

In search of the missing

A unique programme on Kairali TV locates missing people in the Gulf and unites them with their families back in Kerala.

Posted/Updated Friday, Sep 19 00:00:00, 2003

Sreedeevei Jacob

TC Mathai, better known as Pattalam Mathai, had been missing from his home in Thiruvalla in Kerala for 23 years. All that his wife and children knew was that he worked some where in the Gulf. The children grew up, came to work in the Gulf, but could not locate their father. Finally, *Pravasalokam* (meaning world of the non-residents), a unique programme on Kairali TV, to locate and unite missing people with their families, took up Mathai's case. Minutes after the announcement was made, a viewer called up the Kairali representative P M Jabbar in the Gulf giving details of Pattalam Mathai's work and stay. Thus what the government, ministers and embassy could not do in 23 years was done in a matter of minutes, thanks to the large-scale viewership the programme commands everywhere.

Began on August 24, 2000, *Pravasalokam* completed its 150th episode recently. It has got three segments, namely khabraem (news), dosth (a celebrity talk which will have the follow up of the missing cases) and the walkie talkie done by PT Kunju Muhammed which gives the update. A 30-minute programme, *Pravasalokam* is aired on Thursdays at 11 pm, which happens to be the holiday eve in the Middle East. Unlike other TV programmes where viewership is a must to decide advertisement volumes, *Pravasalokam* is viewer-driven differently: Here it's the viewers who locate the missing people and inform about their whereabouts. Hence repeat telecasts are held at 11 am on Fridays and at 2.30 pm on Sundays.

According to Dhanya Nair who is closely associated with the programme, scripting, co-ordinating and presenting it, more than 270 cases have been aired so far in 150 episodes. Out of these 78 missing people have been located and 45 of them have been brought back home. ``The social conditions prevalent in the area, coupled with visa problems often forces the Indian worker to flee. He goes into hiding, doing odd jobs like grazing cattle in the interiors or gets associated with underworld gangs,`` says Dhanya. ``Once found out, these people are put in immigration jails, where they languish for years before being deported,`` she adds.

Rafeeq Ravuthar, the producer of the programme, had a personal reason to embark on this novel venture. ``A cousin of mine, who

was a civil engineer, committed suicide just two days after joining duty in Muscat. Another cousin who was in a cattle feed factory was missing for four months. Despite my brother working in Abu Dhabi, we could not locate him. I knew there would be hundred similar cases elsewhere.ĀĀ Rafeeq was right.

People often go to the Gulf under the false impression of having secured a job. ``It's only when they reach there that they realize that their work and salary are not what was offered by the agent. Dejected and often physically tortured, they get into petty quarrels and leave the Arab who will keep his visa details. Without a sponsor, he will have to be in hiding there and fear of humiliation and poverty do not allow him to inform his people back home.

Though the programme is aimed at helping missing Keralites, a Tamil woman happened to be rescued, Dhanya remembers. The woman was in the immigration jail in Sharjah where on a wall was scribbled the name and phone number of Amanulla, Kairali's representative in Sharjah. The woman immediately got in touch with him and was rescued soon.

Women are the worst-affected, says Dhanya. ``They lack education and suffer from social stigma if put in jail,ĀĀ she says. ``Once we got a woman out of immigration jail and when she reached the Kochi airport, her relatives who had been eating off her till then, even refused to receive her. Finally we gave her money and sent her home,ĀĀ she recollects.

Missing cases are on an increase and the programme gets at least ten fresh cases per week. ``As it is we have 400 pending cases. The relative has to submit a letter with the photo of the missing person, with the contact number and address,ĀĀ says Dhanya. *Pravasalokam* insists that a copy of the complaint has to be sent to the embassy first. There are now reports that the embassy has become more active after *Pravasalokam* began its search.

The programme has 12 representatives in the Gulf countries who can be contacted for help. Their phone numbers and contact details are scrolled on the screen while the missing case is reported. These people also help in bringing home the bodies of people who die abroad. There are some welfare organisations like the Keli, Indian Social Club's Kerala wing, Prathibha Samskarika Vedi which help the located person financially and often get him back home. As Dhanya says, ``Many people, even when they want to come home, will be penniless even to buy their tickets. These organisations offer them help and even sponsor their tickets.ĀĀ Many have got jobs also with the help of well-wishers.

Success in finding one's relative often lies in updating the information about him. Most of these people would be missing for

years and the photographs the relatives would have would be old beyond recognition. `` In many cases we have drawn up the photos ourselves collecting tips from the relatives,`` says Dhanya. Sometimes the person might have been deported to India in which case he would land in Mumbai, from where it is difficult to trace him.

`` While the Malayali is reluctant to do menial jobs in his home land, poverty and unemployment forces him to do cattle grazing and date palm tree climbing abroad,`` says Dhanya. According to her, Keralites have a problem of communication which lands them in trouble in the Gulf. While the North Indians learn Arabic in no time and mingle well with their bosses, the Malayali after years of staying there fails to become adequately socialised in his new surroundings.

Earlier, the maximum number of missing cases were reported from Saudi and Jiddah, but now cases are being reported from places like Canada and US also. `` But the most difficult to crack are missing cases from Mumbai,`` says Dhanya. The place being vast, it's easier for the person to remain in hiding for whatever reasons. And they often get into the underworld also.

(In arrangement with The Quest Features & Footage, Kochi)

