

SPATIAL MOBILITY AND THE CONSEQUENT ISSUES OF SOCIO-CULTURAL INTEGRATION CONFRONTED BY THE DOMESTIC MIGRANT WORKERS IN KERALA

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The state of Kerala appears to be one of the most dynamic places in terms of spatial mobility of people. The presence of people from Kerala could be seen all over the world. The fast development in transportation and communication facilities accentuated the spatial mobility process. While Malayalis are known for their penchant to go to far-flung places in search of jobs, it seems an irony that Kerala has now 3.2 million migrant labour population engaged in various sectors of activities. Interestingly, the size of the migrant workforce in the State exceeds the estimated number of Malayalees working abroad, especially in the Gulf.

It has been nearly a decade since manual labourers from several parts of the country began to flock into Kerala in search of better prospects and have now become an integral part of the manual work force and the economy of the state. As per the very recent report in 'The Hindu Daily'(12-02-16) " Kerala appears to be one of the choicest destination of domestic migrant workers , their ranks swelling by an estimated 2.35 lakhs every year to touch 32 lakhs now, up from 25 lakh in 2013." At present, migrant labourers constitute 10 per cent of Kerala's total population. Not just that, the workers, mostly from West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Uttar Pradesh are pumping in about Rs. 17,500 crore to their home states a year, according to a study conducted by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation(GIFT).

A study conducted by Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation (GIFT) points out that these young migrant workers are breathing life into the state's gasping farm sector, propelling its burgeoning construction industry, toiling at small industrial units, hotels and similar places. In short, they do all the menial works in the state. Without them the wheel of Kerala economy would not move. Truly described by Kerala's former Labour and Rehabilitation Minister, Shibu Baby John, as the wealth creators of Kerala, the migrant workers hail from India's north-eastern States as well as from Bihar, Bengal, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and UP, fan out into every nook and corner of the State, from Trivandrum to Kasargod, ready to do any work even the most repugnant one. Kerala cannot do without migrants and in almost all parts of the state, they dominate the work force.

However, the life is not easy for the migrant workers in Kerala as they find many differences in climate, language, food pattern, customs etc. The State Planning Board describes the inflow of migrant labourers as a 'Social Hazard'. They are victims of exploitation from various sectors. Often they are denied their very human rights. They are confronting grave problems and issues which are primarily social, cultural, and economic in nature. This paper aims at delineating the socio-cultural problems and hazardous situations the migrant labourers facing in the host society. The problems of social and cultural integration, social exclusion and insulation, social insecurity, indecent working environment, unsanitary living conditions and health hazards, denial of civic and public amenities etc. are the thrust areas of this presentation.

The Problem of Socio-Cultural Integration

One of the drastic socio-cultural problems encountered by the Migrant labourers is with regard to their integration with the local community. Accommodating and assimilating an alien culture and society is not an easy task for any individual or group. It is a gradual and slow process which essentially requires cooperation of both the communities. Generally, Keralites are exceptionally capable of integrating fast with the place of destination and hence lead a comparatively comfortable life. But the picture is entirely different as far as the migrant labourers in Kerala are concerned. At what degree could they integrate with the host culture and society? How far are they comfortable with their socio-cultural life in Kerala? Studies (GIFT and Jonathon W. Moses and S. Irudaya Rajan) show that labourers from the other states are well integrated into the host economy, but they are not harmonised with the host society. It means that most of the labourers earn a comfortable income but at the same time experience social alienation and social distance which make their life miserable in the 'God's Own Country'.

Let us examine some of the criteria which are the indicators of social and cultural integration of migrant community. The study conducted by Jonathon W. Moses and S. Irudaya Rajan gives a good insight into the degree of integration of the domestic migrant labour with the host society. According to them if the workers are isolated from the surrounding community it is more difficult for them to find out about the local wage, rights and support systems available to them. When language barriers are high, or when the workers are physically isolated from the surrounding population, then the chances of abuse and exploitation increase.

One of the important indicators of integration is the capacity to communicate in the local language, i.e. Malayalam. Their study reveals that 14 per cent of these workers do not communicate with the locals, and just under half (49%) are only communicating a little with the local population in Kerala. Under these circumstances, one might expect that migrant workers are especially exposed to misinformation and exploitation by employers, as they will have difficulty learning about the prevailing (local) working wages and conditions. They are often insulted, humiliated and ill-treated in workplaces and public places as they are incapable of using and understating the local language. Many cases of denial of human rights such as

prohibition of entry into buses, hospitals, places of worship etc have been reported. The bitter experience of Ms. Daya Bhai, renowned social activist, had in the Kerala state Transport Bus gives a true picture. She was humiliated and driven out of the bus at night as she was mistaken by the conductor as a migrant labourer. If this is the case with Daya Bhai what would be the fate of poor, helpless migrant labourers? As per the report in the Malayala Manorama Daily (06-10-2015) the trails of thousands of criminal cases involving the DML have been remaining pending on account of lack of availability of language translators. Such cases are huge in number with regard to migrants from North- Eastern states.

On an average, over 40 per cent of these workers reside at their work place, which means that they have limited contact with the outside world. This is a grave problem to the migrants from North Eastern states as well as Hindi speaking states. Taking into consideration the differences primarily in language (also in culture) between migrant labourers and local Malayalee community, this domestic migration gets a character of an international migration. Tamil labourers have advantages over others in this context due to the similarities in language.

With regard to their political integration, joining a union is an important measure which is also a way of gaining protection and support in an unfamiliar labour market. The study of Jonathon W. Moses and S. Irudaya Rajan estimated that a high percentage (99.4%) of migrant workers is unaware of the migrant organizations that exist to protect and help them. Similarly, almost 98 per cent was not members of a Welfare Fund Board—these are Boards which the State of Kerala's Labour Department uses to organize many of its welfare measures. In addition, most (98.2%) of these workers are not in possession of a ration card (for securing subsidized food stuffs). According to Sri Elamaram Karim, Former minister for Industry and leader of C I T U, language is the major problem they face in organising them. R. Chandra Sekharan of INTUC observed that though worker registration is crucial many migrants are scared of joining the unions. Being migrant workers with no voting right even if they have completed six years in Kerala, these 'guest workers' do not attract the attention of any trade unions or politicians.

Acknowledgement of the presence of domestic migrant labourers by the local self governing bodies is a significant indicator of the level of integration. Their concentration in certain pockets should be an area of concern for the LSGs, who issue licenses to small units and are mandated to provide basic facilities for sewage, waste disposal, drinking water supply and such other civic amenities. But unfortunately, the development documents of the LSGs normally do not make any mention and concern to address their welfare or problems. The domestic migrant labourers are officially non-existent as far as the LSGs are concerned. The study made by the Gulati Institute of Taxation discloses that the LSGs are very much aware of the problems and issues relating to DML in their area, but do not have any specific plans to address them because, as per their version, these are to be dealt by the appropriate departments of the state government.

Another implication of the socio-cultural integration is the nature of their residence and possession of landed property. Most of the migrant workers have a clustered dwelling unit system what we call labour camps. There are specific areas and specially built dwelling units for them. These are usually arranged by the contractor or the company. Most of the plywood industries in Perumpavoor have labour camps surrounded by huge walls and entry is prohibited to outsiders. The life in these types of labour camps is a mystery; no one knows the magnitude of human rights violation occurring inside this 'underworld'. Sometimes they have to find out dwelling facilities by themselves. Whatever may be the case, their social interaction and communication is limited within their own circle. Moreover, the local community hesitates to treat and accept them as their neighbours. Purchasing a house or piece of land for a permanent settlement is a distant dream for the migrant labourers as the cost of the same is much high in Kerala. Since the migration is predominantly a male dominated one, leaving their family in their home village, hardly anyone has an intention to establish a settled life here. They very much consider their stay a purely temporary one and therefore do not have a felt need for integration psychologically with the host society.

Food is one of the basic needs of human being for his survival. Every individual develops a food habit right from the childhood which is largely determined by the culture of the society in which one is born and brought up. This food pattern includes the type of grains, cereals, vegetables, fruits, oil, spices etc. used and the way of cooking. A sudden change in the food habit will definitely produce psycho-somatic ailments and problems. According to Dr. Hithesh Shankar, Police Surgeon, Trichur, death due to gastroenteritis problems are very high among the migrant labourers as they are not accustomed to Kerala style food. If we are deprived of the food we are accustomed to, will adversely affect our health, work efficiency, temperament and therefore result in a discomfort life of strain and stress. Migrant workers, particularly from north eastern states, find much difficulty to adjust with Malayalee dishes as there exists considerable differences between them. Many of them still remain as purely 'north Indian' and try to maintain their own dietary pattern, a kind of social insularity as well as an indicator of poor integration. Dr. C.J John, Clinical Psychologist, Medical Trust Hospital, Ernakulam observed that psychological and emotional stress, depression, feeling of loneliness, unnecessary fear and suspicion, suicidal tendency etc. are high among the migrant labourers mainly due to problem of adjustment with the new environment and difficulty in integration with the host society and culture that would ultimately lead to a kind of social alienation.

Social Exclusion and Insulation

Another devastating problem faced by the domestic migrant laborers is the social exclusion that adversely affects their life socially, emotionally and psychologically. The attitude and approach of the local population towards the migrant work force is not conducive. The migrant workers are generally called by the local population as 'Bai', a corrupt form of 'Bhai' in Hindi meaning 'brother'. But such appellation does not always

have a brotherly tinge. "There is a general tendency in the state to view migrant labourers as second grade citizens. This attitude should be changed and we should accept the fact that they are very much part of our life now." Kerala's Former Labour and Rehabilitation Minister, Shibu Baby John said. He added that, though sporadic incidents of crimes involved by migrant labourers had been reported in the state, most of them are peace-loving.

The participation and involvement of migrant labourers in various socio-cultural occasions (such as Onam, religious festivals, marriage, birthday party, art and cultural fest etc.) is not welcomed wholeheartedly by the local community. Their presence is often felt as inauspicious and is rarely invited for such occasions. Even if they attend they find themselves as the odd one out. Interestingly it is also noticed that many migrant labourers are actively participating in meetings and processions of political parties and in some festivals of host society. For e.g. many migrants from West Bengal took part in the popular 'Pulikali'fest at Trissur this year. Their participation was not on account of their cultural integration but the fact is that these people were hired by the organizers and paid for the same.

Another major factor fostering integration is the establishment of marital relationship. Blending of different cultures becomes more possible if there is a practice of give and take of life partners between two culturally distinct groups. This is a remote possibility in a traditional society like India and also in Kerala. How far the local Kerala families would accept a conjugal relationship with migrant labour families? Except some cases of love affairs and elopement, none of the local Malayalee families expresses willingness to establish marital relationship with the migrant labour family.

It is an indisputable fact that the migrant community is substantially contributing to the socio economic development of Kerala society and economy. Life today is impossible for the host community without the valuable service of these people. But the irony is that the Kerala community shows hesitation to accept the migrant labourers socially and psychologically but at the same time needs their services badly. This double standard attitude is much evident and they have lot of apprehensions and suspicion about the whereabouts, background and intention of these non-Keralite labourers. Often their indifferent mannerisms produce suspicion among the locals and therefore the very presence of these aliens makes many local community uneasy and irritable. Even many Keralites believe that they create malignance to host culture and pose threat to social security. Alexander Jacob, former ADGP of prison, revealed that because of their unfamiliar and suspicious mannerisms there were several instances of complaints from the locals upon which the police arrested many innocent migrants from public places, produced them in courts; many of them have been sent even to mental hospitals. Due to the unfamiliarity with the local language they were unable to respond appropriately to the queries and often find no one to argue their cases. Only a few do get the free service of legal society.

If one or two labourers are caught for some alleged criminal acts, we tend to generalise and label that all these migrant workers are criminals, conveniently forgetting that the crime rate is much high in this 'God's own Country' in which local people are involved. If this is the case, does it mean that all Malayalees are criminals? Should we not honestly acknowledge their contribution and treat them with fair mindedness and human respect? Viewing the entire migrant workers with suspicion by the host society has badly shaken their confidence. But the fact is that nearly 90 per cent of them are genuine workers holding valid ID cards issued by competent authorities. Often the local labourers employ some kind of mechanisms to keep the non-Malayalee labourers away. They consider themselves as very superior as far as the quality of works is concerned. They possess a tendency to under evaluate the work of their counterparts and also do hesitate to provide with any support and encouragement to them sympathetically considering their unfamiliar environment. Clashes between the local labourers and the migrants are not rare which always go in favour of the former. The local labourers have some apprehensions with regard to the hours of work and the rate of wages. The employers have a general opinion that the migrant workers are ready to work for 8 to 10 hours with less wages than the local labourers. This kind of attitude of the employers also will produce among the local labourers a feeling of animosity towards the migrants that result into exclusion of migrant workers by the local labour force. Every kind of exclusion works to the advantage of the host society in various ways: to keep the wage levels low, rent levels high, services cheap, and maintain a labour force that is at their beck and call, one that can be absorbed and driven out at will.

What kind of exclusion are the migrant laborers facing in the area of education? Though the number of migrant labourers living with their family including children of school going age is less in number, continuing education to their children remains an unresolved problem. The Right to Education Act stipulates that every child aged between six and fourteen should have free and compulsory education. Sarva Sisksha Abhiyan in the Ernakulam district conducted survey among them and found that several children in the age group of 6 to 10 were not studying in school. They were mostly children of migrant labourers, commercial sex workers and children living with HIV. Though the numbers may be small now, it is likely to increase in future with the number of migrant labourers in the state increasing and the education of their children being an issue due to constant movement from one place to another. The medium of language is a problem for many migrant families. The schools both aided and unaided do not show much interest in admitting them. Moreover, the fee structure is not affordable to many of them.

Unhygienic living conditions and Health Hazards

The condition of dwelling units and the living environment of the migrant labourers is terrifically miserable. Most of the units are tent like temporary sheds made out of tin or plastic sheets or asbestos with no proper ventilation and air circulation. The rooms are shady and each room is jam-packed with large number of

inmates, several times higher than it can accommodate. The availability of sanitary facilities such as toilet, bath rooms, washing area, drinking water, drainage etc are a luxury for them. For example, a labour camp in Kakkanad, Ernakulam, housing two hundred labourers possesses a single toilet! (City Express , Kochi, 18, july, 2012). In some area they cook and eat right next to leaky toilets. The situation worsens during the summer season. Many of them sleep outside the tent in the mosquito infected surrounding during the summer. It is true that no human being can lead a healthy life under such conditions. The employers look down on them and they do not have a choice. It is also sarcastically mentioned that slums are far better than the labour camps. It is an irony and shame for the 100 percent literate Kerala society that the helpless migrant labourers live in ‘hell’ in God’s own country! Every now then we hear the news of closing down of Migrant Labourer’s Camps due to unhygienic conditions by the Health Department. Notices are issued to the owners and dead line is given for improving the condition. But unfortunately, most of these camps are continuing in the previous condition as there is laxity in proper monitoring and follow up by the authorities concerned.

An alarming increase in the number of deaths due to cardiac arrest has become a phenomenon among young migrant workers as per the reports from the Taluk Hospital , Perumbavoor. In more than 25 postmortems conducted on the bodies of migrant labourers, below 28 years of age (in 2011), cardiac arrest was the main cause of death. Doctors suspect drug abuse, alcoholism and their negligence in seeking timely medical treatment as the reasons for this. In the words of Dr. Ramshan K R. of Government Hospital at Vengola, Ernakulam, “when an illness is diagnosed, the migrant labourer usually leave for their native place as they prefer their alternative folk medicines to alopahy”(The New Indian express,24-4-12). The overwhelming use of drugs and alcoholism among the migrant workers is intertwined with several factors such as, miserable unhygienic living condition, tedious work, life away from ones own family members, peer group influence, better daily wages. Many of them have developed the habit of using harmful substances and consider as a panacea to get rid of the emotional, mental stresses and physical strain and fatigue.

Dr. Hithesh Shankar Police Surgeon, Trichur, on the basis of the number of dead bodies of migrant labourers reaching hospitals for postmortem, estimated that 50 non –Keralite migrant labourers die every month in Kerala (The Malayala Manorama, 28-11-13). He also observed the following points with regard to the occurrence of death among them:

1. 25% of the death among the migrant labourers is suicide.
2. The number of murder cases is increasing every year
3. Most of the deaths are occurring while working without proper safety measures.
4. Compulsion to do the work, even the person is not physically fit, is also a major cause.
5. Death due to gastroenteritis problems as they are not accustomed to Kerala style food.
6. Death on account of heart diseases, which is on the rise among workers aged between 40 and 60.

Yet another issue to be taken into account is the demographic/gender dimensions of migrant workers and their sexual and erotic need gratification in the context of Kerala. As per their age profile a vast majority of them are young able-bodied belonging to the age group of 18 to 30 years. More importantly, almost all of them are male, and only a very small minority has brought their families with them. According to the volunteers of Kerala State Aids Control Society this sudden influx of migrant male population into Kerala, who earn wages and has extra money to spend, has given a boost to local sex industry. Prostitution is rampant among them, but is carried out under veils of secrecy; moreover, they also are careful not to invite the wrath of local moral policing. All this, along with the total lack of knowledge about safe sex and the use of condoms make them a section that is very vulnerable to fatal infections and diseases. As per the survey conducted by Rajagiri Outreach among 2414 migrant workers in Perumbavoor region, two of them have HIV positive and 120 have other type of venereal diseases.

It is reported that the number of women including girl children are increasingly reaching to Kerala, especially Aluva, Ernakulam from north eastern states.. Every day many groups, each consisting of 20 to 30 members, reach Aluva railway station but there is no further information about them-where do they go? what type of activities are they engaged in? who bring them? A few of them are employed as house servants and a few in some small scale manufacturing units. Many contractors, recruiting agents and intermediaries are behind this human trafficking and they take undue advantage out of exploiting them in several ways. There were many incidents of sexual exploitation and violence ranging from sexual assaults to gang rape by the local people and the helpless migrants rarely get any legal and medical aids. The investigation made by the Intelligence Department in Ernakulam could find many such women remaining in the labour camps without any work. They were suspected to be involved in the sex industry to cater to the need of migrant population. This will accentuate the spread of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS among them and also affect seriously the physical moral health of migrant society as well as host society.

Unsafe Working Conditions

Despite being a vital cog in turning the industrial and manufacturing wheel, migrant workers continue to be victims of negligent and apathetic treatment. Desperate to earn a livelihood, they are forced to work in unsafe conditions, often risking their lives with no guarantee of compensation in the event of an accident. Like the ordinary Keralites working in the Gulf, they do all kinds of jobs: construction, stone-blasting, stone-crushing, septic tank cleaning, brick-making, road-paving, carpentry, tree-climbing, log-splitting, linen-washing and what not !.

As per the study conducted by the Department of Community Medicine, Government Medical College, Calicut, construction work accidents contribute to 16.4% of fatal global occupational accidents. Construction workers have got an attributable risk of 50% for musculo-skeletal injuries, higher than all other workers. Scarcity of water, limited availability of cleaning facilities and climatic conditions hasten the development of dermatitis

(skin diseases) among construction workers. The prevalence of water and vector borne diseases, respiratory, dermatological and eye problems, injury and high risk behaviours were reported to be high among unskilled and semiskilled construction workers. They are often prone to jaundice, malaria, typhoid and dengue fever. Many such cases were reported in last few years because of poor sanitary conditions at work/camp sites and due to their exposure to outdoor unhygienic conditions, where chances of fecal oral transmission are high. On his reply to an opposition notice on health problems of migrant labourers, Former Minister for Health, Govt. of Kerala, said that most of the workers in the labour camp were suffering from different disorders, including skin problems, tuberculosis, HIN1 and malaria; last year those affected by fever till July was 13.45 lakhs. (PTI, 8 Jul 2015, Thiruvananthapuram). The migrant laborers are not provided with any medical benefits by the employer or the work contractor. Sometimes they are not permitted to take leave on medical ground. The absence of recreational facilities, the nature of work, hours of work, low pay, poor housing and separation from family, lack of job security and lack of access to occupational health services cause anxiety among the migrant workers

As per the Factories act and The Inter State Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme, the workers or their relatives are eligible for benefits in the event of a fatal accident. A unit using power and employing more than ten workers are covered under the Factories Act and the employer is required to register all workers and bestow them with all relevant social security benefits. Dependents of the migrants meeting with accidents in the work place are entitled to Rs. one lakh under the Inter State welfare Scheme. But in reality they hardly receive any of these benefits with their employer and contractor concerned exploit their circumstances of abject lack of awareness about their rights. Often the employer, through the contractor, resorts to informal and illegal payment and settle the issue by merely paying for the transportation of the body back home. It is because of the illegality involved in the employment of the of migrant labourers that often the employers go into hiding as soon as something goes amiss.

Employers are expected to provide insurance coverage to migrant workers as well. But that does not happen as these workers are mostly not registered and their names would be missing from the muster rolls. Death of migrant workers at work place cannot be considered as accidents but culpable homicide since in majority of cases there is an element of criminal negligence on the part of the employer. But this aspect is hardly pressed in the court, since innocent people and their dependents are unaware of such possibilities and often settle for a meager compensation. Migrants are also deprived of the benefits of welfare fund board because of the elaborate formalities involved to qualify for these benefits and the inadequate amount set apart for these purpose. Recently incidents were reported of migrant labourers suffocated to death while working in canal and manholes in Kochi and Calicut. Most of these workers who perform essential service are given no safety gear. "The drain was about 15 feet deep with a width of 1 meter. There was very little water in drain, but there was a lot of waste accumulated. Poisonous gase in the drain may have led to their suffocation" said the leading fireman T. Shaji (The Hindu, 14-4-14). Even the fire men were unable to enter the drain through the small manhole with their breathing apparatus set and oxygen.

There are about 1200 wood industrial establishments including 300 plywood companies functioning in Perumbavoor, Kothamangalam areas in which more than 1.5 lakhs of migrant workers are employed. Accidents are reported more in plywood companies. In one such an incident occurred in May 2014, four north Indian migrant labourers died out of serious burns in a plywood company in Perumpavoor. Three of their dead bodies were buried in Kochi itself with out getting a chance for the relatives to see the body for the last time and perform the death rites.

Conclusion

. Every citizen of our country has the right to travel, work and live anywhere in the country. Keralites are well aware of it and are it's true beneficiaries. The migrant labourers are arriving in Kerala in order to find a livelihood for themselves and support their family. But unfortunately we do not wholeheartedly treat these poor and helpless labourers from other states as equal to us and help them to make their survival easy and comfortable. As coming from a distinct socio-cultural and economic life situation they are confronting grave problems of adjustment. They are often treated with contempt and are excommunicated from our social and interactional frame. Therefore, their life in the host society is quite miserable and problematic. It's consequences are not confined within the migrant community itself but seriously affect the entire spheres of life of people of Kerala.

Measures are needed to improve the work environment of these workers by ensuring availability of protective gears, good living conditions and sanitation facilities at the sites along with accessible, accountable occupational health services. A system of health recording and routine surveillance among workers should be implemented. Above all, an attitudinal change is mandatory from the part of Keralites in general and employers in particular towards the migrant labourers. Devoid of stereotype, prejudices and bias, accept the migrant workers as human beings and fellow citizens with all the rights guaranteed by the constitution. Only when the plights of these 3.2 million people are improved, the state of Kerala will become the 'God's Own Country' in the real sense. As the primary beneficiary of the services rendered by the domestic migrant labourers, the host Kerala community should look into their chronic problems and issues scientifically as well as sympathetically. An action plan should be devised collectively by the ministry of labour, health and social welfare and implement them on a war foot basis. A separate department may be established for its effective monitoring, follow up and evaluation of the output. The role of local self governing bodies, non voluntary agencies and common public is equally important in addressing their problems.

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