

# Kerala Diaspora and the Emerging Role of Political Economy: An Evaluation

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### Introduction

Migration has been a subject of growing academic interest as it contributes significantly to economic development. What figures prominently here are certain aspects of migration such as the political and human rights rather than just purely theoretical aspects. This follows from the fact that the concerned political economy is implicated in issues of their functioning and survival. The historical background and theoretical perspectives of international migration are subjects of great interest. Miller (2016)<sup>1</sup> offers a liberal-nationalist account, which we might view as further developing the cultural argument earlier advanced by Walzer (1983)<sup>2</sup> in explicit nationalist terms. According to Miller, the right of states to control immigration is grounded in the right of nations to exercise self-determination. Many studies examining this relationship between the migrants, strength of identification, threat and their responses to it have focused upon a single category of identification: most commonly, ethnic or national identity (Boski, 1991)<sup>3</sup>. Whether migration is perceived as voluntary or forced, it affects the migrant's strategies for dealing with cultural demands, human rights issues and potentially conflicting identifications required in the new country (Lalonde *et al.* 1992)<sup>4</sup>. Historically, the trends and implications of migration from India have varied from time to time. The very tradition of out-migration of Indians might be traced back to 268-231 BCE when Ashoka, the Mauryan Emperor sent messengers or emissaries across the world to spread the teachings of Lord Buddha (Singh and Chand 2004)<sup>5</sup>. The incidence, complexity and diversity of migration on a global scale have considerably increased during the last few decades.

The migration experience of Kerala, the southern state of India, from gulf migration to the present replacement migration stimulates a lot for research. This paper mainly focuses on examining the trend analysis of migration at the global, national and regional level in the context of Kerala. My focus is on examining efforts of political economy in dealing with issues of migrant survival rather than on purely theoretical questions or issues. Hence the specific objectives of this paper are (i) to examine the trends in global, national and regional migration and (ii) to examine the role of political economy on the question of migration in the context of Kerala. The paper is based on data derived from United Nations Migration Office for the last 50 years, between the years 1970 and 2019. Statistics of migration as per International Migrant Stock Report of 2019 has also been used for net migration rate analysis of India for the last 50 years. In order to specifically evaluate migration trends of Kerala, I have also consulted Kerala Migration Survey report of 2018.

### Trends in Migration

People have been moving across borders in search of better social and professional opportunities since a long time.. However, labour migration was considerably speeded up and popularized during the era of globalization. Accurate data on migration is difficult to obtain because many migrant workers lack official status. According to World Migration Report 2018, migration has emerged in the last few years as a critical political and policy challenge in matters such as integration, displacement, safe migration and border management. There were 271.6 million international migrants in the world in 2019, according to the United Nations sources. The number of migrants, representing 3.4 per cent of the world's population, is increasing faster than the global population, driven by economic prosperity, inequality, violence, conflict and climate change. During the last 50 years, the Compound

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Annual Growth Rate of international migration has been estimated to be 2.36 per cent.

Having a long history of migration, India is the top source of international migrants. The number of international Indian migrants has more than doubled over the past 25 years, growing about twice as fast as the world's total migrant population. According to the International Migrant Stock Report of 2019, India, with 17.5 million international migrants, has emerged as the top source of international migrants, constituting 6.4 per cent of the world's total migrant population. Similarly a good number of foreigners immigrate to India. Thus, the net migration rate, the difference between the number of immigrants and the number of emigrants (people leaving an area) throughout the year, has assumed some significance. The current net migration rate for India in 2020 is -0.369 per 1000 population, a 3.66 per cent decline from 2019. It can be seen that the net migration rate, expressed as net number of migrants per 1,000 populations, has been positive during the pre-globalization period. However, the globalization era opened up opportunities for Indians on a large scale so that the number of emigrants outnumbered immigrants leading to negative figures in net migration rate since early 1990s.

### Settlement History and Kerala Diaspora

The migration story of Kerala is closely related to its settlement history. The settlement history of Kerala dates back many millennia. The Stone Age carvings in the Edakkal Caves feature pictorial writings believed to date to at least the Neolithic era around 5,000 BC, indicating the presence of a prehistoric settlement in this region<sup>6</sup>. Kerala had direct contact across the Arabian Sea with all the major Mediterranean and Red Sea ports as well those of the Far East. The spice trade between Kerala and much of the world was one of the main drivers of the world economy for a long time. Kerala was a major spice exporter as early as 3000 BC, according to Sumerian records. According to Sumerian records, Kerala was referred to as the 'Spice Garden of India' exporting spice as early as 3000 BCE. Kerala's spices had attracted ancient Babylonians, Assyrians and Egyptians to the Malabar Coast in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE.<sup>7</sup> Trade relations were believed to be the point of settlement or migration of foreigners to Kerala. It is believed that merchants from West Asia and Southern Europe established coastal posts and settlements in Kerala. The Jewish connection with Kerala started in 573 BCE. Arabs also had trade links with Kerala; they intermarried with the local people, resulting in formation of the Muslim Mappila community.<sup>8</sup> By 345

AD, Christians from Edessa (Mesopotamia) arrived in Kerala under the leadership of Thomas of Cana, and in 825, another group joined them. In the 4th century, some Christians also migrated from Persia and joined the early Syrian Christian community who traced their origins to the evangelistic activity of Thomas the Apostle in the 1st century (John Ralston Marr, 1985)<sup>9</sup>. Islam too arrived in Kerala through Arab traders during the time of Prophet Muhammad (AD 609 - AD 632). Kerala has had very early relations with the Middle East even during the Pre-Islamic period. Muslim merchants are known to have settled in Kerala by the 7th century AD and introduce Islam.

The monopoly of overseas trade in Malabar prospered under the Arab-Mappila alliance until the arrival of Portuguese in Kerala in the year 1498. The Dutch (1661–1795) who succeeded the Portuguese reduced the area of the Old Portuguese town, abandoned the fort and destroyed most of the public buildings built by the Portuguese. The Portuguese, Dutch, Arabs all had trade relations with the state. Later, when the traders started to take control over the affairs of state, British came as an ally to protect the state and demanded permission for trade in return. Eventually they took control over the land of Kerala.

All these trade relations in a way opened up Kerala's commercial and professional opportunities in those countries leading to large scale emigration in course of time. Migration has been a significant factor in helping reduce poverty and unemployment in Kerala. For over centuries, there has been steady migration from the state of Kerala to countries in the Gulf and different parts of India and the world. Kerala received much attention in the 1970s in view of the large number of emigrants to gulf countries. Migration from Kerala to other states of India and to countries abroad has become so influential that its impact felt in every aspects of life in the state. Through migration, the economic status of the average household in Kerala has shown signs of improvement which gets reflected in their consumption standards, quality of housing and income levels (Zachariah et al., 2002)<sup>10</sup>. The number of emigrants from Kerala to gulf countries reveals that number has been increasing constantly even if there is a decline in the rate of growth. As per estimate, there were 1.86 lakh Keralites in the gulf region in the year 1980, which increased to 2.30 lakh in 1981. In 2000, the estimated number of emigrants from Kerala to gulf countries was 15.01 lakh which was 35.75 per cent of the total emigrants from India to the gulf countries. The number of emigrants from Kerala in 2008 was 21.93 lakh and 22.80 lakh in 2011. It was 24.00 lakh in 2014 (KMS 2014)<sup>11</sup>. It is estimated that today over 10 per cent of the population of Kerala lives outside the state, in various

parts of India and abroad particularly in the Gulf region, the US and Europe. It has been estimated that there are 2.12 million emigrants from Kerala across the world in 2018 (KMS, 2018)<sup>12</sup>.

The gulf migration and the inflow of remittances into Kerala economy has led to rapid growth of Kerala economy. The socio economic impact of such remittances had contributed significantly towards the development the so-called *Kerala model* of development. It could be noticed that India stands unbeaten as the largest migrant source country, as well as remittance receiving country in the world. In 2017, there were 16.6 million Indians living abroad (UN, 2017). According to the World Bank Migration and Development Brief, 2018, India received USD 69 billion in remittances. The depreciating value of rupee is a positive effect on increasing remittances to India<sup>13</sup>. In case of Kerala, as per available information, an estimated total of all the household remittances in Kerala during the 12-month period prior to 1 March 2018 was 30,717 crore rupees. This is only a fraction of the total remittances to the state. To be precise, the share of remittances in the total NSDP of Kerala has been estimated to be 19.3 per cent, which is significant for the socio-economic advancement of this region. About 87 per cent of household remittances were received by the households as regular remittances to meet their immediate household needs. The nature of needs has changed. The survey found that the emigrants are now concentrating more on investing in buying a car, starting an enterprise, paying dowry and for education purposes (KMS, 2018).

Being a state having inherent migratory tendencies for long, it has been understood that migration shaped the economic and social dimensions of Kerala. Making advantage of the economic boom in Gulf countries, large-scale emigration from Kerala attracted a good sum of remittances to the state. Even though there is change in the destination of emigrants from Kerala during the era of globalisation, huge numbers of people from Kerala are still in gulf region. Thus, Gulf countries like UAE, Saudi Arabia, etc. remain the principle destination of Kerala emigrants. The Nitaqat crisis in gulf countries has in a way diverted the destination of emigrants from gulf countries to USA and the United Kingdom. Similarly, Kerala has witnessed a reverse trend in migration. Kerala Migration Survey 2018 has confirmed the trend that was observed in the last round – that emigration from Kerala is falling and return migration is on the rise. Even though its migration to gulf countries slightly reduced, remittances to the state have increased. This happened mainly because of higher earning jobs secured by emigrants from Kerala in those countries.

Large-scale migration of people from Kerala created a gap between the demand and supply of workers in the

labour market. This gap is effectively filled by migrant workers from other parts of the country. The shortage of local labour, higher wages for unskilled labour in the state and opportunities for employment led to the massive influx of migrant labour to the state. A recent trend in the employment sector in the state is the inflow of interstate migrant labour from other states. There were around 2.5 million internal migrants in Kerala according to a 2013 study by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation. There are several unofficial data showing that the total number of domestic migrants in Kerala is more than 35 lakhs. It shows that the gap between the demand and supply of workers in the labour market of Kerala has been effectively filled by domestic migrants. This conveniently developed a culture of replacement migration in Kerala. Migrants are coming to Kerala from states like West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, etc. There are various factors leading to this in migration. There are higher wages for unskilled labour in the state, large opportunities for employment and shortage of local labour. The largest proportion hails from West Bengal (20 per cent), Bihar (18.1 per cent), Assam (17.28 per cent), and Uttar Pradesh (14.83 per cent). There is not much difference in the age distribution of migrant labour across the states of origin.

The emerging phenomenon of replacement migration in Kerala has attracted attention of academic community in recent years. With in-migration into the state from other parts of the country, the number crossing 3 million internal migrants in Kerala mainly from the states of West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the government seriously started thinking about their welfare schemes along with issues faced by them. Kerala has a good record when it comes to providing rights and welfare to migrants, which are yet to be gained prime importance in economic and sociological research in the country.

### **Welfare Schemes for Migrant Workers in Kerala**

Perhaps the most affectionate and powerful term being used by an administration during the period of COVID-19 would be 'guest labourers'. It is in the state of Kerala where the government has started referring to nearly 3.5 million migrant labourers as 'guests' honouring them for their contributions to the state's labour force and economic progress. Being one of the friendliest states to the working class, Kerala has been witnessing a massive influx of construction workers from other Indian states during the last decade. The growth of IT sector and tourism development in Kerala necessitated several construction activities where the widening demand supply gap in the labour market is effectively

filled by the migrant workers. However, the fact that the migrants are inherently vulnerable and victims of severe human rights violations from the time they leave home to initiate their migration could easily be recognised by the state government prompting it towards various laws for protecting migrant rights. The very usage of guest workers reveals Kerala's concerns toward such workers in the state which is just an accomplishment of numerous welfare programmes for migrant workers

Kerala Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme 2010 was the beginning which provided registered migrants the benefits like accident/ medical care, children's education allowance and termination benefits. Kerala State Labour Policy, 2011, proposed to ensure minimum wages to workers in the unorganized sector, registration of workers with the Welfare Fund Board will be made compulsory and introduced many more welfare schemes. So far, around 4 lakh labourers have registered for the scheme. The state government announced a new welfare scheme, AWAZ, for migrant workers in the 2018 state budget. Under the AWAZ scheme, any migrant worker employed in Kerala between the ages of 18 and 60, would be eligible for free medical treatment worth up to 25,000 rupees and insurance coverage of 2,00,000 rupees in case of accident death. Medical treatment will be available from all government hospitals and also private hospitals empanelled with the scheme. Another scheme of the Kerala Government, 'Apna Ghar', aims to provide good quality, hygienic and safe living space at affordable rent. The Kerala government, in a first in the country, has undertaken projects to provide safe, economical and hygienic rental accommodation for migrant workers. The project named 'Apna Ghar Project' is shouldered by Bhavanam Foundation, a public sector non-profit company owned by the state government.

Apart from insurance and accommodation programmes, the state government has initiated a literacy programme for migrant workers in order to link them culturally with the place of their work. The literacy programme called *Changathi* aimed at such a cultural linkage. The idea of the mission is not limited to literacy alone but *Hamaari Malayalam*, the textbook provided to the labourers, contains lessons on everyday life, including hygiene, health, rights of workers and ethics. Kerala State Literacy Mission Authority (KSLMA) conducted the first exam in Perumbavoor for 500 migrant labourers as part of *Changathi* literacy programme. The labourers, mainly hailing from West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam along with those from Nepal, assemble in district centres for classes on Sundays with great enthusiasm. As mentioned by a labourer from West Bengal, "*The classes have helped me in understanding Malayalam. This has helped*

*in communication at work, in the market and bank. Writing and reading is still a bit difficult.*"

A similar language development programme was launched in Ernakulam district for helping migrant children stay in school. *Roshni*, the programme, assists migrant workers' children in learning the local language and performing better in tests. Most of these migrants would find it challenging to study with Malayalam as the medium of instruction. Programmes such as *Roshni* help bridge the education gap for migrant children. *Roshni* trains volunteers in government and government-aided schools to help more than 1,000 migrant workers' children learn Malayalam through the use of multiple languages as the medium of instruction, including the children's mother tongue. Its breakfast component ensures that children do not go hungry, provides incentive of attendance and helps them assimilate into the local culture. The *Roshni* project, launched by the Ernakulam district administration in 2017, has supported 1,265 migrant workers' children from lower primary to high school. School dropouts across 20 schools reduced by nearly half – about 48 per cent – to just 65 in 2018-19, when compared to 2017-18, as the data from the programme shows.

When the government declared lockdown for the nation, Kerala has become the first state to announce relief measures and guarantee its people that nobody within its borders will go hungry. Effective model of involvement has been made in Kerala for migrant workers during the Covid-19 lockdown period. Kerala sets up 4,603 camps for over 1 lakh 'guest labourers' amid Coronavirus lockdown. The state has also ensured food, accommodation and preventive measures to all the workers in the camps including masks, soaps and hand sanitizers. The government has also set up community kitchens for guest labourers and along with others hit by the crisis to ensure no one in the state goes hungry. It was also decided to provide free milk for migrant workers camps and nursery children. No wonder, the state government's treatment of migrant workers as 'guest labourers' seems to be a model for the entire universe even in times of disasters. It is a rare practice which has to be imitated by countries in the globalized era of flying labourers across the borders.

## Conclusion

Migration has become a crucial factor of socio-economic development of world economies. However, the trend in migration has been undergoing changes so also the issues of migrants. In Kerala, the replacement migration has created situations of massive external migration and an equivalent influx of internal migration. The state has

developed a model of migrant welfare schemes to be noticed and researched. AWAZ insurance scheme, *Apna Ghar*’ hygienic and safe living space at affordable rent, *Changathi*, literacy programme, etc. are a few among them. Further, the state government’s treatment of migrant workers as ‘guest workers’ seems to be a model for the entire universe. It is a rare practice which has to be imitated by countries in the globalized era of flying labourers across the borders

## Notes

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