

TOWARDS A BETTER PASTORAL CARE FOR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN ASIA AT THE DAWN OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

November 6-8, 2008

Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Training Center, Bangkok, Thailand

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Firstly, let me introduce some order into this presentation by contextualizing our identity as pastoral agents and the location in which we work in favor of migrants and their families.

Migrants among the migrants

We are missionary migrants in the Latin Archdiocese of Trivandrum, Kerala, India. We work in collaboration with the local Church in laying the foundation for a pastoral ministry that is essential yet remote to the native ecclesial community especially the clergy. We do this, specifically, through the Commission for the Pastoral Care of People on the Move, formed in 2005, as a consequence of the dynamic creativity with which His Grace, Archbishop Soosa Pakiam M., perceives the exigencies of the Archdiocese where in almost every household, a member or two works overseas.

Migrants in Trivandrum, we move under pressure. As our visa time is short for every single entry, the compression of priorities opens up to the urgency of training and involving the local lay people in the work of the Commission not only to ensure continuity but most of all, to bring the pastoral care of migrants in the local language and closer to home, especially in domains of life where the clergy and religious do not have adequate competence to effectively respond.

We are migrants among the migrants, working jointly with former migrant workers in the Gulf, who returning to Trivandrum, desire to volunteer time, energy and knowledge *by experience*, to help the situation of those caught in the web of concerns and problems related to overseas migration.

Trivandrum: politics, economics, emigration

Our workplace is Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala, south of India¹. Trivandrum is not all of India, nor even most, but surely an important single part. Its total

* Report made for the occasion of the First Asian Congress for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees, Bangkok 6-8 November 2008. This text is available at CSEM website with authorization from the author in November, 2008: http://www.csem.org.br/artigos_port_teologia_08.html

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¹ India's religious groups: Hindus-675,000,000; Muslims-110,000,000; Christians-38,000,000; Sikhs-17,000,000; Buddhists-6,000,000; Jains-4,000,000. In India there are about 1,658 different mother tongues and 16 major languages classified as official languages, spoken by about 90% of the Indian population. Likewise, in India there are about 128,000,000 people belonging to various castes; 371,000,000 belonging to the backward caste and 120,000,000 people from the upper Hindu caste. India has the second largest

population is 1,851,462, segregated by religion, ideology, language and caste. Among these are Catholics of the Latin Rite numbering to some 231,244, spread in more than 70 parishes.

Trivandrum, as is the whole of Kerala, is known to be font of leftist politics. The Communist Party came to power in 1957, a year after the establishment of the State, and has ruled on and off since. Their rule transferred land from the rich to the poor, set a minimum wage and invested heavily on building clinics and schools.

Trivandrum also gained the reputation to be a place hostile to business, with prohibitive regulations, militant unions and frequent labor and civil strikes. While its coastal belt generates fishing job opportunities, it has little industry and weak agriculture. The government is its largest employer.²

With leftist governments in the State capital spending heavily on health and schools, educated generations of workers have expanded but there are no jobs for them. This pushes them to look for work elsewhere, and most of them found this in the Gulf, Western Europe and North America.

In the 1960's, a huge pool of nurses, doctors, engineers and college professors emigrated and gained employment in the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada and the United States of America.

And with the oil boom in the Gulf in the 1970's, emigration including large numbers of unskilled workers, shifted to the Region, specifically in the countries of Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Chronic unemployment sustains the exit of workers from Trivandrum. Departure by thousands doubled in the 1980's and tripled in the 1990's. Emigration for work overseas remains unabated even at present. Nevertheless, the remittances it generates support the local economy and the higher quality of life in the State capital.

Migrants' families live in superior housing, with telephone, television, air condition, cars; afford to keep small family business, manage to travel and socialize, send children to private schools, save money in the bank and interestingly, because they have means, male migrants hunt for local brides via paid ads on newspapers, priding themselves in the ads description as **dazzling, foreign employed, or working in the Gulf**, etc., to lure women to marriage. Indeed, for many, work abroad is a guarantee for better life.

number of Muslims in the world, next to Indonesia. It has the largest number of Sikh population in the world.

² Jason De Parle, "Jobs Abroad Support Model State in India", *The New York Times*, 7 September 2007.

However, the gains from overseas work may be eclipsed by the interweaving of complexity that necessarily follows from the family situation it generates. In Trivandrum, it is commonplace to find a family without the father or mother or both, or without the adult children, with the elderly on their own. It is also common to find empty houses, cared after merely by hired keepers.

Married women whose husbands are away in the Gulf are estimated to be more than 1 million throughout Kerala. They are neither too young nor too old. Most of them are in the late 20's to early 40's. Adverse consequences of separation include loneliness, added responsibilities, acute insecurity from indebtedness for loans incurred to finance husband's migratory requisites, inadequate economic returns from overseas work, mental anxiety and worries about the future. Infidelity and/or abandonment of family are especially true of young wives left behind by their husbands within days or month of their marriage.

Wives who fail to overcome the pressure of intolerable conditions at home in the absence of their husbands meet with resentment, not only from the members of the family but from the husband likewise. They develop social and psychological problems which lead to divorce or annulment of marriage. In worst cases, they lead to suicide.

Husbands, on the other hand, while remaining far from home and family, not only have a share in the pain of separation but in addition have the mental, psychological and physical demands of work to contend with. Those who are less fortunate, mostly unskilled migrants, end up enduring inhuman labor conditions for the whole duration of their contract. There are reported cases of illegal recruitment, non-payment of wages, long working hours, unsanitary living quarters, dangerous or *life threatening* work situations and physical abuse. Inability to cope steers many to unhealthy habits like heavy drinking and excessive smoking, as well as promiscuous sex which makes them vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS. There are instances when these migrants had to return home to seek medical and/or psychological attention.

The children, however, are observed to suffer growth imbalance in the absence of the father or mother or both. The effects are seen in school performance and in their behavior with siblings. The most alarming consequences are drug addiction among youth, early marriages that lead to failure, dropping out of school, nervous breakdown, displaced anger, as well as, extreme fear and insecurity.

Not only the wives, husbands and children bear the cost of emigration but even the elderly left behind. Emigration of members of family has increased loneliness and anxiety among the elderly. It has increased their fear of robbery, burglary or break-ins, as they live on their own unaccompanied and vulnerable.

The increasing rate of suicide in Trivandrum, and in most part of the State, has been attributed by the Kerala Mental Health Authority to the effect of migration to Middle

East countries, incrementing incidence of alcoholism and climbing rate of mental illness. Some 14 persons attempt suicide per hour in the State. Suicide rate is more in the age groups of 30-45 and 60 and above. Further cases of suicide are currently reported likewise among school children. But especially alarming is the rising trend in family suicide.

Trivandrum: sea-based internal migrants, expatriates

So far, what we have described as a background has reference to land based emigrants overseas. This cannot be complete without touching upon Trivandrum's internal fishermen migrants and expatriates.

The coastal belt of Trivandrum generates fishing job opportunities, but not on monsoon season when there's no catch. From five to six months, fishermen on smaller boats sail out of Trivandrum's coast line to fish and market haul in Quilon, Fort Cochin or Alleppey - Christian areas within Kerala. However, some go farther north reaching Muslim dominated fishing villages where they meet with hostility from fanatics who would not want outsiders, especially Christians, in their territory. Violence erupts in many cases resulting to death-dealing riots and burning of boats. Fishermen on bigger vessels go out for longer periods of up to a year and fish in other States of India. Problems arise when they lose direction in the sea and end up instead in the water territories of Pakistan, in the North or Sri Lanka in the South. Accounts of fishermen shot or killed or charged with illegal fishing and jailed in these neighboring countries often land in news headlines. Many stay incarcerated for years as processing for their release takes not only a lot of time but, more so, a lot of political will on the part of the Indian government, given its state of affairs with Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

There are also foreign nationals in Trivandrum. They call themselves expatriates, forming the international community in the city. They come for a wide variety of reasons ranging from business or employment, social service, study or retirement. There is approximately the same number of males as females. The majority are within the working age range, followed by retirees. They stay for two years or more, and then return to their countries of origin. Among those who stay are from Belgium, Russia, Germany, Australia, United States of America, Canada, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, Holland, England, France, Japan, Philippines, Korea, Maldives, Malaysia, Singapore and China. Several are professionals (i.e. engineers, administrators, consultants, trainers, educators, researchers, artists, etc.) and with years of work contract for projects financed by the World Bank. Usually, they bring along their family members to live with them.

Away from home, they find themselves in a world so different from their own, ***in a country like no other***. Strangers in the new culture, many feel discriminated for their color, rejected, taken for granted, labeled, unprotected and vulnerable. Many say they were charged exorbitant fees, made objects for making money, accused of stealing employment opportunities away from nationals, seen as unclean or immoral, irrelevant or outsider.

There are diverse questions and challenges that the members of the international community face.

The Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of People on the Move

From the circumstances presented, it is easy to understand the importance of creating the Commission for the Pastoral Care of People on the Move in the Archdiocese of Trivandrum. But its function needed to be defined in relation to the local religious and cultural environment, availability and sustainability of personnel and material resources, possibility of participation in migration politics, relevance to contending social concerns and set of priorities among competing ecclesial obligations. These considerations challenge the development of the pastoral care of people on the move in Trivandrum; not to mention the threat of misinterpretation by Hindu hardliners. They allege that the Commission's work is a ploy for conversion - a categorical statement that they once made in posters and pasted on the office's gate.

In the Commission, we have more challenges than answers, more pastoral reflections than remedies, nevertheless, convinced that our approach must focus on understanding and acting to challenge the community to the ***importance of a specific pastoral care for migrants, the dialogical-missionary commitment of all and the consequent duty of forming a culture of welcome and solidarity (Holy See's Instruction: The Love of Christ towards Migrants).***

Significant Actions:

- The Mobile Conference Workshop on the Holy See's Instruction "The Love of Christ towards Migrants": ***November 10 to 12, 2005, Trivandrum***

This conference workshop aimed at raising the awareness of the ecclesial community in the Latin Archdiocese on the phenomenon of migration, its cost and consequence to families and society. It sought to bring the community to analysis of the pastoral questions arising from migration, in the hope of getting them to commit to action on behalf of overseas migrants and families, as well as of fishermen migrants, and also, to get them involved in the issues of the international community as a gesture of welcome and solidarity.

The conference informed the Archdiocese about the solicitude of the Church for migrants in the light of the Holy See's Instruction "The Love of Christ towards Migrants".

In the same breath, it communicated the plight of migrants from India in destination countries like the United States, Singapore and the Gulf. It laid out the struggles, challenges and aspirations of the international community in the Archdiocese.

The days of the conference workshop were held in different venues to create a multiplier effect, involve more people and give more visibility to the Commission.

Assisting the work of this conference were consultants and speakers from the *Migration and Refugees Services Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, *Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics - Singapore*, the Center for Development Studies, the Overseas Residents Club of Trivandrum, Women of the World Network, the University of Kerala, the *OLF-Scalabrinian Center for Migration Studies*, the Archdiocesan Seminary and Social Ministry Office, the Labor Commission of the National Bishops' Conference of India through Bishop Joshua Mar Ignathius, and most especially, the *Holy See's Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerants*, in the person of His Grace Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, who delivered the key talks and who accompanied the reflections and discussions with competence, generous patience and much dedication.

The support and participation of Archbishop Soosa Pakiam, M., helped unite efforts to call the community to the continuing task of the pastoral care of migrants.

- Publications

The Commission's publications aim for the continuing information and formation of parishes in the pastoral care of migrants. There are more than 70 parishes in the Archdiocese where these publications are circulated:

1. Information Booklet Series 1 – Migration, Sign of the Times and Solicitude of the Church; The Challenge of the Migration Phenomenon Today;
2. Information Booklet Series 2 – Emigration and Unemployment in Kerala, Is there a Causal Relationship;
3. Indian Migration News Anthology;
4. Human Mobility Electronic Bulletin.

- Solidarity effort to advance international understanding, goodwill, and peace through fellowship

The Commission participates in efforts to advance international understanding, goodwill and peace through its active role in the *Women of the World (WOW) Network* based in Trivandrum.

The network has no political, religious or commercial affiliations and was created by the women who have come from other parts of the world or *from other parts of India*³. It was organized to render support, information and friendship network to

³ An interesting note to make about the WOW network, there is also a group of Indians who also to a large extent face many of the same challenges as expatriates. India is a heterogeneous culture with many languages, religions and regional differences (Amba-Rao et al. 2000; As-Saber, Dowling & Liesch 1998).

the various women living in Trivandrum. The network maintains a group register and is made available to all members for social networking, encouragement and advice. It hosts a coffee morning each week where new members of the international community are welcomed. Moreover, it celebrates International Women's Day and assists in humanitarian undertakings on behalf of the less fortunate in Trivandrum.

The Commission's involvement and presence in the network assure the members of the solidarity and welcome on the part of the Latin Catholic Archdiocese, and manifest to them the Archdiocese's commitment to the peacekeeping project of the Universal Church.

- Harbor Visitation

The Commission reaches out to the fishermen migrants from Trivandrum through harbor visitation. It organizes a team of priests from the Archdiocese for the visits to distant fishing harbors where the fishermen migrants rest their boats for repairs, refueling and/or where they wait for the appropriate time to go back to the high seas. These visits bring the pastoral care of migrants to their place of work, otherwise, unavailable away from home. In these visits, the fishermen usually ask the priest to bless the boat and hear confession; to give advice in relation to a family problem or grievance against the local community for a bad treatment received; to encourage good relationship on board with fellow fishermen; and to offer prayer for their safety as they experience difficulties and dangers at work in the high seas.

The harbors for visitation include Thoppumpedy, Fort Cochin, Vaipin, Mattanchery, New Vaipin, Ochanthuruthy and Murukkampadu.

- Development of parish-based pastoral care for migrants and families

The Commission started this undertaking with data gathering to identify the specific needs of migrants and families in four (4) pilot parishes. The selection was based on parish statistics of overseas migrants and families. This process is ongoing to date and once completed will serve as basis for the planning and development of parish service programs on their behalf.

Initial data indicate the need for paralegal help desk, counseling clinic, rights education at all stages of migration, pre-departure orientation, send-off liturgical celebration and social events.

An Indian from Goa or Bengal can face many of the same issues i.e. cannot speak the language; different style of cuisine; absence from family, as members of the international community.

*Cheryl Crosthwaite, **International Community in Trivandrum: Challenges and Aspirations**, p.10.*

Incidentally, the four pilot parishes are all located around the international airport area in Trivandrum.

- Documentation and databank

The Commission maintains an updated file of migration related news. The information is used for publication, for raising migration awareness among parishioners during Sunday visitations to homes and parishes, as well as, for keeping the Commission abreast on trends and developments in migration flows, policies, controls, realities, gender issues, migrants' rights, etc.

- Networking with migrants' organizations, research groups and institutions that provide assistance to Indian migrants abroad
 1. **WEATO**: Our work connects with migrants' organizations like the WEATO based in Dubai at the United Arab Emirates. This organization was organized by migrants themselves and is exclusive to those coming from Trivandrum. They form a cooperative that helps members in need, financially or otherwise.
 2. **Association of Gulf Returnees**: We also link up with the Association of Gulf Returnees which maintains an office in Trivandrum. This association is national, predominantly Hindu by membership, composed of migrant workers returning from the Gulf. The association helps members find local jobs and gives welfare assistance.
 3. **Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics**: We are also in touch with the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics operating in Singapore. We worked on a case with them involving a domestic worker from Trivandrum. An open line of communication is sustained by exchange of information, especially on women migrants coming from Trivandrum and working as domestic help in Singapore.
 4. **PRAVASI LOKAM**: We monitor cases of missing migrants in the Gulf through the television program entitled "PRAVASI LOKAM". The program is shown every Sunday afternoon at the Kairali channel. There were several migrants located by families through this program.
 5. **Center for Development Studies**: We keep abreast of local research endeavors on migration through contact with the Center for Development Studies. Some research results published by the Center form part of our documentation initiative. The Center also gets involved in the activities organized by the Commission.

6. **Cultural organizations:** We participate in cultural events arranged by diverse groups like the Overseas Residents Club, Alliance de France, Russian Cultural Center and the Japanese Cultural Center. This enhances our contact with the international community in Trivandrum and contributes to the Commission's awareness and resolve to promote dialogue and cooperation among different cultures.
- Celebration of the Migrants' Day

The Commission spearheads the organization of the Migrants' Day on the 1st of June. The first coordinated celebration was held last year at the St. Anne's Parish in Thoppe-Valiathura Forane. It was participated in by migrants' families. This year, the celebration was held at St. Joseph's Chapel in Vanchiyoor-Palayam Forane and participated in, mostly, by women.

The Commission makes use of the celebration to promote migration awareness among the parish population. Holding the celebration in different venues each year ensures an expanded reach.

Concluding word:

The Commission's concern for collaboration extends to Archdiocesan pastoral structures that are already in place. There are various Archdiocesan Commissions which work connects with the issues we get to grips with in our ministry to migrants and families. For example, the problem of alcoholism among fishermen migrants, an issue that can be in the agenda with the Commission on Alcoholism. Another may be the interfaith discussions on migration concerns, an interest that may be explored with the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue. Moreover, the integration of migration themes into the seminary curriculum is an initiative that may be looked into with formators.

The future of the pastoral care of migrants in Trivandrum hinges on the initiatives that we are willing to take and the sacrifices we are willing to make in confrontation with our many limitations. Courage, patience and perseverance are indispensable virtues in our commitment to transform to existential reality the *Love of Christ towards Migrants*.