

The Cultural Diversity of Kerala and the Intensity of the Domestic Migrant Laborers to Kerala

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Abstract

Ethnic origins, religions, and languages are the major sources of cultural diversity. India is a country incredible for its diversity, biological and cultural. It is the natural resources that attracted to the subcontinent many streams of people at different times, from different directions; bringing together a great diversity of human genes and human cultures. Thus the bulk of the Indian population represents racial admixture in varying degrees. Unlike several other lands where the dominant human cultures have tended to absorb or eliminate others, in India the tendency has been to nurture diversity, which has been favoured by the diversity of the country's ecological regimes [Gadgil and Guha, 1992]. Powerful kingdoms and enumerable dynasties, contributed to the shaping of India's cultural regions. An important source of diversity among the people of India is the cultural identity of particular communities and regions. Despite maintaining distinct identities several *jatis*, sects, and communities have organic links with other segments of the population of the region, which develops a cultural persona over time.

Keywords: ethnic origin, welfare, cultural diversity

Introduction

Indian civilization has had a pluralistic character from the start. The pluralistic and composite ethos of Indian civilization, which began evolving during the Vedic period, was supplemented by the rise of Buddhism and Jainism, and was further reinforced during the early medieval period, which witnessed the early zenith in the Bhakti Movement. This composite tradition attained primacy during the late medieval period. Linguistic and philological evidences demonstrate the incorporation and adaptation of regional features into the mainstream of Sanskrit culture distinctly. Certain kinds of echo formations, which are characteristic of the Austric family of languages, found their way into the Indo-Aryan speeches. The presence of Kerala state, which accounts for 1.18 per cent (38863 square kilometres) of the total land area of India, accommodates 3.1 per cent (34 million) of the Indian population. The development experience of Kerala is characterised by high social development disproportionate to the level of economic growth. The experience, often described as the Kerala model of development, has received world wide attention from both scholars and development agencies. The achievements of Kerala, going at least by macro level indicators of social development, have exceeded those of other Indian states³ and some of the developed countries. The state is ranked first among the states in India on the basis of human development index and rural social development index. The state has also been successful in reducing poverty which is 13.7 per cent and 14.7 per cent in rural and urban areas respectively in 2004-05 while the corresponding figures for India was 28.7 per cent and 25.9 per cent (Tendulkar, 2009). The state's development pattern also indicates relatively low inequalities in health and education outcomes. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen cites Kerala as a case of support led security as against the growth mediated security.

Introduction

The achievements of Kerala are often located by Sen and others in the historical processes including the social reform movements, activities of missionaries and the church, mass mobilizations of the poor and the working class for their rights, public action and political activism. Decentralization of government conferring more autonomy and powers to local governments and provision for peoples' participation in planning at the local level are the recent political initiatives in the State for giving more voice to the people. In India, social security is listed in the Directive Principles of State Policy and is one of the subjects in the Concurrent List in the Constitution of India, which is federal in nature. Kerala state has been a front runner among the states in India in initiating social security schemes for different vulnerable sections of the society. These schemes, implemented mainly through different welfare boards, have been successful in extending social security to a limited extent to majority of the vulnerable groups. Extending the coverage of social security net to workers in the unorganized sector is identified as one of the major priorities of the state government (Government of Kerala, 2009).

The state government introduced a welfare scheme for the migrant workers on the May Day of 2010. Under the scheme titled 'Inter State Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme', a membership card is issued to each migrant worker who gets enrolled. Each registered worker would get up to Rs. 25,000 as healthcare assistance for in-patient care in empanelled hospitals in case of accidents or chronic diseases. However, the worker is

eligible to get only Rs. 100 per day and the maximum limit fixed per episode of disease is Rs. 2000. If the labourers become incapable of undertaking jobs for more than six months due to accidents or chronic diseases, they are eligible to get a special assistance of up to Rs. 25000. The labourers who have registered in the scheme continuously for three years are also eligible to enjoy a retirement benefit of Rs. 1000 per year subject to a minimum of Rs. 10,000 and a maximum of Rs. 25,000. Financial assistance to the tune of Rs. 50,000 in the event of death in accident at work site and Rs. 10,000 in the event of natural death is provided to the dependents of the migrant labourers. An additional assistance of Rs. 5000 to Rs. 15000 (depending on the distance to the state of origin) is also given for transporting the body to their native places. There is also a provision for assistance of Rs.3,000 per annum for the education of the children of migrant labourers who are studying beyond Class X in Kerala. The scheme is implemented through the Kerala Construction Workers Welfare Fund Board which is also running a scheme for the welfare of the construction workers. The migrant worker will be required to pay an annual contribution of just Rs. 30. The Welfare Board, which is financed mainly from the cess on construction activities, will credit twice that amount in her/his account. The government will provide the rest of the money needed for the welfare measures. The welfare fund package is in addition to the assistance available to inter-State migrant workers under the Inter State Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act and the rules framed under it. The welfare fund scheme would be monitored by an advisory committee chaired by the State Labour Commissioner and comprising representatives of various trade unions.

The movement of people in search of better economic conditions and a more secure environment is as old as human history. Such movements not only affect the lives of the migrants profoundly, but also lead to significant economic and social transformation in the regions of origin and destination of the migrants. Until recently, large out migration was viewed as the result of poverty and deprivation and development was thought as an antidote to levels of migration. Large investments of foreign assistance by the US in Caribbean and Central America, or trade liberalization in Mexico, did not reduce pressures of migration in the region. European, in particular France's experience with co-development has also been no different. The discussions have, since, gradually shifted away from this perspective and now it is widely recognized that migration is an aspect of globalization

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 seen in the previous section, the present DML stock is spread across both rural and urban areas and has percolated into all professions. Though it is still 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 centers 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.

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	

Source: Gulati Institute of Finance and taxation Survey, 2014.

The attraction of cultural diversity of Kerala for the migrants

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 unavailability 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.

Conclusion

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 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 with out any change in the staffing pattern. They are also constrained because of the nonavailability 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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