

The Extend of Turmoil the Domestic Migrant Laborers in Kerala

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Abstract

India is the largest recipient off international remittances in the world of which about 50% were classified as remittances towards family maintenance. Kerala accounts for about 40% of the Indian household remittances. Kerala along with Punjab and Goa also reports high international migration: whereas at the all-India level only 38 per 1000 out-migrants leave the country, it is over ten times t hat number for these states . The large international migration, precipitous fall in fertility, and rapid urbanization has seen Kerala attract domestic migrant labour in large numbers in recent years. The state, located in the south-western tip of the Indian Peninsula, has been witnessing large inflow of migrant labourers not only from the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (in South India) but also from states in East India (West Bengal and Orissa), North India (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand) and North-east (Assam, Manipur). There is also migrant flow to Kerala from Nepal. This has helped to offset the shortage of labour caused partly due to the out-migration to other states and emigration to other countries. Higher wages for unskilled labour in the state, large opportunities for employment and shortage of local labour provided the necessary pull. As elsewhere, the migrant workers coming to Kerala were pushed out of their native places because of low wages and unemployment or underemployment in agriculture and other sectors. With signs of rapid growth of Kerala economy and the increase in activities particularly in infrastructure and construction sectors, the in-migration is expected to grow faster in the coming years. Apart from its importance in the economic development of the state, inter-state migrant flow facilitate retaining the demographic balance in a state which has the highest proportion of aged population and where a good proportion of the population in the working age group have migrated out of the state.

Keywords: Migration, labour issues, pulls back

Introduction

Urbanisation is one of the key “pull” factors of migration: “Contrary to conventional wisdom on urbanization and migration, high rates of migration (permanent and temporary) into urbanized areas have continued despite rising levels of (formal) unemployment and persistent urban poverty. The explanation lies in the expanding urban informal sector which represents a significant pull” (Deshingkar and Grimms, 2004: p.25). While persistent poverty may not be true of Kerala, urbanization and informalisation has been taking place rapidly. And it has attracted migrant lab our in large numbers.

In many instances, large migrant population provokes substantial amount translated into xenophobia, racism, or lesser forms of hostility toward migrants. While the inflow of migrants has grown exponentially in recent years into the rapidly urbanizing- and rapidly growing- South Western and Punjab- Haryana- Delhi belt, policy makers have not woken up to this reality, except for knee-jerk reactions following Bangalore exodus, or Suzuki violence. It is politically imperative that policy makers pay attention to living conditions in the migrant centers.

Part of the reason policy attention has not been forthcoming is that data on internal migration are notoriously inadequate as censuses and surveys are based on households which do not capture the temporary or semi-permanent migration satisfactorily. F or instance, NSS 64th round (2007-08) collected information on household characteristics, employment status and migration particulars of household members and information on out-migrants. In the survey, the out-migrants present place of residence in relation with the household being surveyed was classified as being any of the five categories: same district, same state but different district, another state, another country or ‘not known’. This is sufficient information to classify out-migrants as international or internal and remittance as international or domestic. However, it does not enable analysis of specific State-to-State, country-to-State or urban to rural migration or remittance

With what was thought to be over one million DML(Domestic Migrant laboures) in the state¹, the Government of Kerala (GoK) is concerned about their economic and social situation. The GoK als o feels the State has a responsibility towards the DML in Kerala and is seriously considering some interventions that are needed to ensure their welfare.

Table 1. Distribution (%) of DML by State of Origin and Age:

State	Age Class in Years					36 and above	Not reported	Percentage Share
	Below 18	18-23	24-29	30-35				
Uttar Pradesh	00	38.53	38.53	15.60	7.34	0	14.83	
Assam	1.57	50.39	34.65	10.24	2.36	0.79	17.28	
West Bengal	1.36	46.26	29.25	14.97	7.48	0.68	20.00	
Bihar	0.75	34.59	33.08	21.05	9.03	1.50	18.10	
Orissa	2.04	34.69	30.61	20.41	10.20	2.04	6.67	
Others	1.18	37.65	37.65	14.71	8.82	0	23.13	
Total	1.09	40.95	34.29	15.65	7.35	0.68	100	

Sectors of Employment: The striking aspect of the DML in Kerala is that they have come to fill almost all occupations and sectors of the economy. A look at Table 5 and the observation that almost all cells have entries is enough to substantiate it. The train survey over two weeks, a small window to the world of DML, was enough to testify it. Their largest concentration is in the booming construction sector with 60% reporting it. Manufacturing, Hotel and Restaurants and Trade too report substantive numbers. Interestingly, Kerala agriculture has also become dependent on migrant labour. The others group contains a multitude of sectors. Thus, Kerala economy is driven by the large DML.

Table 5. Distribution of DML by Occupation and Sector of Employment

Occupation	Sector of Employment							Total
	Agriculture	Construction	Hotel and Restaurant	Manufacturing	Trade	others	Not Reported	
Carpenter	-	0.54	-	0.14	0.14	0.81	0.14	1.90
Electrician	-	-	0.14	-	-	0.41	0.14	0.68
Mason/Flooring	-	3.54	-	-	-	-	0.14	3.68
Sales person	0.14	0.27	0.14	-	0.14	-	-	0.68
Tailoring	-	-	-	0.14	-	0.27	-	0.41
Skilled work	0.14	10.61	0.54	3.13	0.14	3.67	0.27	18.50
Unskilled work	2.04	43.40	5.44	4.22	1.36	11.56	1.50	69.52
Others	-	4.91	0.54	0.67	-	0.15	-	2.45
Not reported	-	0.27	0.14	0.14	-	0.68	0.95	2.18
Total	2.31	60.00	6.94	8.30	1.77	17.55	3.13	100

While the largest concentration of DML is among the unskilled work, they are not just confined to it. The next largest category is that of skilled work whether it is construction, manufacturing or hotels and restaurants. Masonry, carpentry and electrical work too have seen their entry (Table 5). On the whole, the DML have begun entering all skills and all sectors in Kerala.

Living Conditions of the DML (Domestic migrant labourers)

The Domestic Migrant Labour in Kerala are often living crowded in rooms with hardly space to move around. While about 8% of all those surveyed did not respond to the question, 'how many reside in your room', 42% reported seven or more in a room, 13% reported six in a room, 12% reported five, 13% four and 8% reported three in a room. Only about 5% of all DML reported one or two persons in the room. There is hardly any difference as regards crowding across the DML from different States. Further, almost 84% of them all congregate among their own language groups. Almost all the DML also reported access to toilets, but 95% of all are common toilets. Language groups stay together and work together. And about 94% of all do common cooking with their own language groups. Individual cooking is reported by only 3% of the DML.

It has been noted earlier that the numbers of DML in Kerala is over two million. The numbers being large and the crowding in many places is well beyond the acceptable limits it is important to introduce policies and regulations to protect the DML as well as the local population.

Life and Work Environment of Migrant Labour

"Most people, given the opportunity, will not choose to move from their family, friends and home. Indeed, most immigrants yearn to return home and may eventually do. It is only under the most hopeless conditions that potential emigrants consider the exit option, and only a fraction of these have the character, contacts and resources to carry it off" (Moses, 2006: p. 13)

"The migrant worker comes to sell his labour power where there is a labour shortage. He is admitted to do a certain kind of job. He had no rights, claims, or reality outside his filling of that job. While he fills it, he is paid and accommodated. If he no longer does so, he is sent back to where he came from. It is not men who immigrate but machine-minders, sweepers, diggers, cement mixers, cleaners, drillers etc. This is the significance of temporary migration. "(Berger & Mohr, 1989: p 58)

The current wave of migration which gathered momentum during the early 1990s is new both in terms of its quantity as well as sources. Earlier migrations to Kerala were mostly from the neighboring states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, and they were mostly seeking employment in professions predominated by manual labour such as earth work, road works, unskilled jobs in construction, and in services like ironing clothes, and as cooks and waiters in small hotels and eateries. They were concentrated around cities and towns, with the construction workers congregated at the construction sites. They stayed mostly in temporary sheds or vacant shop floors and on rare occasions in accommodation provided by the contractor. In terms of patterns of migration, settlement, employment and mobility, the present wave of migration differs from the earlier ones in terms of patterns of migration, settlement, employment and mobility.

As they are predominantly linked to construction activities, their presence is significant in various other professions too, like hotels and restaurants, brick kilns, jewelry work, bakeries, head-load work, hospitality, and in manufacturing industries of all kinds. They have a very visible and considerable presence even in the small towns of Kerala, and it is a common sight during early mornings for these labourers in great numbers congregating in town canters waiting for prospective job offers. One can see crowds of DML ranging from hundreds to thousands in the suburbs of Thrissur, Kannur, Ernakulam and Thiruvananthapuram cities. They have not only outnumbered the local workers in many professions but they have also totally replaced them. This is happening not only in manual labour sector, but also in the manufacturing sector and also in certain specific services/professions like hospitality. For instance, in Perumbavur Town and its surrounding panchayats, there are more than a thousand wood-based industries (according to sources there are 500 more units which are unlicensed) that engage around 30-40,000 workers, literally all of them are migrants! Most of the DML in Perumbavur area originally came to work in the wood industries, and many among them who are more enterprising and skilled, have consistently moved to other professions like construction and petty trade, hotels, petty shops etc. where wage levels or earnings are higher.

In order to get a bird's eye view of the range of issues around the life and work of DML, field studies were carried out in a number of sites spread over Perumbavur, Thiruvananthapuram and its suburbs, Ramanthali and Aluva. Unlike the previous chapter, this chapter and the next takes the approach of detailed case studies and personal interviews.

What triggered the migration to Kerala?

No one wants to leave one's home, family and surroundings to work in an alien place and under uncertain conditions. Obviously there were several factors that prompted these workers to leave their homes to come to the distant Kerala. Most of them have left home in their teens and have worked in several other Indian towns before coming to Kerala. The comparatively low level of wages, lack of employment opportunities, and the increasing unviability of the agricultural sector and its seasonal nature, have prompted most of them to seek employment elsewhere. Some of them have also come upon invitation by their friends/relatives in Kerala. In the

case of Assamese workers, the first batches came to Kerala in the late 80's and early 90's in the aftermath of a legal ban on wood felling and the consequent closure of wood/plywood industries in their state. It was also a time when wood industrial units were being set up in Perumbavur; they came in groups to work here, and were much preferred due to their experience and expertise in it. Later, when the construction boom started in the mid-90's many of them moved to construction, where the wages were much higher. The pattern was different in the case of construction workers in Ramanthali, where, most workers were recruited by labour contractors from Maldah district in West Bengal, and they were sent for a period of 60 days at a time; new batches came and went in response to the demand. In Thiruvananthapuram, the first batches came during the construction of the Southern Air Command campus in Aakulam

Employment

All the employers of DML – construction firms, labour contractors, manufacturers, casual employers, business owners, quarry/brick kiln owners etc – are unanimous about their professional sincerity and work culture. As noted, DML are employed in all sectors – formal and informal, agriculture, industry, trade and services, and belong to all levels of skill, experience and work categories – unskilled, skilled, trained, apprentices, helpers, experts, middlemen etc.

The employers have no complaints about their dedication to work and output, though when compared to local workers doing similar jobs, especially in skilled jobs, their productivity is less. For instance, many construction labour contractors opined that the quality of masonry work differs between the local masons and migrants, with regard to its finish and perfection. But the time and quantity of labour put in by an average migrant worker is much more than that by the local labourers. In many cases the average daily wages for a local and migrant mason vary up to Rs 100, and in many jobs that need complex calculation and perfection, they are yet to achieve a level of efficiency that is at par with the local workers. But, the migrant labourers are easy to manage and supervise; they do their jobs silently and continuously without breaks. They also put in longer hours and are ready to do overtime. In the case of construction workers at Ramanthali, their normal working day extends to 14 hours a day.

Construction workers belong to two categories: those who work with a contractor and have some assurance about regular employment, and those who seek daily employment by casual employers. Though the casual workers who seek daily jobs independently get more wages, they don't get regular employment. Their employment is dependent upon market demands, and they have to be ready to move in search of better wages and employment opportunities. In the case of workers attached to a contractor, they usually get employed on a regular basis, with the employer shifting them from site to site where he has work. This kind of employment also helps the labourer to work with experienced workers and acquire expertise to become more skilled and earn/demand better wages. The casual labourers who live independently or in small groups in the suburbs are comparatively more aged, and many of them have their families living with them. In most cases, both husband and wife go for work and earn for the family.

Vulnerability of Migrant Workers

Bustamante (2011) points out that "migrants are inherently vulnerable as subjects of human rights from the time they leave home to initiate their migration. In other words, any human being is less vulnerable at home than right after he leaves it to become a migrant. The same applies to the sociological extension of the notion of home to a community of origin. The same person that migrates had more resources, both material and human, to defend and/or protect, himself, when he was at home, prior to moving elsewhere, than after the outward movement had taken place." According to Derose *et al* (2007), vulnerability is shaped by many factors, including political and social marginalization and a lack of socioeconomic and societal resources. Varennes (2003) states that "living in host states where they (migrants) may not master the official language(s), are unfamiliar with the workings of the legal system and administration, detached from traditional support and family networks, exposed to a society with ways of life or cultures which they may find at times alien, they may face trials that can leave them disoriented and disturbed." Thus, vulnerability of the migrants arise because of living in a place which is different in culture, language, social settings, legal protection, entitlements and consumption habits from their native places and the loss of the traditional support system they enjoyed before migration. Though these aspects are usually discussed in the context of international migration, the situation is more or less the same when migrants cross borders of states within large countries like India. In view of the host state's failure to acknowledge their presence, inter-state migrants are barely considered in policy making in the state where they live. It is also possible that their voices may not be heard in the states of their origin.

Conclusion

A feature of the welfare boards in Kerala is that they are contributory in nature. The nature of contribution from government, employers and workers varies from fund to fund. The employer's contribution is higher than that of

the workers in all the funds (ibid). Whenever both contributions are meagre, government makes up the shortfall. The worker's contribution (as also benefits) varies from fund to fund and is dependent on the ability to pay. But in the case of the welfare fund for migrant labourers, employers' contribution comes only in the form of cess collected from the construction companies. Since construction industry is only one of the sectors in which migrant labourers are employed, in effect, there is no contribution from employers in other sectors. The initiative of the state government to institute a welfare scheme for migrant workers, in spite of its weaknesses, needs to be appreciated. It also indicates that the visibility of this 'invisible people' has increased in administration and governance aspects in the state. The state government, in the future, may have to think about constituting a separate mechanism to implement the scheme as presently the scheme is faced with constraints due to inadequate personnel. Currently, the staff of the Construction Welfare Fund Board is implementing this additional scheme without any change in the staffing pattern. They are also constrained because of the non-availability of vehicles and other facilities necessary for undertaking the field work. It is also important that the representatives of the migrant labourers are present in the monitoring committee. Kerala, a state known for participatory democracy, can not shed its responsibilities to involve the beneficiaries in the implementation of the scheme.

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