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# “One More Dirham”: Migration, Emotional Politics and Religion in the Home Films of Kerala

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**Abstract.** *This article explores the Islamic home-film movement in Kerala, India, a video film movement by amateur filmmakers of the Muslim Community. These films circulate in VCD and DVD format in retail outlets in both Kerala and the Gulf Council Countries (GCC). These films are important for their supporting group, Jamaat-e-Islami, one of the most powerful Islamist groups in the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, as they try to gain hegemony among Kerala's Sunni Muslims through an alternative Islamic public culture. Home-films now circulate beyond their original audience of Muslim women in Kerala, among Keralite migrants in the Arab Gulf, who organize public screenings in social gatherings and labour camps. Indeed, the large-scale migration of labor to the GCC has led to a re-imagining of the moral geography of Kerala Muslim households to account for changing gender norms and family structures. The films, concerned with social reform among the Muslim Community of Kerala, also refract the experience of migration to the GCC, particularly in narrating an emotional landscape characterized by precarious conditions of labour, racialised hierarchy and the kafala (the specific employment system in many GCCs, that is a combination of a contract and patronage) through specific tropes of precarity and philosophy of risk in these films.*

As more and more countries turn to short term international migration for their labour shortage through a rolling stock of cheap international labour, the labour migration flows between South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal to the oil rich states of the Persian Gulf demands more scholarly attention. The petroleum-rich states of the Persian Gulf referred to as Gulf States have a long history of transnational migration, which intensified after the exponential growth of the petroleum industry since the 1970s.

This labour force has been central to the transformation of the Gulf States from semi-nomadic economies into technologically advanced states, through massive infrastructural reconstruction. Scholarship on this migration, now a substantial area of research, has mainly focused on the accumulation of capi-

tal, remittances to the country of origin, ethnic entrepreneurship, social capital and networks (Buckley 2011; Kurien 2002). While these approaches have yielded rich data regarding migration, they are not reflective enough of the complexity of social, cultural, political and psychological terrains of migration. Recent scholarship reveals a sense of fatigue with this saturation of over-deterministic economic theory so that they turn to other less explored areas of migration focusing on affective aspects, sexuality, emotional politics and culture (Ahmad 2009; Gallo 2015). We join this area of research by focusing on emotional aspects of migration through a set of films produced in the interstices of migration flows between the Gulf States and a major out-migration location, Kerala, the south-western most state in the Indian Union.

The focus of this paper is a set of narrative films produced in Kerala, mainly by the Muslim community in the northern districts of the state. Self-described as Islamic home films, the home film industry emerged in the course of the late 1990s, and flourished in the 2000s with about 200 productions in the last decade and it is both facilitated by and exists as an expression of Islamic political mobilization. Eagerly echoing the views and concerns of *Jamaat-e-Islami*, one of the most powerful Islamist groups in neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh, the home film movement has contributed significantly to the popularity of Muslim-oriented social themes, enabling the emergence of an alternative public culture in the Malabar region of Kerala, a Hindu-majority state in the Indian Union (Ahmad, I 2009)

The sweeping portrayal of Muslims as bound by religiosity and fundamentalism or as carriers of opulent and consumerist modernity or as black money launderers have increasingly populated mainstream Indian media discourses (Ahmad, I 2014). Home films attempt to provide an alternative set of correctives motivating Muslim households to discard customs and practices that are construed as 'un-Islamic' (Sreekumar and Menon 2013). The films infused with wit, irony, satire and moral judgments mimicking mainstream Indian films in structure and form, have become increasingly acceptable among both *Jamaat-e-Islami* supporters and a wider Muslim audience. The films take up new issues that require religious clarification in the wake of modernity and globalization such as use of new technologies, women's education, marriage and freedom, attitudes to wealth or negotiating norms for participating in public life in a society where Islam is a minority. Home films have gone to create a vast geography of circulation that extends from Muslim households in the four districts of Northern Kerala to public exhibitions in football grounds on giant screens to households and labour camps in the Gulf Council Countries region (GCC). The popularity of these films could also owe to the central theme of the reconstitution of a moral and ethical Muslim household against the impeding forces of globalization. Beginning in 2003, the home films have grown into a wide network of circulation in about four districts in Kerala, and six countries in the Middle East, with an average viewership of 500,000 people.

Of the 200 odd films in the genre, most of the home films engage with the pressures that migration to the Modern Gulf states brings about. The car-

tography of this engagement often includes places as diverse as the sweeping panoramas of Modern Gulf cities like Kuwait, Doha, Abu Dhabi and Dubai to the jagged alleys, gravelled roads and green fields of Southern Malabar. The emotional geography of this encompasses the fraught lives of the wives and women who are left behind to the loneliness and alienation of labour, hardships and insecurities of immigrant life. In ways that are not overtly critical, many of these films do touch upon the appalling labour conditions that exist in most of the Middle Eastern countries. These films address the migrant life as not just dominated by the paradigm of utilitarian economism and rational choice but as complex social beings and portray the affective terrain of the migrant life (Sreekumar and Menon 2013).

The principal burden of this paper is to explain the emotional geography of migration that emerges through these writings. In doing so, we aspire to claim a legitimate space for these amateur productions in the civil and political mediations in the society in which they emerge, in this case Kerala. Functioning outside the protocols of mainstream film production in the Indian sub-continent, these small budget video films work towards a deeper understanding of the migrant experience in the GCC. Formally, they negotiate the boundaries of mainstream popular film in the sub-continent, journalistic chronicles, travelogues and at times, city films.

In order to traverse the complex terrain that is called upon by the deep histories of migration from South Asia to the GCC and the visual and material aspects of video as a medium, we intend to undertake an analysis of the specific histories of migration, followed up by analysis of video films shot particularly in Middle Eastern cities like Doha, Muscat, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. In the context of Transnational Women's video movements, women's relationship with the medium of video has been analysed as an "organic relationship between the materiality of the medium and its expressive and political properties" (Marks 2003, 41). This argument extends to the political possibilities video held for a minority religious group that desired to articulate a new moral and ethical life for Muslims. Video's relative cheapness, portability, absence of crew, potential for wider distribution and its existence outside mainstream context of industrial production defined it as a medium most appropriate for such visual explorations. These mediations, outside the industrial mode of production and created through a style that is more determined and in turn limited by its small scale production methods and the accumulated labour of its producer are closer to what Hamid Naficy had described as an interstitial mode of production (Naficy 2001, 49). The defining characteristics of the migration to the Middle East as they emerge in these films are marked by a distinct sense of leading 'abject' emotional lives explored through tropes of nostalgia, precariousness and risk philosophy. Kristeva's (1982) understanding of the abject is as not only the 'cast away' but also one by which the individual senses the ultimate cut-off from the very awareness of self. Abjection is in fact, the deepest horror, physical, social or biological, which can infringe upon self. The theoretical term has been used to understand the trauma of

migration and social resistance of marginalized citizens (Tyler 2013). We can see that in the films that form part of the Home video movement, the extension of psycho-social impact of the migration to an alien Muslim locale and the cultural abjection of a community gets a rare archival treatment.

### **Migration Flows Between Kerala and the GCC**

The state of Kerala forged a somewhat singular development path through concerted popular mobilizations and public actions harking back to the nineteenth century, achieving significant success in reducing poverty and social inequalities. The case of Kerala emerged as an important example of how an economically poor region can, in fact, achieve living standards comparable to the levels of advanced industrial regions. It provided an instant illustration of a possible 'model' because it had overcome maladies of underdevelopment like hunger, malnutrition, high fertility and educational backwardness without traversing the arduous path of either militant social revolution or rapid industrialization with its mythical promises of 'trickled down' benefits. It appeared that all concerned had their own lessons to draw from the experience. Not surprisingly, both the World Bank and the radical left had hailed the state as a 'model,' and not without reason. Those who were voicing the need for an alternative path of sustainable development also pointed out certain specific features of the state's development trajectory that warranted a close look at resource use patterns underlying the model.

The dominance of Muslims among the emigrants is very conspicuous. A recent study has observed that the share of emigrants belonging to Islam has always been much higher than their share in total population. While Muslims constitute 26.5 percent of Kerala's population the share of emigrants from the community amounts to 44.3 percent (Zachariah and Rajan 2012, 5). It is pointed out that "(C)orresponding to 100 households, there are 59.1 emigrants in Muslim households, but only 18.1 emigrants in Hindu households and 29.0 emigrants in Christian households" (ibid, 6). The study also notes that among Muslims, 53.3 percent of the households had at least one emigrant or returned emigrant while the comparative figures for Hindus and Christians are 19.6 percent and 21.3 percent respectively (ibid). There is also an overwhelming concentration of males among the international migrants from Kerala to GCCs. Most recent figures of migration statistics are illuminating in this respect. Out of the 668, 876 international migrants from Kerala, 95.89 percent emigrated to GCCs and among them 94.8 percent were males (Khan 2014, 44). Disaggregated data for the 14 administrative districts in Kerala shows that the Muslim-dominated Malappuram district sends the largest contingent of migrants, particularly to GCCs and correspondingly receives the highest amount of remittances (Oommen 2016). The impact of male migration to GCCs on the women in Kerala has been the subject of an early study by Gulati (1993). Gulati (ibid) closely examined the changing status of the wife within the close family circles in the context of the prolonged absence of her husband providing a fresh perspective on its impact on the moral economy of

the Malayalee emigrant household structure.

But it may be noted here that these achievements were not based on any considerable expansion of the productive base. Industrial delay and agricultural stagnation began to set in, showing visible manifestations of an impending crisis in Kerala's development. However, arguably the precipitation of the crisis was averted by the large-scale emigration of mainly unemployed youths to Arabian Gulf countries and their remittances, beginning in the mid-1970s. From the mid-1970s the factor that had a visible effect on Kerala's economy had been the migration of skilled and unskilled labor to Persian Gulf countries and their remittances (Prakash 1998).

Although the impact of the migration of large numbers of skilled and semi-skilled workers to the Arabian Gulf countries may have cushioned the impact of a possible crisis, it certainly did affect the consumption patterns and attitudes of the general public (Zacharia, Kannan and Rajan 2002). Having made no visible impact on investment and employment creation in Kerala, the large amounts of remittance may have caused more damage to the long-term development of Kerala by creating a consumer society without a productive base. In Kerala, by the mid-1970s the middle class had gradually acquired the trappings of a consumer society thanks to the developmental project and the Gulf migrant remittances. The benefits of the Kerala model began to be concentrated around this new middle class. Organized groups, through intermediation of the state and the political society, were able to grab a sizable share of the new riches. But groups and communities that were marginalized from the mainstream, such as tribal people, fisher folk and a section of *Dalits* became the conspicuous 'outliers' of the developmental process (Parayil and Sreekumar 2003).

Scholarship on migration in the last decade identifies migration as the single most critical factor in contributing to poverty alleviation and reduction in unemployment in Kerala (Zachariah and Rajan 2012). According to Zachariah and Rajan the proportion of population below the poverty line has declined by 12 percent and the number of unemployed persons has come down by more than 30 percent consequent on worker's remittances. But at the same time they caution that Kerala is becoming overly dependent on migration for sustaining developmental activities. They point out that such dependence makes Kerala highly vulnerable to external shocks. Migration could stop abruptly as happened during the Iraq-Kuwait war and later the US-Iraq war experiences of 1990 or the recent crisis in the construction industry in United Arab Emirates (UAE).

A survey in early 2000 provided an estimate of the total stock of Indian emigrants in the Arab region in 2000 to be about 3.07 million. Of them, about 1 million are reported to be in UAE (Zachariah, Kannan and Rajan 2002). The total stock of Kerala emigrants in UAE was about 0.5 million in 2001. The paper argues that changes in the immigration policy of the UAE government, completion of major infrastructure projects and economic recession in the region have reduced substantially the demand for unskilled and

semi-skilled labourers in the UAE. Though UAE and other states stopped accepting visa applications for unskilled workers from South Asia, particularly, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in early 2000, the redesigning of cities and an emergent construction industry demanded new unskilled and skilled labourers like electricians, plumbers, heavy equipment operators and other professional workers. The major problems faced by several Kerala emigrants as identified by the study were non-payment of salaries, denial of wages and non-wage benefits stipulated in their work contracts, refusal to release passports and non-payment of air-ticket fare for return to Kerala. The living conditions of Kerala workers are also not satisfactory. It is found that one-third of the Kerala emigrants live in worker camps and in most cases, the number of persons per room range from four to six (Zachariah, Mathew and Rajan 2003).

At the state level, the major concerns of the state government and its agencies were about converting the remittances into investments for enhancing economic growth, especially in productive sectors, and tapping the full tax potential consequent on the growth in monetary terms; in terms of some physical and social indicators of development Kerala appears to have benefited from the Gulf migration. Nevertheless, the state has not been able to tap the full potential in terms of capital accumulation and resultant industrial growth. Kerala is now being increasingly identified as a source of educated human power in the global labour market. This is a historically evolved position that Kerala holds in the world economic order. Unlike many other provinces in India, Kerala is still capital scarce. This unique development pattern in Kerala based on remittances that does not lead to further investments has led only to a consumerist expansion (Parayil and Sreekumar 2002). The role played by Gulf money in keeping Kerala as a consumerist state cannot be ignored. Kerala's population is 3 percent of all of India while it consumes 13-15 percent of the consumer products in the country. This has been mostly made possible by remittances. The chances of turning remittances into productive capital appear to be nearly impossible given the location of Kerala in the new world economic order. While Kerala was hailed as a model state in India for achieving higher levels of social indicators such as high literacy levels, low birth rate and low death rate, it was also noticed that the state lagged behind in economic development and industrial growth when compared to many other Indian states. The fact that high social development and steady inflow of remittances did not translate into capital accumulation and subsequent industrial development was identified as a paradox in the literature on Kerala's economic and social development (Kannan 1990; Tharamangalam 1998; Parayil 2000). One of the reasons pointed out for this apparent anomaly was that the remittances boosted both consumption and wage levels, while it failed to trigger investment in industrial growth. However, this was predictable since Kerala was already identified in the changing global economic order as a market for consumer durables and an exporter of skilled and semi-skilled labour to the Middle East (Parayil and Sreekumar 2003).

The Kerala Government had set up a Non Resident Keralites Affairs De-



partment (NORKA) in 1996, in an effort to address the legal, political and economic problems faced by overseas Keralaites which include, *inter alia*, support for seeking investment opportunities in Kerala and rehabilitation of returning migrants. Further, Norka-Roots was also set up as a field agency of NORKA in 2002 which has taken up channeling investments to the state as one of its prime activities.

### **Visceral Economies of Migration and Emotional Politics**

With citizenship limited to 'native' Arabs, the legal and cultural lives of South Asian immigrants and Arab communities remain within mutually exclusive domains. In most of the GCC states, the immigrants can neither buy property nor settle, thus banning them from participating in the domain of the 'political' in any formal sense of the term. This would mean that they do not have property rights, voting rights, but have only rights to conduct business and buy and sell goods and services, thus limiting their participation in the society as buyers and sellers and not acceding any formal claims to citizenship. In the context of middle class Indian immigrants in Dubai, this lack of formal access to citizenship makes it almost impossible to have a sense of belonging with the local Arab society. In this context of non-belongingness and limiting oneself to the domain of the economy in the free market globalised economy, other kinds of diasporic subjectivities are produced among the middle class – one of racial consciousness and consumer citizenship (Vora 2009). How do home films traverse this contested terrain of racial discrimination, free market economy and a consumer citizenship in trouble? These films focused mainly on middle class and working class immigrants in modern Gulf cities show the segregation among the non-citizens on the basis of race and ethnicity. We argue that these films struggle to lay bare struggles to maintain traditional class and racial hierarchy in the new landscape of neoliberal economies in the GCC, but fail to offer a full critique of the same owing to the intricate relationships between power and faith systems.

The *kafala* system of labour migration is the means through which all South Asian trans-migrants arrive in the GCC and provides the central framework through which migration is organised and controlled. The *kafala* system binds the migrant worker to a legal entity of the corporate or sponsor; either a citizen or an entrepreneur referred to as a *kafeel*. The *kafala* system contains the qualities of both a contract and a patronage, where the immigrant labourer, the *kafal* signs a contract and is bound to work at a customary level of pay for at least two years. The system thus keeps the guest worker an economic dependant on the citizens or sometimes-elite non-citizens. The migratory conduit between South Asia and the GCC states are also deeply entrenched in patterns of gender, nation, ethnicity, language and region. While South Asian men are more visible and typically employed in the construction industry and service sector, women are largely invisible in the public space and work as domestic workers, one of the poorest paid and the most vulnerable section of the guest worker system (Longva 1997, 70). At the other end of the socio-



economic spectrum are women who arrive on family visas of their spouses who are guest workers and professional women who work with transnational companies. While Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are found more in construction and service sectors, Filipinos work as concierges and Filipinas run beauty parlours and Indonesian, Sri Lankan and Filipina women work mostly as domestic helps.

The South Asian labourer very often also arrives through transnational debts, a fact well documented by anthropologists and economists. Migration from South Asia has been shown to happen through processes of chain migration and the labour brokerage system, with brokers sharing one part of the workforce utilizing connections they have established in particular regions of South Asia. Chain migration is typically a process by which one trans-migrant from one particular place uses his or her knowledge, resources and contacts to facilitate the entry of additional trans-migrants, sometimes through familial and kinship relations, which also structure the workforce in important ways. These patterns of migration underscore the naturalisation of certain ethnicities and nationalities as appropriate for certain kinds of labour (Gardner 2010). In a rigorous ethnographic work that explores the local and transnational aspects of the arrangements in labour migration to the gulf state of Bahrain, Gardner (2010) argues that these aspects converge to produce a structure of dominance for the state. The *kafala* system, as pointed out by scholars and journalists, keeps the migrant in perpetual fear of deportation and precarity. Pointing towards a “deportation industry at work, which in the case of the *kafala* system includes not just the police, and immigration officials but a multitude of agents who are individual citizens,” (Gardner, 2010). This structure of dominance and the violence that it engenders, Gardner argues, is singularly tied to the profit making enterprise of the neoliberal state. Describing this as the tragic logic of the *kafala*, that extracts labour surplus from transnational migrants, he points out the possibilities of how to “envision this system as a vast transfer of wealth, one whereby thousands of families in South Asia are separated from what little wealth they have accrued, through equity or debt, which then is transferred to sponsors in the Gulf—sponsors who, in conjunction with the state, perpetuate and maintain the deportability of the laborers they bring to the island,” (Gardner 2010, 219).

What kind of critique do these video films offer about the *kafala* system and the general sense of alienation of the Malayalee migrants? As discussed earlier, as central as migration is to the world of Malayalee life, most of these films are replete with references to migration and are in one sense or other about migration. Films like *Pathiyatrakkoru Ticket* (Half Way Ticket), *Parathan Thirichu Varunnu* (The Deceased Returns), *Oru Dirham Koodi* (One More Dirham), *Kudumba Kalaham Nooram Divasam* (Family Feud 100th day) or *Aliyanoru Free Visa* (A Free Visa for the Brother-in-Law), which are fully or partially shot in Middle Eastern cities refract and mediate this rather complex diasporic identity in their narratives. The films are shot in an all-male world of working class or middle class men who work in these cities and are

segregated from other South Asian immigrants and live together in all Malayalee conclaves. They rent apartments together with six or more men sharing an apartment, often hosting immigrants/friends who arrive from other parts of Kerala. The emotional world that is unravelled is one of loneliness, longing, despair and alienation.

In ways that are overtly critical many of these films touch upon the appalling labour conditions that exist in most of the Middle Eastern countries. This experience of alienation is further accelerated by the lack of citizenship rights. Shaped within a British colonial past and rapidly developed on oil revenues, most Middle Eastern countries and particularly the city states of UAE are built on a vision of the future rather than the past. Though there has been long standing historical ties via trade between India and specifically with the western coast and the contemporary state of Kerala, Indian migration to Middle Eastern countries increased dramatically after the oil boom in the 1960s.

Legally most of the countries in the Middle Eastern region have a hierarchical structure, with citizenship limited to 'native' Arabs thus making the legal and cultural lives of South Asian immigrants and Arab Communities mutually exclusive domains.

The exploitative guest worker system and racialized economic hierarchy where Indians are placed below all other expatriates is shown as contributing to this profound experience of alienation for the Malayalee Muslim in the Gulf. The *kafala* system coalesce resident permits with specific employment contracts, which requires a national resident or company to act as sponsor. The system thus keeps the guest worker an economic dependant of citizens or sometimes elite non-citizens. Most lower class immigrants are shown as struggling within the *kafala* system in these films, with their passports often seized by the employers. In the film *Aliyanoru Free Visa* (A Free Visa for the Brother-in-Law) the protagonist Bapputty, a simple and pious man is dependent on his manipulative and exploitative employer, Saleem Bhai addressed as Bhai, (brother in Hindi/Urdu), another Malayalee Muslim who possesses his passport and threatens to not return it whenever an argument arises between them. The whole story takes a new turn at the end, when Bapputty is about to return home, the employer turns up at his doorstep with a handsome sum he has saved from Bapputty's salary over the years. What does the film offer in terms of a critique of the *kafala* System? It offers an excellent testimony of everyday life of a *kafal* bound to the relatively wealthy and entrepreneurial *kafeel*, in this case not different from each other in religion, nationality or ethnicity. The tiny, packed grocery shop, filled with consumer goods from the floor to the roof is the scene of encounters between Bapputty, his employer and the customers who visit the shop. The space of the shop gives off a sense of claustrophobia. The camera is constantly kept outside the shop, accentuating Bapputty's sense of nostalgia. On more occasions than one, following an argument between them regarding his debt, stagnant salary and overworked state, Bhai waves the passport at him as a symbol of his entrapment. The pre-scient history of the passport as a document of the bureaucratisation of identi-

ties, and the verifiability and governing of mobility in the twentieth century is brought into materiality through close-ups and the movement of the hand, and the object moving in the air (Robertson, 2010). While this is the case, the film is brought to a conclusion where the *kafeel* meets his obligation as not just a legal being but meeting the criteria of the ontology of a Muslim by keeping to his contract. He has increased Bapputty's salary every year, invested it wisely and returned it to him for a better future at the right time. Both the *kafal* and the *kafeel* meet their duties to deliver a functional *kafala* system, that is beneficial to the migrants and the state.

Recurrent themes in these films also include the precarity of labour in the neoliberal economy, again in the Gulf countries embodied in the *kafala* system. Political theorists like Standing (2011) see precarity and increases in job insecurity an important feature of work and life in the present. This is most present in its sharpest and most violent form perhaps in the context of the temporary labour migration to the Gulf States. Precarity is described as the condition in which one cannot predict one's future and empties us of our ability to create social relations and feelings of affection (Vora 2009). The condition of precariousness produced in new capitalist social relations is thus overbearing and oppressive. On the other hand it is also seen as creating new conditions of permissibility and accessibility and eventually new political subjectivities (Gill and Pratt 2008, 3). How do we interrogate precarious identities in the realm of representations? In extreme conditions of precarity, can these be read as attempts to resist and unsettle?

The increasing sense of precarity unravels in these films through a philosophy of risk. Drawing on an epistemological understanding of risk would force us to focus on the personal decision maker and a consequent analysis on uncertainty and the knowledge that is brought to bear upon it. An economic conceptualisation of risk on the other hand, distinguishes risk from uncertainty and conceptualises risk as an ordered application of knowledge on the unknown (Althaus 2005). Sociology as a discipline theorises risk in varied ways. The concept of a risk society, forwarded by both Anthony Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) dominates the literature and has spawned interest across disciplines. They place risk as fundamental to an assessment of modernity and conceptualises it as pervading all aspects of life and the most intimate of experiences.

Let us return to the opening sequences of the film *Aliyanoru Free Visa* that we discussed earlier. The film set in Kuwait, begins with a song sequence that frames the city scape of Kuwait, the shiny steel and glass buildings, express ways, speeding cars and luxurious shopping malls form part of it, but the camera dwells more on the transit in buses, the ferry, workers waiting, various kinds of migrant labour from trash can picking to drivers and labour camps. The city shots unravel the gulf city as something that holds contradictions: splendour and squalor, wealth and poverty, joy and despair. The streets emerge in these sequences as the central representational element and as an affective trope of the migrant life. The streets thus exude social despair, hard

labour, desolateness and the constant movement of labouring bodies in the city streets. In the background is a melodious soundtrack that speaks to the deep history of Malayalee migration to the Gulf States. It begins by paying homage to those unknown ancestors who arrived on the gulf shores in the 1960s, a journey of hope and despair. The song unfolds the history of migration to the Gulf as fraught with the idea of struggles with the unknown. The song imagines the whole trajectory of migrant life as a fateful road, where they seek meaning through fulfilling others dreams and a search of mirage in a desert, a recurrent theme in the cultural tropes of migrant life in literature, popular culture and cinema. The audio and visual tracks together envision a landscape of risk economy and fear of loss. The Gulf, as we can see in the sequence and several other instances, stops being the 'closed, risk-free' economy and utopia. While risk has been primarily used to understand economics, it has been transported to various other disciplines to explain complex forms of subordination across history, outside the narrative of the nation state and continuing crisis (Jackson 2014). The body of films under discussion can be seen as addressing risk both as an economic category and as a trans-historical experience of migration. What are the other ways in which risk in a new society is understood in these films?

In some of the cases where films bring in the question of family life and relations, it brings sexuality into relationships with political economies of migration and those relationships often tendered in terms of a newly sexualized subject's access to the pleasures of consumption or in terms of financial pressures brought to bear on these subjects. Migration, itself appears as emotional risk taking for both migrants and the spouses left behind, in these films wives of the migrant men. In the film, *Oru Dirham Koodi* (One More Dirham), the wayward protagonist Raouf plans to remarry when initiated to the pleasures of a *nouveau riche* world of the upper middle class. In *Pennu Orumbettal* (Where Women Dare), women who enjoy the pleasures of consumption that remittance from migration brings home, end up being greedy, callous, and selfish and some of them enter into illicit relationships with local men in the absence of their husbands. This is a recurring theme in many home films. In such accounts the sexuality of people and communities is seen to be embroiled in the risk generated by the processes of migration. In *Parethan Thirichu Varunnu* (The Deceased Returns), the protagonist Subair, battling a chronic heart disease, does not receive any support from his family and is forced to return to Doha where he works. Unable to survive the pressures of work, he dies returning as a dead body. In many films, precarity and risk emerge as the central tropes through which the disparate events and concerns of migrant life are tied together.

Giddens and Beck describe risk as the defining characteristic of the world in which we live (Garland 2003). Almost an emergent ordinary of contemporary life, explaining risk as always existing in the context of uncertainty, Garland defines risk as a specific way of assessing and categorizing the (hazardous) relationship that affect us, our plans, our interests and our wellbe-

ing. Precarity, on the other hand captures the political urgency of the sense of widespread insecurity in contemporary capitalism, characterized by high unemployment, globalization and increased migration. Precarity is used to refer to a specific subjectivity that emerges out of this experience of ambient insecurity (Frase 2013).

The competing modes of citizenship in the Gulf region –one that includes substantive, urban and consumer –in the absence of a formal citizenship finds an important place in the narrative of these films. Supplementary to this as scholarly literature has shown, the cultural nationalism of Indian immigrants forms a very important aspect of immigrant life (Vora 2008). The films display an acute awareness of the factitiousness of these modes of citizenship offered in general and of consumer and urban citizenship in particular. This can be explained through a discussion of the film *Oru Dirham Koodi* (One More Dirham), a general critique of the embracing of the consumer and urban citizenship offered in particular to the middle and upper middle classes in the Gulf States. The dislocation from the sources of one's culture and ethico-religious practices, shown in the film, leads to an embrace of these modes of citizenship leading to a corrosion of the moral core. The dystopic constructions of the Gulf are equally present in the home films as well as in literary representation and popular narratives.

The experience of migration is shown as an important aspect of the immigrant's identity. Many of the narratives weave this insider/outsider binary as an essential one. In the film *Parethan Thirichu Varunnu* (The Deceased Returns) the protagonist, a long time immigrant now ailing, returns home in the hope of support from his family to get his surgery done. Disillusioned by the rather callous and often humiliating remarks by his parents and relatives, he returns to Kuwait to work. He remarks, "this is better than *Naadu* (native place), where I have the support of kind and discerning friends." The Gulf, in such narratives emerges not just as a better place, but also as a refuge and utopia. A fundamental element of the migratory networks is the family bond, where a young man migrates to the Gulf and creates opportunity for others to migrate. Thus a large part of immigrant social life is constituted through these networks of extended family members, men of the same community or same village in Kerala.

*Oru Dirham Koodi* (One More Dirham) narrates the tragic fate that befalls a simple and pious immigrant Raouf in the Emirates. A lower class immigrant, who loves his parents, wife and children transforms into an amoral and unethical man as he lives a life of greed and snobbery characteristic to the elite and upwardly mobile Indian immigrants. He divorces his wife and stops taking care of his old and ailing parents. As fate would have it, he loses his job and ends up as a day worker in a camel farm with no future or prospect of return. Though he wants his wife back, she opts for a second marriage with a pious and devout man. He finally ends up in one of the most difficult and abject kinds of jobs in the Gulf countries, a helper in the camel farm, often in the deep desert. While his friends find him and try to help him get back home,

he decides to return to the camel farm, at last defeated and with no sense of purpose in life. Most home films have several such subplots and weave both dystopian and utopian narratives of the alien land of the Gulf. The film ends with a song sequence that takes him through the desert path to the camel farm.

The wind has swept away my footsteps from these sand tracks/The  
song of my soul is like broken violin strings / My heart's landscape is  
full of broken sculptures/The flicker of lamps in my heart are blown  
off by harsh winds/My grieving heart is filled with the flutter of  
doves/My golden dreams are dead/ My dreams fleet like shadows/My  
dreams shift like quick sand

The sequence in its panoramic shots of desert landscapes, melancholic audio track in its musical notes and lyrics together create an affect of risk philosophy. This allusion towards risk can be seen repeated in dialogues and lyrics in most of the films in the genre/movement. The nature of social relationships and familial relationships are also shown as stressed and in a dialogic relationship with the conditions of migration as well as contributing to migration. It is pertinent to think of the work of gender in the production of these discourses of risk and we would like to turn our attention to it. A renegotiation of the moral economy of the Muslim household in the post globalization age is deeply inscribed in the ideology of the religious aesthetics and responsibility that seeks legitimacy to the technological project of the home films.

Home films have often functioned as maps for the cultural and social geopolitical imaginaries and realities of everyday life of the diasporic Malayalee Muslim in Middle Eastern cities. *Aliyanu Oru Free Visa* (A Free Visa for Brother-in-law) discussed earlier deftly weaves the everyday life challenges of the South Asian migrant into the narrative. Ever torn between emotional pressures from family and relatives back home and the harsh realities of life in the city, the immigrant protagonist constantly negotiates demands of financial and other nature from relatives back home. In this film set in Kuwait, the protagonist Bapputty, a shopkeeper is an earnest hard worker, who works for lower wages but has to fulfil the expectations of his family and the ever growing demands from his sister's husband who expects Bapputty to take him to Kuwait on a work visa. The film also depicts the misconceptions about the 'gulf migrant' in Kerala society and the anxieties held about the 'missing husband.'

The concerns around the missing male figure in the public imagination give rise to the construction of the 'Gulf Wife' as a transgressive figure who is often in 'need' of sex and emotional companionship in the absence of her husband. The construction of the 'Gulf Wife' as a 'transgressive' woman has formed part of a diverse range of representations in literature, film and television in Kerala for more than three decades. Many home films attempt a close look at the webs of gossip, rumor and hearsay that are spun around the lives of Gulf wives and the effects of it on the moral fabric of the Malabar Muslim



community. If this forms an important moral concern for the local community and for migrant Muslim familial relations, many recent trends in migration have brought in new factors to be considered for a history of gender relations in the context of migration to the Middle East.

The beginning years of the last decade saw the emergence of new jobs in the Middle East that prompted young women migrants to leave home, perhaps unwittingly and forced a traditional society to accept new freedom for women. The migration of Muslim women domestic workers from the region to the Middle East has a longer history. Based on an international division of labor that forms a global gendered economy, poor Malayalee Muslim women migrants have become nannies, maids and caregivers in affluent homes in the Middle Eastern countries. The rapidly growing body of literature on the feminization of migrant labor in South Asia focuses on the importance of patriarchal institutions of family and the importance of gender in relation to every aspect of migration and work (Osella 2012).

Scholarship on South Asian migration has shown that the experience of migration and living abroad transforms their identities and sense of masculinity. Together, the processes of migration and the new religious identity formation are seen to have changed gender relations in the Muslim community of Kerala by scholars. The male Muslim migration to the Middle East had the consequence of forcing women in migrant households to engage in the public domain, taking up unprecedented roles. Anna Lindberg in her study of the changing gender relations among Kerala Muslims suggest that the empowerment of women as a result of migration is only one aspect of the Kerala Muslim migration (Lindberg 2009). She points towards a narrative of loss of the freedom of movement for lower class women who once worked outside the home freely, to forced confinement inside their homes. The female migrant domestic worker on the other hand is shown as grappling with a sense of not being taken care of and provided for by their men. To develop a more radical and better understanding of the changing gender relations in Malabar, it will be important to look at intersecting discourses of femininities and masculinities, in the context of migration and the processes that it sets into motion.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have attempted to analyze the emotional and existential conditions of South Asian migrants to the countries in the Arabian Gulf or GCC, through a set of films made on migration in Kerala, a southern Indian state and a major migration location for the Middle East. By focusing on the emotional aspects of precarious conditions under which labour migration functions in these neoliberal economies, we argue that we should further our understanding of migration in the contemporary world as processes which result in deeper transformation of gender relations, family norms and religious practices.

The exceptional kind of migration of a minority community in Kerala to the GCC countries has left a profound mark in the region's socio-economic and cultural landscape. We observe that the trauma of this migration that is of-



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ten recorded in mainstream popular cinema and literature in Kerala, receives a distinct treatment within the home film movement. Bordering on the stereotypical tropes of tragedy and curtailed by the dictums of faith, the films do extend to a wider dimension of the Gulf migration that lies unexplored. They become a very portent terrain to understand the 'abjection' of migrant lives, the emotional economy that surrounds it, as well as the social invisibility that shrouds it in dominant representations. Coming from the minority communities of Northern Kerala, one of the regions influenced by processes of Gulf migration, the films provide a first-hand visual archive to the experienced abjection.

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