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Gendered Migration and Economic Development in Kerala

An interview with Praveena Kodoth



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Gendered Migration and Economic Development in Kerala

An Interview with Praveena Kodoth

Praveena Kodoth is Associate Professor Centre for Development Studies. Her areas of interest are Social Policy, Higher Education, State Politics and Policy. In this interview she talks about how emigration from Kerala has impacted and whether or not it leads to a brain drain.

What are the reasons that the gulf migration has been so prominent in Kerala?

Several layers of connections existed between Kerala and the Middle East by the 1970s when the oil boom enabled Malayalees to capture a disproportionately large share of employment in the Middle East. Trade and cultural ties between West Asia and the west coast of India go back to centuries before colonialism. In the 1930s, British Indian influence in the Middle East opened the doors (in a small way) for Indians in intermediary-level jobs in oil installations in Bahrain and Kuwait. Bombay, which was the nodal center for recruitment for jobs in the Middle East, saw a growing presence of Malayalees arrive in search jobs. The first migrant nurses for instance made their way to Kuwait and the UAE from Bombay as did the large number of Malayalee men who went to work for the Kuwait Oil Company. There was also the informal sea route used mostly by the coastal people in Kerala to reach the Middle East.

This early phase of mobility (1930-70) generated social networks and channeled information about jobs back to Kerala thus laying the foundation for the big push in the 1970s. The Malabar Muslim community which accounts for the largest share of migrants from Kerala in the Middle East mobilized shared cultural ties to gain employment even as Christians and the numerically large caste groups among the Hindus exploited connections developed since the 1930s. As the demonstration effect set in, the recruiting industry moved in enabling aspirants including those who did not have the benefit of social networks, to migrate.

Malayalees were marked by their willingness to take up overseas jobs even in the first phase of migration to the Gulf. In the early 1950s when Kuwait was only setting up its health infrastructure, nurses from Kerala were among the first Indian women to be employed there and in 1955, a woman from the coastal sector in Trivandrum left for Kuwait to work as a domestic worker for a more affluent Malayalee family. This willingness may be seen in the context of their late nineteenth–early twentieth century history of migrations to urban centers across the country, to Sri Lanka and South East Asia besides the Middle East. The uprooting of the traditional family / caste based agrarian structure and population pressure on land owing to demographic transition fostered migration. By the 1970s, these factors combined with the demonstration effects of previous migration cast mobility into an attractive livelihood option for a cross section of Malayalees.

Women and Scheduled Castes and Tribes were largely excluded from the otherwise widespread access to migration for distinct reasons. Gender norms restricted the mobility of women who moved largely as family members or in occupational groups on the social margins such as nurses and domestic workers. The mobility of women workers in some ways underlined the norm (because nurses and domestics were subject to stigma). Scheduled Caste and tribe people lacked social networks and ability to raise the necessary finances, which depended on connections.

Do you think emigration leads to brain drain? What skillset are we losing out on since so many people tend to emigrate?

The idea of a brain drain does not capture the implications of migration for source regions like Kerala/India and is potentially harmful as a determinant of the content of regulation. On the face of it, Kerala is losing people with important skill sets, not only professionals such as physicians, nurses, teachers and engineers but also technicians and intermediary skill groups such as plumbers, electricians, masons and drivers and less skilled workers. Take the case of nurses, who are skilled workers in the business of providing services that are crucial to shaping the quality of human capital. On a normative indicator like the nurse to population ratio, Kerala and India compare poorly with WHO standards but when we turn to the market, there is an excess supply. The public sector is not expanding and the private sector already employs nurses at pitifully low compensation and harsh working conditions. Any move to restrict outflow would only make nurses available at even cheaper rates to the private sector. Given the inability of the economy to absorb such skill sets, it is inappropriate to designate the outflow of nurses as a 'drain'.

In this context, the social stigma on nurses and the poor terms and conditions of work they face have reduced the possibility of Kerala/India benefiting from what is referred to as 'brain circulation', bringing home the value addition of working overseas. The glut in occupations such as nursing and teaching in Kerala is partly because women are channeled into them as they are considered 'feminine' occupations. But, the huge

increase in the number of nursing schools and colleges since 2000 is driven by the demand for nursing education associated with overseas opportunities.

When we talk about migration from Kerala to Gulf, the nurses who emigrate to the Middle East face lots of hardships but still tend to migrate. What do you think are the reasons that are still ready to move out when the situation would be unlikely to what they are expecting.

It must be remembered that nurses in the private sector within India work in harsh conditions. The salaries offered in the Middle East are exponentially higher and working conditions are comparably better. The horror stories that we get to hear (about the Middle East) are linked directly to dubious recruiting practices, where recruiting agencies in India (some of them licensed) connive with government officials to extort money from aspiring migrants and place them in jobs that are exploitative, where they are not paid for months together and / or made to work in poor conditions. A scandal that came to light in 2015 involving the Protector of Emigrants (POE) in Kochi and private recruiting agencies showed that nurses aspiring for jobs in Kuwait were willing to pay as much as Rs 20 lakhs. This indicates the level of aspiration for overseas employment, the competition and the expected returns.

The reason nurses migrate (and rarely are they unaware of the risks) is because they want to tap the opportunities out there. Most nurses are drawn from relatively poor families and they want to better their lives. Nurses who have migrated to the Gulf in the previous decades have done very well so there is a strong demonstration effect. But also, studies suggest that nurse with jobs in the government sector may be less likely to migrate. Salaries are only one aspect of aspirations. There are issues like the quality of social life in the Middle East and particularly the education of children.

I must add that this question is usually asked about emigrant domestic workers in the Gulf because stories about their abuse and exploitation as well as their illicit sexual agency appear more frequently in the media and circulate widely in the public. The pejorative meanings attached to migrant domestic work have not stemmed aspirations but have relegated it to the most marginalized sections and consigned it to secrecy. In the sending regions of domestic workers in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh (where I have done field work), mobility remains strongly ingrained. Changes if any are seen in the expansion of the destinations of less skilled women to include Israel, Italy and other OECD countries.

Are the jobs in Kerala lacking according to the kind of skillset that they have?

I have already answered this question partially. I would only like to add that nurses from Kerala have been taking up jobs across the country since the first half of the twentieth century. The interviews I have done show that by the 1940s, Malayalee women had moved to study and work in places like Bombay, Patna, Bhopal, Delhi, Vellore, Kolar and even interior locations in Punjab and Orissa where missionaries ran nursing schools

and hospitals. It should not be surprising that large numbers of Malayalee nurses continue to work in hospitals across the country. Thus, a gap between supply and demand in Kerala is not a major issue, but the lack of prospects in the private sector in India, the limited demand from the public sector and significantly better overseas prospects are important.

Is the Kerala government taking any steps to increase employment opportunities to the people so that they don't have to face the hardships they are facing now? Even if they are successful in creating jobs will they stay back leaving the high salary they are earning outside?

People do not move only because jobs are not available at home. Aspirations are multifaceted. The aspirations of people at the lower end of the skills hierarchy to mobility needs to be underlined as they are much more willing than the affluent sections to take a chance. Spatial mobility is part of the everyday in Kerala and is encountered all around. No amount of job creation is going to stop it. But job creation is important in itself because there is unemployment, particularly among educated women, and because more of better jobs give workers greater bargaining power and strengthen the fall back options of those who wish to migrate.

To answer the first part of your question, successive governments in Kerala have failed to create employment more generally. Jobs of the kind that would be attractive to a labour force with education ranging from matriculation and higher secondary to the graduate level is scarce. There is virtually no manufacturing sector to speak of and expansion in IT has been slow.

Policies that the government has taken to reduce the cheating by middle men and policies for emigrants?

Emigration comes under External Affairs (previously MOIA) so policies incentivizing or restricting mobility and dealing with recruiting agents are made by the Central Government. After the POE's role in facilitating extortion by private agencies was exposed, nurses were brought under the emigration check required (ECR) system, designed for migrants with less than matriculate level of education, and three public sector agencies, two from Kerala and one from Tamil Nadu, were given the exclusive responsibility for recruitment. Though they have initiated recruitment, these public sector agencies have had to surmount hurdles related to bureaucratic procedures and the lack of proactive facilitation by other government agencies involved in emigration. The entire process is done online through e-migrate so there is a chance of ushering in greater transparency if private recruiting interests and rent seeking officials are not able to scuttle the move. News reports suggest that private interests have already weakened the initial resolve of the government as they were successful in lobbying with the government on contracts to recruit to Saudi Arabia in January this year.

In the recent past emigration policies have been directed at wooing the affluent

diaspora (NRI and the recent People of Indian Origin (PIO) in the OECD countries) who have been conferred with aspects of dual citizenship in the hope of returns in investment. In accordance with this, there is recognition at some levels in policy circles of India's prospects in nursing in the global market as well as considerable demand in the OECD and the Middle East. Indian nurses (mostly from Kerala) have established a niche in many countries and there is some concern not to jeopardize this. The effort to clean up recruiting may be seen in this context. However, policies for emigrants are singularly lacking in a focus on less skilled relatively poor migrants and women workers in this category. Increasingly repressive measures resorted to since 2000 have served the interests of informal recruiters and rent seeking officials. This sector is mired in the worst recruiting practices and lacks dynamism because of the refusal of the government to intervene in support of these emigrants. As women drawn from the most marginalized sections of society go overseas with no training or information, those with social networks or with individual abilities enough to build their own support structures survive, whereas the others struggle in the hands of unscrupulous recruiters and the most exploitative segment of employers. The demand for domestic workers in the Middle East remains undiminished by the oil crisis and is an opportunity in the face of bleak forecasts of reduction in jobs and remittances. That is if the policy establishment had the courage to treat India women as full citizens.

In a cultural milieu that is hostile to women's migration, the less skilled women workers from India is poorly documented at source. What are reasons for this according to you?

A hostile social environment curbs the space for less skilled women workers to voice their mobility aspirations and also diminishes incentive to report such migrants in surveys. Organizations working with domestic workers and people living in the villages underline that aspiring migrants are secretive about their plans. This environment of secrecy benefits informal / illegal recruiters and fosters illegality. Illegal recruiters play on the fears of aspirants that they may be stopped from going by organizations working on alliance with the state. Illegal emigrants are not captured in the statistics on workers granted emigration clearance by the state. Thus, a restrictive policy has ripple effects. It renders migrants invisible and allows the state to evade responsibility. Harmful to migrants, it brings profit to illegal recruiters, rent seeking officials and employers in the Middle East who are black listed.

There are two sources from where women migration can be captured. One is statistics on Emigration granted to women with Emigration check required passports by POI offices and the second is sample surveys on migration from Kerala and return migrants. Are these two data sources very reliable?

The ECR data is only for people who have education below matriculation and go to countries that require emigration check (18 countries including the Middle East). I said in response to Q 7 that both sources are likely to underestimate less skilled women migrants. When illegal migration accounts for a sizeable section of workers emigrating, as may be the case among domestic workers, the ECR data is a poor estimate. Further, a migrant who has spent three years working overseas repeated is granted ECNR status, thus no longer requiring emigration clearance from the POE. The household survey data is likely to underestimate less skilled women workers because they less evenly distributed than the migrant population in general. Less skilled women are concentrated in specific regions that are prone to poverty, the coast, the urban slums and the highlands.

From your work I have found that recently you started working on women migrants. Is there a particular reason for it?

Work and mobility are crucial aspects of gender discrimination that combine to shape women's labour migration. In the case of India, it has impeded women's labour migration since the 1980s and ruined the prospects of less skilled women workers in the Middle East. I wrote a paper in 2010 examining the implications of Indian emigration policy for domestic workers for a workshop which was a part of a research programme that I was involved with. This is how I got involved.