



Christian Ministry Towards the Migrant Workers in Kerala

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Abstract

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1. Introduction

Human migration is the movement by people from one place to another with the intentions of settling temporarily or permanently in the new location for different reasons. Migration is a process in which an individual or a group shifts their residence from one place to another for their survival. People choose to move out of their family, friends and the society in which they are brought up, because of some significant reasons in their contexts. Migrant worker is a person who has moved from his so-called home base/home land to a new adopted home/land to earn for his livelihood.¹ In Kerala they are addressed by the Malyalees as 'Bengalis' or 'Bhai.' There is a great possibility to extend Christian ministry among these Bhai. According to Thomas O Meara, "Ministry is doing something for the advent of the kingdom in public on behalf of a Christian community which is a gift received in faith and which is an activity with its own limits and identity within a diversity of ministerial actions."² It is worth to know that migration is a topic that links to theological studies and pastoral ministry. Hence, the purpose

¹ P.G. George, "Towards An Immigrant Theology." *Indian Journal of Theology* volume44/ 1 & 2 (2002):1.

² Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: leadership in the community of Jesus Christ*, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 147.

of this paper is to examine the life of migrant workers in Kerala and the means of Christian ministry towards them.

2. Migration Theology

In migrating to the human race God enters into a place of “otherness,” the very migration that human beings fear and find so difficult to make. This movement of divinity to humanity is predicated not on laws, institutions, or any form of human merit but, above all, on God’s privilege.³ Christ reaches out to all those considered, in Barth’s terms, “alien life.” Christ moves not away from alienation, difference, and otherness but towards it, without ceasing to be who he is: “He went into a strange land, but even there, and especially there, He never became a stranger to Himself.”⁴ God’s identification with humanity is so total that in Christ he not only reaches out to the stranger but becomes the stranger: “He does not merely go into lowliness, into the far country, to be Himself there, as He did in His turning to Israel. But now He Himself becomes lowly. He Himself is the man who is His Son. He Himself has become a stranger in Him.”⁵ The cross is the ultimate expression of God’s self-giving love, God’s solidarity with those who suffer, and God’s power at work amid human struggle and weakness.

3. Reasons For Migration

The people compelled to migrant due to two factors: driven factors and distress factors. On one hand, the migration of people is mainly motivated by the desire to access better employment opportunities, higher wages, good quality education, health condition and better living conditions. While on the other hand, it is also encouraged by push or distress factors at

³ Thomas F. Torrance, (ed), *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Church Dogmatics*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (New York: Continuum, 2004), 184.

⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, (ed), *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Church Dogmatics*. 180.

⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, (ed), *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Church Dogmatics*. 170.

home such as the lack of employment, low wage rates, agriculture failure, debt, drought, natural calamities,⁶ result of conflict, human rights violations, violence, or to escape persecution or population pressure, and so on.⁷

4. Migrants In Kerala

Literacy rates, better education and lack of professional and skilled jobs had prompted Keralites to look for higher wages and skilled labor outside India. About 26 lakhs of Keralites of young age are out-migrants working as company executives, teachers, clerical assistants, nurses, doctors, engineers, technical assistants, construction workers, domestic workers, drivers etc., in foreign or Gulf countries. This trend then led to a decline in the availability of workforce in Kerala especially in unskilled jobs. S Irudaya Rajan⁸ says that, “Domestic migrant laborers have become one of Kerala’s wealth creators.” These migrants are not competing with Malayalis for jobs, he points out. They are only filling in the gaps, taking up jobs that the locals do not want to do.⁹ Kerala is a Dubai for Migrants, therefore it is known as “Baika Dubai.”¹⁰ The high wages with comparatively better living conditions in Kerala, even in villages, are often what motivate migrant workers, as the wages are often double or even more than three times than wages obtained in their own states, which also have higher living costs and is a key attraction to the migrant laborers.¹¹ However, Keralite workers are

⁶Puthuma Joy, “Impact Of Migrant Workers In The Kerala Economy,” *International Journal of Informative & Futuristic Research* 3/8 (April 2016): 29..

⁷Lizy James, Dominic Mathew, *Social Integration of Migrant Workers in Kerala: Problems and Prospects*, Kozhikode: Kerala Institute of Labour and Employment, 2016), 8.

⁸ Professor and expert on migration studies at Thiruvananthapuram’s Centre for Development Studies, has for decades studied the migration patterns to and from Kerala.

⁹P. Anima, “The Story of Two Migrations,” *The Hindu Business Line* [http:// www.Thehindubusinessline.com/blink/cover/the-story-of-two-migrations/ article-9003343.ece](http://www.Thehindubusinessline.com/blink/cover/the-story-of-two-migrations/article-9003343.ece) (Accessed 1/11/2017/10:30pm).

¹⁰Sreelatha Menon, “Kerala a Dubao for Bengali Migrants,” <http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/kerala-a-dubai-for-bengali-migrants-1110727000871.html> (Accessed on 1/11/2017).

¹¹ For agricultural work like ploughing and tilling, the average daily wage in Kerala was more than Rs.700. The wages for non-agricultural work is also much higher in Kerala. Carpenters and plumbers get wages which are two times the national wage average for their profession. The data shows that while the average wage ranges are between Rs.200 and Rs 300 for different professions in states across the country, employers in Kerala do not pay below Rs. 600 for any job. It is even said that a migrant labourer from Bihar, who would get Rs.40 at his native place, makes a minimum of Rs 600 in Kerala.

paid even higher amounts and so, most of the times the local residents prefer the migrant workers because of the comparatively cheaper labor.

5. Migrant Workers As Economic Force In Kerala

Migrant workers in Kerala are a significant economic force in the state. S Irudaya Rajan says Migration from north India began about 20 years ago. "It became prominent in the last 10 years and now we have laborers from every state in India."¹² There are nearly 3 million migrant workers in Kerala from other states of India, as well as from Bangladesh and Nepal according to the study done by Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation research for the Department of Labor and Skills of the Government of Kerala.¹³ Existing studies provide evidences for short distance migration from nearby states like Tamil Nadu, Andrapradesh, Thelangana, and Karnataka, and for long distance migration from states like West Bengal, Bihar, Uther Pradesh, Odisha and Assam in recent years. 60% of them work in the construction sector and the rest work in the hospitality, manufacturing, trade and agriculture sectors. Their skills range from unskilled to skilled carpenters, masons, electricians and the like.

Though it was only construction in the beginning, today migrant labourers can be found doing an range of jobs. The CDS's¹⁴ 2012 Interstate Migrant Survey documents their presence in gold work, industrial factories, road repair, hotel industry, domestic help and as casual labour. They are familiar faces at hair salons, petrol pumps, supermarkets, paddy fields, they can even be found helping with directions in some of the most remote towns.¹⁵ There are people

¹²C. Gouridasan Nair, "Migrants in the land of expatriates," The Hindu Business Line : <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/cover/the-story-of-two-migrations/article9003343.ece/April21/2017>(Accessed 1/11/2017/10:30pm).

¹³Lizy James, Dominic Mathew, *Social Integration of Migrant Workers in Kerala*, 2.

¹⁴Centre for Development Studies.

¹⁵C. Gouridasan Nair, "Migrants in the land of expatriates," The Hindu Business Line.

migrate seasonally to work in brick making, construction, tile factories, and crop cutting operations.¹⁶ “There aren’t any jobs now that are completely maintained by the Keralite,” says Rajan. These workers are not part of any trade union or any social security network, nor are they aware of their labour rights. They are only bothered about prompt payments for the work done.¹⁷ The remittances to their home states by them are over Rs. 25,000 crores. Many of them are males between 16 – 50 years old.¹⁸ According to official estimates, the emigrant Malayali population earns in excess of Rs. 75,000 crore annually. The number of migrant workers in Kerala is much larger compared to only 26 lakh (2.6 million) keralites working outside India. This money, as Rajan points out, played a big role in creating jobs, particularly in construction, which in turn triggered internal migration one which he calls “replacement migration.”¹⁹

Migrant workers engage in almost all activities as engaged by native workers. They perform various agricultural operations. They are a source of semi-skilled and unskilled laborers in construction sector and to some extent skilled labor also. They undertake various activities at lower wage rates irrespective of nature or status of the work. They are ready to undertake dangerous, hazardous, hard, difficult and filthy occupations, which are rejected by native’s workers. In this way they help and contribute to the economic development of the state by providing the required labor force and thus have an important position in the economy of the state.

¹⁶ Ravi S. Srivastava, “Migration and the Labour Market in India,” *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, Vol.41/4 (1998): 11.

¹⁷ C. Gouridasan Nair, “Migrants in the land of expatriates,” *The Hindu Business Line*.

¹⁸ Lizy James, Dominic Mathew, *Social Integration of Migrant Workers in Kerala: Problems and Prospects*, 4.

¹⁹ P. Anima, “The Story of Two Migrations,” *The Hindu Business Line*.

6. Issues And Challenges

The state of Kerala do have issue of migrants in many dimensions such as legal, demographical social, psychological and economical.

Legal Issues: A large entry of outsiders does cause some worries to the local population, some of which may be valid. However, if the initiative for a new law, which is to include registration, is motivated purely by suspicion of outsiders, either as a threat to law and order, it could only contribute to reinforcing the sense of insecurity that migrants from afar often experience.²⁰ There are a high number of migrants from Bangladesh, Nepal and Srilanka among other countries. Illegal migrants from Bangladesh have also been arrested in many cases where the migrants, who come under the pretext of being from West Bengal or Assam and as citizens of India. It is estimated that a large number of Bangladeshi illegal immigrants live in Kerala under the pretext of being from West Bengal and the Kerala police has been finding difficult to identify as they often mingle with migrants from other states and disappear into the crowd.

Newspapers frequently report criminal activities such as theft, drug addiction, drug trafficking, fake currency, robbery and even murder of the locals by the migrants. Thus they became hindrances to the social integration of the Migrant workers.²¹ The rising crime rate, with many crimes being attributed to migrant workers, has made their acceptance into the local community harder.²²

Demographical Issues: Most live in groups, often seven or eight persons sharing a single room, and up to 40 or 50 in a constructing building with little toilet facilities. In many construction sites, the workers live in sheds and in the rural areas with bare minimum

²⁰Lizy James, Dominic Mathew, *Social Integration of Migrant Workers in Kerala*, 10.

²¹Lizy James, Dominic Mathew, *Social Integration of Migrant Workers in Kerala*, 11.

²² K.P.M. Basheer, <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/spurt-in-crimes-involving-migrant-workers-rattles-kerala/article7252167/> (Accessed 30/10/2017).

facilities. They cook, eat and sleep in open spaces and hygiene is at a premium in most such dwelling units. In many construction sites, they work for 12 to 14 hours a day, leaving them with little time for even cooking their own food. Many of the unskilled labourers keep moving from place to place, taking up day jobs as they move. Key among the places of migrant worker concentration are Perumbavoor in Ernakulam district, Paippad on the borders of Kottayam and Pathanamthitta districts, and Cheruvannur in Kozhikode, adding a new dimension to the local life and culture.

Psychological Issues: The migrant laborer is increasingly being viewed as the ‘other’ and, with the media ready to find a migrant laborer as the prime culprit in major and minor instances of crime, tension is building up in areas of migrant labor concentration. Home away makes them lonely. Anyone who travels through the localities of Kerala on a Sunday and misses the way is very likely to have a frustrating time getting the right coordinates. For, the only souls on the village roads would be domestic migrant workers in their ones and twos. The conversation can begin only after he pulls out the plugs of the earphone attached to a mobile phone and spits the pan masala, khaini, zarda or gutka. Often it is noted that local people do not interact with them except labor purpose and therefore they are subjects to discriminatory treatment.

Social Issues: Except from Tami Nadu, migrants from other states often find it difficult to integrate due to large differences in culture, food habits, language and lifestyle, especially the local food, which is not to many migrants' tastes due to the presence of coconut oil. Locals also experience problems higher rents, which results in many local businesses no longer being practical, while renters cannot afford to pay their rent. Migrants have not very much identified with the Kerala culture. They are more self identified with the state of origin.

Economical Issues: Migrant workers in Kerala face multiple challenges, exploitation and also receive much lower wages and work longer hours than local labourers.²³ Long work days of up to 12 -14 hours, and long work weeks can also often be six or seven days. While migrants form a significant role in Kerala's prosperity, they do not receive much attention from the state government; this is especially important as they are usually not involved in unions and lack knowledge about their rights.

7. The Biblical View On Migrant Workers

The God of Bible is the God of the migrant community. People are as Jesus saw “sheep without a shepherd.” Therefore every member of the Israelite community had to remember and confess that they too are sojourners. (Deut.26:5-11). It is a confession of how God dealt with the forefathers of Israel as they were migrants.

8. Christian Ministry Towards The Migrant Workers

All of us are migrants; moving from home to some other place or moving from one place to another. In a world of divisions and hatred we can be prophets of peace and reconciliation. We find people beyond hope and places beyond repair. Let us have Mark 10:45 as our roadmap for good Christian ministry: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” It is among these depressed communities the church today carried out its work.

Advocacy among Migrant Workers: The Christian ministers are active among migrant workers, occasionally visiting their residential sites to understand their living conditions and bringing to the notice of government officials, and extending community support in times of

²³<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/migrant-workers-face-challenges-in-kerala-workshop-%C2%A01/972884.html>.

need. Members of the church are also encouraged to share what they have and consider them as members of the family. During Christmas, the church organizes special celebrations that include musical performances, plays fellowship and share the good news to them. Christian ministers also take greater interest in establishing adult literacy classes to educate them. Apart from this, awareness programs on smoking, alcohol, gambling, drugs, and economic living so that their life style be improved and developed.

Church priests often mention the hardship and difficulties of migrant workers and repeatedly invited to be voice of voiceless. On every gathering Christian ministers encourage their congregations to pray for the migrant workers and their families who are far from them.

9. Conclusion

If all migrant workers decide to go home together, the construction work in Kerala will literally shut down. Hotels will be shut as they are the main supply boys. Factories will be shut and even agriculture will seize as Kerala is literally dependent on them. If they have provided the opportunity to earn and live, many of the migrants would not even think of leaving their native place. Migrant come to an alien place preliminarily with a mindset of the unavoidable factors. They must have experienced at first, a sense of loss, dislocation, alienation and isolation, which will lead to process of acculturation. It is in this context a Christian worker is called to minister unto migrant workers to be their advocates and pastoral ministers.

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