

From Internal Mobility to Global Migration: The Kerala Experience

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Abstract

Migration is one of the important components of demography and population change. The changes in scale and pattern of migration have a great consequence in both areas of origin and destination; influences on social, economic, cultural, and political configuration of a society. A general definition of migration is the movement of people from one place to another either temporarily or permanently within the country and abroad. Migration from Kerala on a significant scale began within the colonial era and continued after independence. In retrospect, it is possible to discern two waves of international labour migration within each of these periods.

Aim of this study is to analyse the impact of Kerala Migration on social and economic status of the society in a general point of view.

Keywords :Migration, Kerala, Gulf Countries, West Asia, Malayalee Diaspora

Introduction

The migratory movement which gained momentum during the years following the First World War continued to remain brisk thereafter. Though there was a setback during the 1930s on the account of the depression, the Second World War gave an opportunity for large scale migration from Kerala. The war as usual created shortages, miseries and even conditions of famine in many parts of the country. Most of the migrants who had gone to Burma and Malaya came back to the country with the outbreak of the hostilities. However, the war was instrumental in accelerating the migratory movement from Kerala for another reason. One of the outcomes of the war was large scale recruitment of the young man to the army and other defence services. In Travancore were unemployment among the educated had been persisting since the 1920s, large scale recruitment of personnel to the army became a golden opportunity to the educated youngsters to secure employment. There was a rush to the recruitment offices in search of military service. From the Travancore alone 1.57 lakhs persons were recruited in the army and civilian labour force. Thousands of young men were enroll in the army from Cochin and Malabar regions also. The demand for the labour came not only from the army but also from the economy connected with the war. The result was the transformations of Travancore and Kochi region of Kerala as out migrating regions. According to Zachariah, the total number of in- migrants in Travancore- Kochi was respectively 38000 during 1931-41 and 53000 during 1941-51¹. Against this, out-migrants from Travancore-Cochin total 43000 from the decade 1931-41 and 143000 for the decade 1941-51. According to another estimate the total number of Travancore- Cochin born

persons living outside the state was 1.17 lakhs in 1951². Apparently, more number of migrants were arriving in Kerala, throughout migrations was also brisk during the years following the First World War. However, by 1951, Kerala became an out-migrating region with more number of out migrants than in migrants.

The migrants from Kerala included senior civil servants, doctors, lawyers, engineers, degree holders and matriculates even during the pre-independence period. In 1931, for example, the educated persons of such categories numbered 2162 out of a total migrant population of 39742 from Cochin.

OUT-MIGRATION OF KERALITES IN FREE INDIA

The massive development program launched soon after independence was a potential factor capable of promoting interstate migration in the country. The gigantic industrial ventures like the fertilizers corporations, steel complexes, heavy machine tool factories etc. established in the different parts of the country required the services of large number of skilled workers and educated persons. They served as fill factors to the migratory movement from a state like Kerala was in the forefront of the educational development. Intensity of migration from Kerala could naturally go up. As a ratio to the total interstate migrants in India, those from Kerala formed 4.26%. By 1981 Kerala could overtake all the states except Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan intensity of migration. Out-migrant as percentage of the state population increase to 4.44 and as percentage to the total interstate migrants to 4.71 respectively³.

The progressive increase in the size of the Malayalam speaking population living outside Kerala can provide a continuous picture of the flow of migrants from Kerala.

As can be seen from the table, the size of the Malayalam speaking population living outside Kerala has grown up since independence. However, the rate of increase was the highest during the decade 1951 to 1961. Evidently, the industrial ventures started soon after independence would have provided additional leverage to the migratory flow from Kerala. The total Malayalee population living outside Kerala percentage of all Malayalee state was 6.38 in 1981 against hardly 0.5 in 1901. Needless to say, most of the settlers were migrants or the descendants of the migration from Kerala. From the very beginning, the largest concentration of Malayalees living outside Kerala was in Tamil Nadu where a migrant of ethnic Malayalee origin, M G Ramachandhran could even become the chief minister. However, by 1981, Karnataka had overtaken Tamil Nadu in accommodating more number of Malayalam speaking population⁴.

Migratory movement gained momentum when employment opportunities were expanding on account of the brisk economic activities. The educated youth of Kerala could take advantage of the openings in other parts of India and move in the large numbers during the 1950s and 1960s.

KERALITES IN FOREIGN LANDS

As mentioned earlier Keralites were prudent to open pastures new by migrating to foreign lands, though on a limited scale for the early decades of the 20th century itself. The important destinations were Burma, Malaya and Srilanka. By 1931 the Malayalee migrants numbered 11,343 in Burma 34,894 in Malaya and about 11,000 in Ceylon⁵. Most of migrants to Burma and Srilanka came back at the time of Second World War or with the attainment of independence of those countries.

Keralites were not far behind in migrating to the West also. However, migration to the West with the USA, becoming the most important destination gained importance only after the attainment of independence. It is estimated that Malayalees form roughly 10 percent of the Indian population in USA. Most of the migrants to the USA are well educated professionals like engineers, doctors, business executives, accountants and paramedical professionals like nurses, technical hands etc. Nevertheless, large scale migration to the USA is not so easy for various reasons including quota restrictions.

The shrinking employment opportunities which diminished the chances for migration to the other parts of India, to which reference was made earlier, put hundreds of thousands of potential migrants of Kerala in a predicament. Luckily for them a new opening for large scale migration was in the offering. It was the gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, UAE, Qatar which became the promised land to the migrants from Kerala as wells from many parts of the world.

The countries of the Persian Gulf region in which nearly two thirds of the oil reserves of the world are found had began to recruit expatriate workers from outside on a limited scale since the discovery of oil. The inflow of expatriate workers became massive with the oil boom of the 1970s which those countries launched ambitious development plan. The influx continued to remain high since then, India had political, administrative, even ethnic connections with West Asian countries at the time of independence, there were about 13500 persons of Indian origin in various West Asian countries however, and migrations from India acquired importance only after the oil boom of 1970s. There was a setback in 1991 on the account of the gulf war but the number well up further once the hostilities ceased Migrants from India hail from many states, but majority of them are believed to be from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Goa. Various estimates place the migrant workers from Kerala at about 40-50 percent of the total from India.

However, migration from Kerala gained momentum only after the oil boom of the 1970s. Certain special reasons seem to have facilitated large scale migration from Kerala. First, Kerala which had maritime trade relation with the countries of the Middle East from ancient times has an advantage over other parts of India in sending more number of migrants to the gulf regions. Second, some of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar are believed to be descendants of Arab merchants who settled in Malabar Coast. The ethnic connections could serve as a facilitating factor for attracting Muslims of Malabar to the Middle East. Thirdly, the legacy of migration already undertaken from the early decades of 20th century would have been another positive factor in promoting migration to the Gulf. Fourth, the very attractive wage rates which the migrants could get in the Gulf region provided added attraction for large scale migration from Kerala. Finally, opening in the Gulf was a good sent opportunity to the growing ranks of the unemployed who were in a predicament when opportunities in other parts of India were dwindling.

The state government of Kerala was the first to make any survey of the magnitude of migration to gulf. There were as many as 1.86 lakh migrant workers in the gulf region in 1980 according to the survey conducted by the state government of Kerala. The migrant population in the Gulf region was started to be between 3.10 to 3.25 lakhs in 1983 according to another estimate⁶. During the gulf war of 1991, there was a setback to the migratory flow and large number of migrant workers returned to India. After the war, the outflow regained momentum, though return migration has also intensified. However, Zachariah's estimate based on a survey conducted in Kerala places the number of migrant in gulf regions at about 13.6 lakh in 1999⁷.

Demand for expatriate workers as a whole came mainly from the construction sector during the initial stages of migration. Naturally, most of them were employed either as skilled workers like carpenters, masons, plumbers, electricians, painters or as mere as unskilled hands. Domestic sector constituted another sector of employment. A good number of the unskilled workers were employed as cooks, sweepers, gardeners and ayahs. There was not much variation from such a general pattern in the occupational profile of the migrant workers from Kerala. Significantly, in 1980, 48.19 percent of workers from Kerala were unskilled hands whose educational qualification was below secondary level. Skilled workers whose level of education was below secondary level accounted for 20.76 percent of the total in 1980. The migrants also included a few engineers, accountants, doctors, nurses and others with technical qualification and professional skill. There has been a change in the educational qualification and occupational career of the migrant workers as years went. Even then, the educational profile of the migrants is not so high in comparison of that of the migrants to the USA.

Migrants take place from almost all parts of Kerala. However certain districts like Malappuram, Kozhikode, Kannur, Thrissur and Trivandrum are identified with high intensity of migration. Migration to the gulf by and large a male phenomenon and migrants are bound to return to India after serving in the gulf for a few years.

CONCLUSION

The main attraction for large scale migration to the gulf region, as stated earlier, is the possibility of getting remuneration at rates high by Indian standards. There is no restriction regarding the remittance of the earnings to India. Since most of the emigrant workers retain their families in India, they remit a portion of their earnings to India in order to support their families or for accumulating sufficient savings for starting a new career once they came back from the gulf.

The remittances from the Gulf countries reach India through private transfer payments originating from different country regions. Money sent from the gulf region stem either from the sterling area or from the other currency area comprising mainly the oil exporting countries of west Asia. According to Gopinathan Nair the share of Gulf region in the private transfer payments from the sterling area was 10 percent till 1973, 20 per cent in 1974-75, 50 percent in 1975-76 and two-thirds for the period in 1976-79 to 1984-85⁹. Similarly the share of oil exporting countries in West Asia and North Africa from the other currency area accounted for 50 percent in 1973-74 and 1974-75 and 90 percent during the period 1976-77 to 1984-85.

According to CDS (2007), Kerala received remittances RS: 18465 Crore. These remittances are come to about 25 percentage of NSDP of Kerala. The remittances were 1.74 times the revenue receipts of the state, 1.8 times the annual expenditure of the Kerala government, and seven times of what the state received from the central government¹⁰. At present emigration has become all-pervasive in the economic and social life in the State and has outpaced migration within India. Almost all families in Kerala are affected by migration to the Gulf region in one way or another. Migration is affecting every facet of life in Kerala, economic, social, demographic, political and even religious.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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²*Ibid.*

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⁴*Op cit*, p.198.

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⁶Government of Kerala, *Op cit*.

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⁹IrudayaRajan. S and P R Gopinathan Nair, 'Saudi Arabia, Oman and the Gulf States' in Brij V Lal. (ed). *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, Editions Didier Millet, Paris and Singapore, 2006, Pp. 222-233.

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