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An Interview with Binitha Thampi



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# Influx of Migration in Kerala

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*Binitha Thampi is Assistant Professor of Development Studies in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras. She holds a PhD in Development Studies from the Institute for Social and Economic Change in Bangalore, India. Her research interests include gender and development; ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) and digital communities; feminist demography and policy critique; decentralized planning and governance; and poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization. In this interview she talks about the migrants coming to Kerala from other states are increasing at a fast pace and what are the factors that are driving them to come to Kerala. Also what are the factors that is causing out migration from Kerala.*

**Migrants coming from parts of India like Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha and other north eastern states feel socially excluded in the place of destination since the place that they move to is socially and culturally very different from the source?**

Social and cultural adaptation is an integral aspect of migration, whether it is internal or international. For inter-state migrants in India, particularly those who move from North and Northeastern India to the Southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, there is definitely a cultural shift that they need to cope up. The regional language also is a major challenge. As the migrant workers are placed at the lower end of the hierarchical occupational ladder, many of the socio-cultural spaces that help them to adapt are not available for them. The state policies need to focus on this aspect in addition to provide them basic facilities.

**Currently Kerala is witnessing 'reverse migration'. Could you please throw some light on this?**

Return migration is a major challenge that Kerala is facing for the past few years and this may probably accelerate in the coming years. This will have significant impact as Kerala is a remittance driven economy. Kerala needs to have a focused policy to deal the situation due to the diversity among the gulf returnees. Some may need employment, some may have sufficient funds to invest, and some may require additional social

security measures. An imaginative policy framework that facilitates the requirements of all these groups should be evolved. Moreover, policies and programmes that result in structural changes in the economy that promote production need to be envisaged.

**Can we say that the skilled workers from Kerala are leaving for better jobs in Gulf countries, this gap is then being filled by the migrant workers coming from north and north-eastern parts of India?**

No, the migrant workers from North and Northeastern states are relatively less educated and unskilled. There is a labour scarcity in various occupations in Kerala due to the fact that many unskilled workers have migrated to Gulf Countries, and also those who are educated do not prefer such unskilled wage labour. And there exists a wage gap between migrant workers and local workers for the same occupations. As the cost of living is high in Kerala, it may not be possible for the local workers to compete with the migrant workers for low wage work. In the case of migrant workers, the spaces of social reproduction are controlled either by the employers or by the contractors. They provide accommodation and other minimum facilities. Through this, they control the workers from moving out for better opportunities and make them work over time. This aspect needs to be studied further.

**People/Youth that leave and go for work in Gulf countries are well-educated and literate and the in migrants who are emigrating are unskilled/ daily wage earners. Do you think this is causing a brain drain effect?**

I think the brain drain is an outdated concept as the processes of globalisation are facilitating the mobility of labour and the pattern of this mobility is assuming new directions. There is no dearth of educated people in the state of Kerala; in fact, the challenge is to provide them employment. The cross-boarder migration of workers from Kerala having low educational attainments has resulted in more human capital investment in the early period of migration during 1970s and 80s. They realized the value of education in gainful employment and invested in their children's education substantially. Perhaps we could observe a similar impact in future in the case of migrant workers in Kerala spending more on their children's education and an overall change in their life styles.

**Media reports have portrayed the emigrants coming to Kerala as a "Bad Trend". What are your comments on this?**

I do not see it as a 'bad trend' because any migration is not bad. Malayalees particularly do not have a moral standing as either one of their family members or a close relative is a migrant worker outside the state or the country. After the recent brutal murder of a girl allegedly committed by a migrant worker, there was a media furor that portrayed all migrant workers as criminals. I think the media has to be more responsible in reporting such news. Migrants need work and the local population needs the work to be done.

Hence it has to be viewed as mutually beneficial. Media can meaningfully engage in awareness creation in this respect.

**The migrant population is one tenth of the resident population and the prediction is it will only grow more in future. What according to you have the government taken measures or should take measures to ensure a sense of security for both migrants and residents?**

Proving 'citizenship rights' to migrant workers is an important step to be taken. The non-portability of entitlements is a constraint that needs to be addressed. Many workers do not have ration cards or other valid documents. Moreover, those who work under contractors are more mobile and do not have residential address where they stay for a reasonable duration of time. Proper enrollment of migrant workers is important to ensure social security measures. Unfortunately, the need for enrollment is currently wrongly premised in order to police them and posing them as a security threat to the local population. We need to make institutional mechanism to ensure the basic facilities such as health care provisioning, proper housing, educational facilities etc. As the workers are mobile, certain entitlements have to be state specific whereas certain others should be at all India level. On the whole, migrant workers do more hours of work and they are not compensated fairly. We need to have a formal regulatory structure that formulates over time wages for various occupations.

**Do you think the reason that the migrants are moving more to Kerala is because they are paid higher wages than other places. What are your comments on this.**

Yes, the high wage is an attraction for migrant workers. In addition, a better living condition is another attraction. Housing is cheap compared to other metro cities, whereas facilities are equally good. The climate is also not that bad compared to other states. Compared to Tamil Nadu, for many occupations, there is no competition with local workers. Migrant workers are slowly monopolizing certain occupations such as construction work. The dependence on them is increasing.

**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. What do you think are the reasons that they are neglected.**

Not having voting rights is an important factor for the neglect by the political parties. But the trade unions have been active among various sections of the workers in the state. We need to view this in the backdrop of general decline of trade unionism in Kerala and elsewhere particularly since 1990s. The negotiating power of labour has declined drastically in the past two decades. The unions are increasingly failing to hold together the collective interest and negotiating power of labour. The recent struggle by women workers in the Munnar Kannan Devan Plantations is a testimony to this fact. In addition, migrant workers do not have a prior history of trade union activism

and they need to be taught, but the language is a major constraint. Moreover they are a mobile population, and the fixity of labour is a precondition for collective trade unionization. For instance, the nurses in the private sector were not unionized until recently – the promise of mobility was a major hindrance. Nevertheless, there were many protests waged by migrant workers in the recent past including the blocking of traffic in the city of Cochin to gain financial support from the state when the employer refused to take the responsibility of transporting the body of a worker who was dead in the construction site. There were other similar instances too. Hence, it may not be perhaps the old trade unionism, but their own collective action that are contextually articulated that is going to ensure them rights and better conditions of work.