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Contours of Internal Migration in India: Certain Experiences from Kerala

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Abstract

In recent times, internal migration has intensified in different parts of the world. In tune with this, migration issues in Kerala have assumed different dimensions thanks to the inflow of a large number of migrants from the far away states like Assam and West Bengal. This has made Kerala a destination which attracts internal migrants besides being a state sending its own people to the Middle East and Europe. The large influx of migrants has caused precarious socio-economic issues in Kerala society. At the same time, Kerala's dying productive sectors find resurrection only on the ride of the present wave of migrant workers to the State. Set in this background, this paper intends to look into these issues and try to bring out policy interventions by the government to improve the living conditions of migrant workers.

Key Words: *Migration, foreign remittances, Labor Market, Discrimination, Intervention*

Heeding to the call of goodness, people leave behind their place of birth and cross their boundaries with the expectation that they can land in an illusionary world where honey and milk flow in abundance. Migration thus has brought in new avenues in the life of migrants in their new place of promises. The economic advancement of European countries owing much to their migratory nature stands testimony to this. Of course, it is true that when one speaks about migration, mostly international migration comes into the scene. However in recent times, internal migration has assumed indomitable importance in literature owing to its increase in volume and the amount of remittances emanating out of such migration (Bell & Muhidin, 2009).

Evidently, it is hard to emphasize that poverty and economic deprivation force people to migrate in search of better living environment and job opportunities. It is hardly heard that destitute from the poverty ridden countries in African continent move to developed regions of the world whereas “most wealthy, developed countries still have higher levels of emigration than developing countries” (Terraza, 2011). In developed countries like US, the pace of emigration and immigration has reached such a zenith that it is going to be irrelevant to ask someone: “where are you from?” (Nigel, 1999). The same can be said to be true in the case of Kerala¹, the State to which

immigration from other parts of the country has skyrocketed without commensurate subsiding emigration, both internal and international. In the context of this new trend in migration which Kerala has been experiencing, it is worthwhile to examine the nature of this migration, and the socio-economic hardship that the migrants face in the place of destination, and the interventions that the State has been undertaking to uplift the living conditions of migrants in Kerala. This paper mainly makes use of secondary data from various sources to look into the issues of migrant workers in the state of Kerala.

Kerala has perceptibly witnessed a turnaround in the origin of destination of its internal immigrants as well as their sector of occupation. The crossover of people to neighboring states has been quite natural elsewhere. In Kerala, too, earlier, strictly speaking in 1980s and 1990s, workers from neighboring Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh used to crisscross boundaries to reach Kerala in search of gainful employment and better living conditions, and they were accommodated in the construction and other unskilled employments mainly ironing clothes. These workers from these boundary states moved mainly to urban and suburban areas where they could find more rewarding jobs, and the domestic workers continued to rule the rural casual labor market. But, today, quite distinct from this, the origin of destination of immigrants has changed to far away states like West Bengal, Orissa, Assam and Uttar Pradesh, and even people from Nepalⁱⁱ are reported to have been seen in Kerala (Kumar, 2011). The nature of spreading of migrants in Kerala has now extended to remote places besides urban and suburban parts. Unlike the earlier migrants from neighboring states, these migrants from far away states are blessed with a widened horizon of job avenues spanning across construction sector, cashew processing, plywood industries, slaughter houses, oil pumps, brick making units, hotel and restaurants, malls and private securities, and even it has been reported recently that they have started performing certain skilled jobs in the construction sector replacing the domestic skilled workers whose bargaining power seems to have become unaffordable to employers. Nevertheless, it needs to be mentioned here that the informal nature of work and living status of migrant workers have made it difficult to estimate their actual number in Kerala. Official documents bear no accurate figure about this barring an estimate by the Department of Labor, Govt. of Kerala, which estimates that Kerala has 25 lakhsⁱⁱⁱ of migrant workers.

The factors which work behind migration to Kerala from other states of origin need to be highlighted. The push factors encompass the relatively better economic and social circumstances prevailing in the State. Kerala ranks better in many of the indicators compared to these states of origin of migrant people. For instance, among the states in India, Kerala has the highest HDI index and the per capita income of the State is comparably high (Table No.1).

Table 1 Selected Indicators of Kerala v/s Other States of Origin

Indicator	Kerala	West Bengal	Orissa	Bihar	Assam	Tamil Nadu
HDI Rank	1	15	26	28	19	9
Literacy Rate	93.91	77.08	73.45	63.82	78.81	86.81
Rural Poverty Ratio (2004-05)	20.2	38.2	60.8	55.7	36.4	37.5
Per capita Income (2008-09)	49316	36322	29464	13663	23993	45058
Life Expectancy at Birth	74	64.9	59.6	61.6	58.9	66.2
Percentage of Households With access to toilet (2005-06)	96.0	59.5	19.3	25.2	76.4	42.9

Source: Kumar, 2011

Unsurprisingly, it is pretty natural that given the differences in the socio-economic conditions prevailing in the States of origin and the state of destination, that is Kerala, workers get attracted to Kerala. A look at the state wise origin of migrant workers in Kerala reveal that most of the migrants hail from West Bengal followed by Bihar and Assam (Table No.2). The people of West Bengal have been quite interested in migrating to other countries in pursuit of higher education and better employment prospects. And now that the unskilled and undereducated Bengali workers naturally find Kerala as a destination to migrate which may be because of ideological similarity of people in both states.

Table 2 Distribution of Migrant Workers by States of Origin

State of Origin	Percentage of Workers
Uttar Pradesh	14.83
Assam	17.28
West Bengal	20.00
Bihar	18.10
Orissa	6.67
Others	23.13

Total**100.00**

Source: Report by GIFT on Domestic Migrant Workers in Kerala published in 2011

Main pull factors of migration to Kerala encompass the boom in the construction sector and the reluctance of native workers to handle menial and casual work. Now the pertinent question is what could be the immediate force which pursues migrant workers to choose Kerala as a destination to work for livelihood. Studies have shown that since the migrant workers have been engaged in informal sector of occupation, many informal methods have been used for their entry into Kerala (Narayana & Venkiteswran, 2013). One important channel through which they get attracted to Kerala is the friendship (54.69), one of the informal ways of recruitment and it is interesting to note that only the second position goes to the involvement of contractor in bringing them to the State of destination (Table No.3). Precisely, it could be argued that urbanization and the growth of informal sectors have led to the growing presence of migrant workers in Kerala. Added to this might be the reluctance among the youths in Kerala to engage in casual workers requiring more physical labor.

Table 3 Distribution of Migrant Workers by Channels of Migration

Sate	Relative	Friend	Contractor	Others	Not Reported
Uttar Pradesh	6.42	65.14	25.69	0	2.75
Assam	11.81	56.69	24.41	5.51	1.57
West Bengal	8.84	46.94	33.33	10.2	0.68
Bihar	9.77	54.14	32.33	3.01	0.75
Orissa	16.33	51.02	16.33	12.24	4.08
Others	12.94	54.71	28.24	2.94	1.18
Total	10.61	54.69	28.16	5.03	1.5

Source: Report by GIFT on Domestic Migrant Workers in Kerala published in 2011

Economic and social hardships that migrants encounter with:

Migrants are always looked down by the natives as alien people to be treated as second citizen, and they are inherently vulnerable in many respects (Bustamante, 2011). This has been the mindset elsewhere and many historical anecdotes^{iv} stand testimony to this. Migrants are self uprooted people moving to places which they deem fit to fulfill their aspirations. Enhanced income is the main driver of migration, and migrants seem to have been sacrificing everything to have an

increase in income. Migrants, deprived of entitlements which they enjoy at the origin states, subject themselves to social, political and economic marginalization in the host states. Migrants become people unattended or unheard of by both their states of origin and the host states. So long as natives of host states consider migrants as outsiders, their vulnerability gets aggravated. Studies have unearthed the plight of migrants in the host states on account of the loss of entitlements which they could have enjoyed had they not ventured into the host state in search of better avenues. In Kerala, although Public Distribution System serves her people graciously, when it comes to the migrants, they do not have access to PDS shops as they do not possess ration cards, which they had before moving into the host state (Kumar, 2011). Similarly, migrants in Kerala do not have access to CHIS^v which are accessed by poor people in the state. This calls for evolving policies responsive to the needs of migrants in the State. The living conditions of the migrants are deplorable and entail opportunities to outbreak it as social and health menace in the near future. Another economic hurdle they face at the hands of employers is the discriminatory treatment in respect of wage determination. It has been understood that migrants are paid less compared to their native counterparts. For instance, studies have brought to light the fact that most of the migrants in Kerala receive only Rs.300-399 per day (Narayana & Venkiteswran, 2013) which is lower by Rs.100 compared to the wages of local workers and this wage which the migrants receive is three to four times more than what they are likely to receive at their states of origin(Kumar,2011). The flip side of the story is that migrants receive this money only occasionally, studies have shown in the context of Kerala (Narayana & Venkiteswran, 2013). One encouraging thing is that most of the migrants (nearly 60 percent) transact their money using their own personal bank accounts. Language barrier appears to be another hurdle before the migrant workers in Kerala. Difficulty in using the vernacular language of the host state stands in the way of their process of socialization with the local community. English could have been a link language but for the absolute lack of English knowledge with the migrant workers.

Living conditions of Migrant workers in Kerala

Two things shrink the living space of migrants. First is their reluctance to pay more for better housing as they strive to save more money to be sent to their kiths and kin's in the state of origin. The second is the contractor's disinterest in providing congenial accommodation to the migrant workers. Many studies on the socio-economic conditions of migrants have brought to the fore that

migrants stay in deplorable living conditions devoid of water and sanitation amenities. The shelters of migrant workers can turn out to be cradles of communicable diseases in Kerala. Most of the migrants, in a survey, opined that in a little less than half of the cases seven workers crowded together in one room, sharing common toilets, eating from a common mess and consuming other facilities (Narayana & Venkiteswran, 2013). Interestingly, migrants speaking common language flock together in a specific labor camp, which happens to be convenient for the owners of the camp to manage them. Migrants live in pathetic conditions, and studies have shown that their settlement is often littered with waste, creating a threat to public hygiene. The unrestricted inflow of migrants even from Nepal is reported to have raised law and order problems in the State.

Employment

Why is the demand for migrant labor increasing in Kerala? The increase in the demand for migrant labor is inversely related to their wage rate, of course. Wage rate is practically at least Rs.100 low compared to the native workers (Kumar, 2011). Even if wage rate is at par with the local workers, then also the demand for migrants would continue to rise because it is quite easy to manage and supervise the migrants and they seem to be engaging in their work silently and without any protection. As they are not unionized, labor hazardous hardly matters. But the productivity and perfection of work done by the migrants are found to be poor, but it does not reduce their demand as they contribute to output even by doing overtime work. It needs to be mentioned here that migrant workers are bracketed as casualized or informalized to fit to the interest of local employers, which is dangerous and can hardly be digested by a community like Kerala.

Policy Interventions

It is obvious that given the shortage of domestic workers and the growing demand for manual workers especially in the construction sector, Kerala badly requires the relentless service of migrant workers how so poor the quality of work is. Their supply on tap actually fuels the State economy in many respects. Recognizing this, the State led policy interventions have been implemented to uplift the employment and living conditions of migrant workers in Kerala including certain social security schemes. As early as in 1979, Inter-State Migrant Work Men Act was enacted to regulate the work of migrants and to protect their interests. If implemented in tooth and tail, this Act could make desirable changes in the employment and living conditions of the

migrants in Kerala. Besides this, there are Companies Act, Minimum Wage Act, Equal Remuneration Act, Building and other Construction Worker's Act which provide for the betterment of workers including the migrants. What is noteworthy is a brave step which the government of Kerala has taken by bringing in Interstate Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme that commenced on May Day of 2010. This scheme makes every migrant entitled to a membership card that enables them to get Rs.25, 000 as health care assistance if they are hospitalized, besides a package of other welfare showers. But, the reach out of this scheme has been very dismal which is evident from the fact the in the first one and half years since the scheme was started, only less than 20,000 migrants got registered out of the lakhs of migrants living in the State. The main reason for this under enrollment of 'invisible' migrants is cited to be the lack of trade union among the migrants which created a communication vacuum with the implementing authority of this scheme, the Kerala Construction Workers Welfare Board.

Concluding Observations

Internal migration has become a reality today, and its intensity has grown with the growing urbanization and in-formalization of the labor market in Kerala. With the inflow of migrants from the rest of the country, Kerala has added another feature which makes it tantamount to the conditions of the developed countries. That is like the developed world, Kerala has also become a state that attracts migrant workers and at the same time sending its own skilled and semi-skilled man power to the outer world enhancing its ability to garner more foreign remittances. But on the contrary, it seems that Kerala is at crossroads in respect of dealing with the issues of migrant workers. The present condition of Kerala's labor market, characterized by the shortage of domestic labor coupled with their reluctance to take up physical work and their continuing migration to other countries including Middle East, necessitates the involvement of migrant workers in her economic process. Therefore the progress of the State may be jeopardized without the presence of migrant workers. At the same time migrant workers have started posing certain socio-economic issues which need to be tackled by a progressive community like Kerala.

ⁱ The case of Kerala in migration related studies stands distinguished at least in the context of Indian economy. It is the state which has been gaining a major chunk of household remittances that flow into India from other countries, nearly 40 percent of the total household remittances. Keralites are observed everywhere in the world. The community has been much ahead in

international as well as internal migration. It is quite interesting to observe now that such a state has started witnessing an unprecedented inflow of migrant workers from elsewhere in the country. Other two states which are in foray are Punjab and Goa, and three states together, viz. Kerala, Punjab and Goa account for high out-migrants from India (Czaika, 2011).

ⁱⁱ Labor mobility from Nepal to India remains unrestricted as visa requirements for Nepalese to come to India have been either eased or a non-existent one. This has caused migration of Nepalese to India, and to Kerala.

ⁱⁱⁱ This estimation is based on a train-based survey executed by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, not on the basis of Census Based survey. And therefore, naturally its accuracy stands questioned to some extent, but for the lack of other reliable information on the number of migrant workers, the estimate by GIFT has to be reckoned with.

^{iv} M.K.Gandhi had to encounter insurmountable hardships when he was a law professional in South Africa which made a sea change in his life, and finally ended up in the historical struggle against the British in India.

^v Comprehensive Health Insurance System (CHIS), a programme commenced by the government of Kerala to benefit those which are not covered by RSBY (Rashriya Swastya Bima Yojana).

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