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## **SOCIO-CULTURAL INTEGRATION: A MAJOR CONCERN OF DOMESTIC MIGRANT LABOURERS IN KERALA**

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### **Introduction**

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. 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 for manual work in various sectors. Interestingly, the size of the migrant workforce in the State exceeds the estimated number of Malayalees working abroad, especially in the Gulf. 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. It also 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. Rightly described by Kerala's Labour and Rehabilitation former 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. The State Planning Board describes the inflow of migrant labourers as a 'Social Hazard'. They are victims of exploitation from various sectors. Often they

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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 their problems of socio-cultural integration with the host society.

### **The Problem of Socio-Cultural Integration**

One of the major concerns 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 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.

### **Communication Barrier**

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 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 important measure of integration is the capacity to use local language. A considerable number of 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. On an average, over 40 per cent of these workers reside at their work place, which means they will 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.

### **Political Integration**

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 Local Administrative Bodies**

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.

### **Nature of Dwelling**

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 in Ernakulam district have labour camps surrounded by huge walls and entry is prohibited to outsiders. The life in these type of labour camps is a mystery; no one knows the magnitude of human rights violation occurring inside this 'underworld'. Some times 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 any one 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.

### **Social Participation**

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 occasion. Even if they attend they find themselves as the odd one out. Interestingly it is also noticed that many migrant labourers often actively participate in meetings and processions of political parties and some festivals. For e.g. many migrants from West Bengal took part in the popular 'Pulikali' fest at Thrissur last year. Their participation was not on account of their cultural integration but the fact is that these people were hired by the organizers and were paid for the same.

### **Establishment of Marital Relationship**

Establishing marital relationship is a major factor fostering integration between communities. 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 their willingness to arrange marriage with them.

## **Food Habit**

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 psychosomatic 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, Senior Psychiatrist, 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 from northern states are generally called by the local population as 'Bhai' (in Hindi meaning 'brother') and Tamilian as 'Annachi'. "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 local community has 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 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.

### **Indifferent Attitude of Local Labourers**

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.

### **Exclusion in 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.

## Conclusion

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. 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. 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.

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