In his review of literature, Vertovec notes that 'the transnational lens on migrant activities allows social scientists to view the ways some significant things are changing... Migrants now maintain such connections technologically, legally and financially more intensely than ever before possible.' 'Trends and Impacts of Migrant Transnationalism', p. 971.
7. 'Making Sense of Settlement'.
8. Compare Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, with Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.
9. 'Immigrant "Transnationalism" Reconsidered'.
10. Between 1989 and 2002 we undertook several periods of fieldwork in a Hindu-dominated rural area of south Kerala. From 2002 to date we have shifted our fieldwork focus to a Muslim-majority area of urban north Kerala. We have also undertaken several short stints of fieldwork in various Gulf sites (UAE, Kuwait, and Oman).
11. Osellas, 'In and out of the Indian Ocean'.
12. Gardner and Osella, 'Introduction', p. xxiii.
13. *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.
14. Following the example of Tsing, 'Global Situation' and *Frictions*.
15. Zachariah et al, *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala*, p. 313.
16. The triangle consists of the most salient destinations. While others—Malaysia, Australia—exists, the Gulf accounts for 95 per cent of Kerala's emigration, while the USA (2.2 per cent) holds a special place in cultural imaginations. These statistics are from Zachariah et al, *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala*, p. 129.

17. Osellas, 'I am Gulf!'
18. Osellas, 'Muslim Style in South India'.
19. And we ourselves have often witnessed (for example, alcohol drinking parties, adulterous or homosexual affairs, men's visits to sex workers and so on) how the strict codes of public morality and honour which support claims to prestige are made workable both in India and in the Gulf through observance of the golden rule that discretion and secrecy be carefully maintained.
20. Percot, 'Indian Nurses in the Gulf'; and George, *When Women Come First*, p. 45ff.
21. See detailed breakdowns of statistics in Zachariah et al, *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala*, p. 309ff. The Christian community contributes around 43 per cent of female emigrants, the highest proportion, while Muslim women make the lowest proportion, just 4 per cent (p. 314).
22. Described in George, *When Women Come First*; Osellas, *Men and Masculinities in South India*.
23. Actually, things are considerably more complex (Osellas, 'I am Gulf!')
24. Osellas, 'Quelques Points de Vue sur l'Inné et l'Acquis au Kerala, Inde du Sud'.
25. Caplan, 'Colonial and Contemporary Transnationalisms'.
26. Malayali pentecostalist/evangelical Christians talked of the two Gulf wars as a sign of the eventual showdown between good (the American-led Christian West) and evil (Arab and Middle-Eastern Muslims).
27. See Osellas, 'From Transience to Immanence', 'Migration, Money, and Masculinity', 'I am Gulf!' and 'Once Upon a Time in the West?'
28. Osellas, 'From Transience to Immanence', 'Phoney Traditionalists, Upstart Newcomers', and *Men and Masculinities in South India*.
29. Osellas, 'Migration, Money and Masculinity in Kerala'.
30. Osellas, *Social Mobility in Kerala*, p. 41ff; Devika, 'Domesticating Malayalees' and *En-gendering Individuals*; and Osellas, *Men and Masculinities in South India*.
31. In this paper, we focus on women in migrant families; there are many Kerala stay-behind wives looking after aging parents.
32. See Percot, 'Indian Nurses in the Gulf'; George, *When Women Come First*; Kurien, *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity*. For comparative material on Sri Lankan housemaids in the Gulf, c.f. Gamburd, *Kitchen Spoon's Handle*.
33. 'Gender, Status and Modernity in a Transnational Migrant Circuit'.
34. Zachariah et al, *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala*, p. 321ff give special attention to what they label as Gulf Wives (GW), and conducted a survey to determine social impacts of separation: negative (for example, loneliness) and positive (financial gain) factors are delineated.

- When asked whether they would prefer their husband to leave the Gulf and return to Kerala, the split was 60 per cent affirmative and 40 per cent negative.
35. Many of northern Kerala's Muslim families live in undivided matrilineal properties (Osellas, 'I am Gulf!').
 36. While the study of Zachariah et al does not differentiate but aggregates one category, 'Gulf Wives' (GW), in their study *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala*, we are quite certain that marked differences appear in attitudinal data between women living in different types of household.
 37. Of course, it can also act as face-saving justification for manual labouring rural Hindu men who are anyway denied family visas.
 38. See also Percot, 'Indian Nurses in the Gulf'.
 39. Dubai, because of its liberal focus on moneymaking, and Sharjah, because of its high concentration of Indians, provoke more favourable reports.
 40. Osellas, 'I am Gulf!'; c.f. Gamburd, *Kitchen Spoon's Handle*; and Kabeer, *Power to Choose*.
 41. Zachariah et al, *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala*, p. 323.
 42. As discussed in Gardner and Osella, *Migration, Modernity and Social Transformation in South Asia*; and Osellas, 'I am Gulf!'
 43. Discussed in Osellas, 'Muslim Style in South India', and Osellas, 'In and out of the Indian Ocean'.
 44. As we might expect, see e.g., Gardner, *Global Migrants, Local Lives*.
 45. Compare with *sthalam*, a more loosely defined 'place', which could be India, Kerala or the nadu; and '*rajyam*', the larger political unit of 'country', or place of which one is a citizen.
 46. The nature of migrant websites confirms this. See e.g., Thekkepuram. ourfamily.com which brings together migrants from a *particular* neighbourhood of one Kerala town, resident in *specific* Gulf Emirates.
 47. An argument made in Osellas, 'I am Gulf!'
 48. Percot, 'Indian Nurses in the Gulf'.
 49. Osellas, 'I am Gulf!'
 50. 'Immigrant "Transnationalism" Reconsidered'.
 51. 'Disruption of Social and Geographical Space'.
 52. Vertovec, 'Trends and Impacts', p. 18ff.
 53. Salih, 'Shifting Meanings of "Home"'.
 54. Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 'Immigrant "Transnationalism" Reconsidered'.
 55. 'Immigrant "Transnationalism" Reconsidered'.
 56. See Vertovec, 'Trends and Impacts'.
 57. See also Gardner and Osella, 'Introduction'.
 58. Devika, *En-gendering Individuals*; and Osellas, *Men and Masculinities*.
 59. At the same time, members of low castes (OBCs and SCs/STs) might find it similarly problematic to participate in the Hindutva (Hindu

- nationalist) rhetoric of a unified Hindu community from which they are simultaneously marginalized by virtue of caste (Osellas, *Social Mobility in Kerala*).
60. We are not discounting here that women's best strategy of obtaining their own desires, where they are expected to be self-sacrificial, is to attribute their wishes to others or as being 'in the children's best interests'. At the same time, we do perceive a degree of displacement of self onto children among mothers and a genuine degree of self-sacrifice (Osellas, 'Mothers, Daughters and the Feminine Masquerade').
61. Following definitions given in Bourdieu, *Distinction*, and Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*.

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