

SHRAM

Strengthen and Harmonize Research and Action on Migration

June 2016

Changing Dynamics of Migration in Kerala

An interview with Irudaya. Rajan. S



Indira Gandhi Institute
of Development Research



CENTRE FOR
POLICY
RESEARCH



IRIS Knowledge Foundation



National Institute of
Urban Affairs

An Initiative supported by Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and the Allied Trusts

Changing Dynamics of Migration in Kerala

An Interview with Irudaya.Rajan.S

Irudaya Rajan is Associate Professor at Centre for Development Studies. His areas of interest are population and development, economics of aging, gender and development, international migration, database issues: population census.

In this interview he discusses how Emigration situation in Kerala has changed over time and how it has become more diverse in nature.

What is it that particularly interests you about migration? When did you start to work on it?

What fascinates me in migration is that, it is one of the most important components of demography. In demography we have both births and deaths. Birth is always positive and death is always negative. Whereas, migration is the only variable which can be either positive or negative? For example if a girl from Kerala goes to Mumbai for higher studies then Kerala will lose her but at the same time Mumbai will gain her. So migration can be either positive or negative. This is one of those important demographic variables which stabilize the total population anywhere. Any nation which needs more people will introduce migration policies which will attract more people to the country and when they have enough people they will withdraw the policy. So we can say that migration is very flexible. And in today's world migration is not only economics but also politics. Even in the US presidential elections migration is being talked about. Because, in any country the growth of population will happen only through birth and migration. So it is a very influential factor in population growth. These are the things that fascinate me about working on migration. I started working on migration almost 20 years ago. My interest on migration started when Prof. Zachariah started his first Kerala Migration Survey in 1996. He was the first

one to work on migration in the 1960s. We call him “the lion of migration experts” in the country. At that time however, my interest was in ageing issues. When I came to Kerala I found that an average Malayali lives 25 years after reaching 55. So we need to look into the things like are we giving them proper care, user friendly facilities etc...therefore in the first study itself we had a chapter named ‘Impact of Migration on Elderly’. Then I continued with my interest what I like to call, as the ‘Social Cost of Migration’; because the social costs associated with international migration calls for greater attention in the upcoming years. A human rights framework to migration policies is required to extend national protection to the valuable overseas workforce. Social effects include changes in family structure, composition and gender roles in the origin communities. The migration of a family member has implications on the health and education outcomes of the family left behind, as well as on the relationship with spouse, children and elderly. Health risks and vulnerabilities are also exacerbated with international migration. This ‘human dimension’ of migration is a vital future direction for policy-relevant research.

The issue of migration has been in the limelight globally. What are some of the broad issues you think India needs to look at in the light of the emigration of the Indian nationals to find work abroad?

According to me, the international migration should be orderly, legal and safe. It should stand as a mantra not only for international migration but also for internal migration. And when we say orderly, we mean one can enter any country legally. If you follow these three then there won’t be any problems created by migration anywhere in the world. Today we talk about the issues of European migration because it is not orderly and legal. These three should be together for avoiding any problems related to migration.

You have spoken length about migration policy in India. What should a migration policy for the country entail? What could be the specific areas that can make a good migration policy?

I think a migration policy in today’s world should include both immigration and emigration. We need two types of policies where one discusses the issues of people going out and the other of people who comes in. According to current studies we have 18 million people who have Indian passports living outside the country. We don’t have any special policy for them except the Emigration Act. But I think we should also have a policy for the people who are coming to India with a valid passport. World Bank says that India has 5 million legal immigrants in the country. It is our duty to protect them. They came legally to India and they have the right to be safe. We become very unhappy when Indians are ill-treated in other countries and we will stand for their protection. Similarly it is our duty to protect other country men who come to India. So we should

have policies that will address the issues of people both coming in and going out. And, these policies should be legal, safe and orderly. If these three come together then we can say that we have a good migration policy.

What are the mechanisms currently in place for the protection of emigrants working abroad? What has been the efficacy of the “Emigration Act”?

Currently we have the Emigration Act, which only talks about the migration of people who have completed class ten. If you cleared the tenth standard then you can go to ECR (Emigration Clearance Required). Anybody can go to any other country without clearance. As a researcher I found that even today we have no relevant database on migration. For a vast country like India, it is very important to know who is where and doing what. For example, we should know specifically how many Indian students in the USA are pursuing higher studies. This will be very helpful in formulating policies. We should generate a database on the number of people coming in and leaving the country. It will help us to create an order; an order which we can be created through airports. People leave India only through airports, because nobody leaves the country without a valid passport and visa. Similarly, nobody can enter into India without a valid visa, except the refugees. But they also have the refugee status. We don't have a database of how many people are coming in. if we don't know the stock of these two we can't talk about the welfare of those people. Therefore, first we should think of creating a database this will give us an idea of the stock of both immigration and emigration, after which we can think about a mechanism to protect them.

What have been the reasons for emigration from Kerala to Gulf Countries? How has this emigration impacted the employment scenario in the State?

I cannot say that there is any specific reason for migration from Kerala. One thing is that people in Kerala are not willing to do the same jobs in Kerala that they do abroad. Kerala is not an industrialised state in spite of its high human development index and high literacy rate. Even the quality of education is still a question mark.

Kerala is spending so much money on education without looking at the employment opportunities. So the so called, educated people will be left unemployed. So they go to Gulf countries and do the unskilled jobs which are supposed to be done by the uneducated. I should say that Keralites are running away from the local conditions. The unemployment among the educated and the attractive salaries in destination country creates Gulf migration. Another point is that because of emigration a lot of money is flowing to Kerala as remittances and these remittances lead to the development of Kerala. In Kerala we have a 'Remittance-led Growth'.

Remittance transfers from overseas workers have boosted the economy. Of course, if someone travels from Thiruvananthapuram to Kasargode by road, we can see the visible changes in the state's landscape. Thanks to the Malayalis abroad. Today,

Kerala has about 2.4 million migrants and they remit about 60,000 crores of Rupees which is equivalent to 36 per cent of the State Domestic Product. The deep potential that the Kerala Diaspora offers for state development cannot be ignored, because of their size, as well as economic and political status in host countries. The Diaspora, if channeled productively, can be a game changer in Kerala's development path. Already we see return migrants as M.L.A.'s, ensuring that Non-resident keralite concerns are also given equal consideration in the state's policy agenda.

NORKA has made seminal contributions towards analyzing and utilizing the NRK potential.

The issue related to this is the jobs created by these remittances are not aimed at keralites. They are not of interest for keralites who are looking for jobs outside Kerala. We have jobs which keralites don't want to undertake. Similarly Kerala has a lot of purchasing power and a two times higher wage rate when compared to any other parts of the country for which people will rush into Kerala to do those unskilled jobs. For them Kerala is Gulf.

In the context of Kerala, your research explores the idea of Replacement Migration. Could you shed some light on how this works and what the consequences are?

Replacement migration is something that we have been discussing for some time. Replacement migration simply means that the ones who have gone outside Kerala for job will be replaced by someone who came from outside Kerala. For example, if an engineer in Kerala went to another country, he will be replaced by another engineer who is not a Keralite. This will continue to happen. The problems faced by people who are coming in are the same as those going out. So the issues and problems are same for replacement migration.

The CDS-ISMSK (2012) Survey data revealed how migrant workers are largely isolated. Could you elaborate on the kind of problems that the migrant workers face at destination?

What we have done in our survey is to understand the living and working conditions of people coming to Kerala. We have done the survey in five sectors namely, construction, hotels, carpenters, gold, and electricians. One thing we found out through the survey is that the employers are not keen on the conditions of their workers. That means some things are not organised. The workers are given a salary which is much less than what they are offered. The same happens with the number of working hours per day, the number of days of work etc... so simply we can say that those people are getting exploited like the way our people get exploited in other countries. People come here for a livelihood and we give them proper food, rest, working and living conditions. These are the questions we are not able to investigate and this is something crucial for migration.

Second thing we found is that these migrant workers are not part of any labor unions. Kerala is a state with highly mobilised labour unions but they do not accept migrants into their unions, and unionization is not happening among migrants. This is also true for Gulf migration. In Gulf we can't organise ourselves but here in Kerala people can organize and discuss their problems.

So these are the two things: lack of transparency in jobs and lack of unionization among the migrant workers.

What are some of the measures that could address these problems? What has been the experience with, for instance, insurance schemes meant for migrants travelling to Gulf countries for work?

One solution for these problems is that there should be legal, safe and orderly migration. Most of the problems can be solved by following these three. Secondly we need to provide proper orientation to prospective emigrants. In countries like Philippines, in colleges itself they have orientation classes about the positives and negatives of migration. Here we are not able to make that type of informed choice.

Here people rely on unreliable information and that is why it becomes unordered and unsafe. Secondly people who leave the country should give proper information about the purpose and other details. If we don't know the details of people then officials can't help them. In Gulf countries Indian embassies are there for the welfare of Indians. But if people do not give proper information about the job contracts and information about visa etc...the officials can't help them. Most of the problems faced by emigrants are created before they leave their home country.

We should also talk about the return migrants. Migration is a cyclical process. About 90 per cent of Kerala migrants work in the Gulf and there exists no citizenship and they continue to work as contractual workers and at the end of their working life, they return home. Kerala is home to about 1.2 million return emigrants as per the sixth KMS carried out in 2013. Do we have any policy to utilise these vast and experienced human resources? Absolutely no. So we can provide them with financial support or so which will help them find new livelihood by starting up business ventures.

You are currently working on Gulf migration in a broader South Asian context. Could you please share your findings so far in short?

For the last seven years I was working on a series called India Migration Report. So in every report I pick up some issues. First report was focused on governance, second on identity and conflict, the third on global crisis, and the current one on gulf migration. The next will be based on forced migration. When I looked into the report I understood that India alone can't do anything in the Gulf. Being the Editor-in-Chief of Migration Development Journal, by reading articles I understand that South Asian countries can unite in their take on gulf countries. For example oil producing countries have their own

organisation named OPEC (Oil Producing and Exporting Countries). Similarly the labour sending countries should unite as a Block. We have SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation) but SAARC is not dealing with the issues of migrants. In Gulf we are independent competitors. If we unite we will have a better bargain with the Gulf countries on proper salary, living conditions etc. So this is the one thing I want to say about South Asia. And next year we are thinking of launching a South Asia Migration Report (2017). So in my opinion SAARC should take a major role in putting migration in their agenda, and then we can find a solution for the problems.

The Government has failed to collect proper data on migration. The datasets like NSSO and Census seem to overlook a lot of factors. Do you have advice on how we can collect better data on internal and international migration?

Migration is a critical aspect of India's economic emergence. Nevertheless, research and databases on dynamics of migration is not readily available. To fill this gap, CDS initiated the Kerala Migration Survey as early as 1998 and we have also extended it to Goa, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat. We are in the process of initiating state-wise surveys in Andhra Pradesh, Telengana, Bihar and the most populous state Uttar Pradesh.

The most apparent barrier to generating such surveys is the extensive capital required to cover large sample groups. Unlike fertility, mortality, marriage and other social indicators, migration is not such a common occurrence. Therefore the number of households under survey needs to be increased.

I think census will give you some information, but it comes only once in every ten years. So we have no idea about what is happening to internal migration. In international migration also we don't have much data. So we have to create a database. Once we create the database we can have the total stock of migrants in the country and it will also provide information about the total flow of migration. For this we need a onetime survey like the one we had in Kerala. I proposed that we should think of an India Migration Survey in the model of National Family Health Survey.

The popular perception of migrants is negative and this is often fuelled by inadequate and ill-informed media coverage of situations migrants face. Kindly comment on the role of media in influencing perceptions and how this could be important.

Media plays an important role. However, when it comes to migrants, media behaves in a negative way. Whenever there is a crime there will be a suspicion on migrants. It is a human tendency to commit crime, whether migrant or not. They are also humans and they don't have any particular behavior code. So media should be very careful when talking about crime and health issues. I have heard that many of the eradicated health problems came back to Kerala because of migrants. One thing we should keep in mind that it is not the migrants who need us, but we need migrants because we are not ready to do our jobs.

What do you think can SHRAM Portal do in terms of extending the scope of migration studies?

Portals can also do much in migration. They can help in creating the databank.