

“Invisible Workers, Visible Stereotypes”: Analysing the Complex Realities of Migrant Women in Kerala, India

By

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Migration has long been a defining characteristic of India’s labour economy, shaping demographic patterns, economic structures, and social hierarchies. Kerala, a state in the southern tip of India with its positive social indicators often compared to European Nations, has been witnessing the influx of migrant population at least since the 1980s, initially from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu and later from states far north such as West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar and Assam.¹ To precisely historicise the migration waves to Kerala might almost be an impossible task as labour migration from Tamil Nadu dates to the ancient period with both Kerala and Tamil Nadu forming the part early *Tamizhakam* culture.² With a long, shared boundary between these two states, it is a common sight to see Tamil workers in Kerala even today. Nor did they have much cultural and linguistic barriers like those who came later from the north, as Tamil and Malayalam had many similarities and it was easier for the Malayalees to understand Tamil and Tamilians to process Malayalam. Many of these early migrants today have expanded their businesses and have purchased land and sometimes employ other migrants in their shops. The Tamil migrants, however, did not expand and monopolise all aspects of the unorganised sector like their successors. Though they were prominent in construction and cleaning, many of their engagements were entrepreneurial in nature. Tea Shops, laundry and ironing, sewage or septic tank cleaning etc. remain almost their monopoly at least in some of the cities in Kerala.³

The succeeding phase of migration that began in post-liberalisation period from the North India states to Kerala and continuous till date.⁴ The current paper shall focus on this wave with special focus on the district of Ernakulam, which is often considered as the commercial capital of the state. Often opined to begin since the late 1990s this influx of thousands of workers from diverse regions,⁵ including Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Manipur, Nepal, and Bangladesh became an integral part

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of the city’s labour market predominantly marked by their presence in construction and plywood industry to now being spread to almost all the manufacturing, agriculture, and service sectors.⁶ While their presence as employees spans different nooks and corners their lives is concentrated around certain spots such as Kadavanthra, parts of Goshree area, and West Kochi in the city limit and in small regions like Perumbavoor, Muvattupuzha, Kalady, and Kodanad being home to a large number who are ready to travel to the city and elsewhere almost daily. Perumbavoor today has even been nicknamed as “Mini North”⁷ with the migrant population almost outnumbering the native population.⁸ This region best exemplifies the case of group migration along with families to Kerala.⁹ Erstwhile little known to the city’s development this suburban region buzzes with the news of the migrants, both good and stereotypical on a frequent basis.¹⁰ This demographic shift has brought forth a significant cultural, social, and economic shift to the town.¹¹ The current paper attempts to understand this trend and tendencies in Ernakulam by analysing popular representations, news reports, and non-participant observation.

Making and Breaking the Stereotype of the “Bengali”

Kerala has a long tradition of migration both internal and external as well as inward and outward shaped by economic imperatives, social mobility, and historical contingencies. Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar) in the early twentieth century and the Gulf in later decades have seen Malayalis searching for their own rags to riches. Cinematic and literary imaginings such as *Aadujeevitham* (2024), *Varavelppu* (1989), *Pathemari* (2015), *Arabikatha* (2007), *Swapnasanchari* (2011), *Khaddama* (2011), and *Jacobinte Swargarajyam* (2016) have eulogised the plight, aspirations, and alienation of the migrant Malayali in Gulf. The real experience coupled with such tales have weaved an empathetic public consciousness for the Malayali migrant experience. However quite contradictorily the general perceptions about and attitude towards migrants arriving in Kerala from Northern and Eastern states of India are often reduced to a homogenised and stereotypical identity of the “Bengali” irrespective of their state of origin.¹² The term Bengali literally denotes the population that inhabits Bengal or speaks the language by the same name.¹³ However, in the colloquial sense of Kerala today the linguistic transformation of the term Bengali as a “catch all term” reflects deeper socio-cultural anxieties of the Malayali community. While one can draw striking parallels to the experience of Malayali Gulf Migrants and the migrants from North and Northeastern states in Kerala, endearment of the experiences of the former over the alienation of the later has been the dominant norm. Although Keralites have realised that, these migrants, today, are essential part of their workforce, the Malayali consciousness have systematically refused to accept the fact that these migrants’ culture have slowly diffused in to the cultural making of Kerala and now influence the anxieties and perceptions of everyday.¹⁴ This reconfiguration of the term “Bengali” extends beyond mere identification and carries pejorative connotations. In everyday conversation “Bengali” denotes “valueless

worker”.¹⁵ The term is frequently used to mock individuals who work diligently, accept lower wages, or perform tasks without financial compensation. This exemplifies how these internal migrations while protected by the *Constitution of India* is excluded and diminished through informal barriers restricting complete integration.

Public discourse, media representations, and policy frameworks further reinforce this homogenised image of the migrant worker, disregarding their diverse backgrounds in terms of caste, class, gender, and regional identity. Shaped by economic or structural inequalities the decision to voluntarily migrate have been shaped by hopes of upward mobility. While the conditions of the migrated population have often historically been second grade in most of the settled spaces, despite these antecedents the aspirations for migration are shaped by the dream of a better future that are determined in tune to the necessity of the movement and the place of settlement. In this context the concept of invisibility is introduced not in the conventional sense of an illegal immigrant as conceptualised by Benson¹⁶ but to indicate the form of invisibility of that erases the identity of the migrant workers in to homologous category in Kerala, despite being legal citizens with the right to work anywhere in India, experience a form of invisibility that erases their individual identities and reduces them to the singular category of ‘migrant’ with recurrent representations and narratives stereotyping them into rigid social perception.

The Case of Ernakulam

The district of Ernakulam now shows a preference to migrant labourers from other states primarily due to the non-availability of Malayali workers to perform works in the unorganised sector and their availability to work at lower wages, willingness to work for larger hours, comparable lack of bargaining power and lack of unionising capacity in comparison to their native nation counterparts.¹⁷ These workers now fill critical gaps by filling up the demand for labour in industries such as construction, manufacturing, textiles, hospitality among others and are now integral part of the district’s economy.¹⁸ These population like any other migrant population have also been contributing to the cultural exchange with the most visible example being the makeshift *Chaat* shops selling savoury snacks run by the migrants almost occupying every second street of the cityscape and those food items achieving much familiarity with the local populace.

Apart from the minimal self-employed occupations such as roadside vending, the conditions in which these workers continue to live, and work are far from ideal. From long working hours amounting to almost nine hours per day to earn an average monthly income of ₹15,000 (\$175.32) and must survive the high cost of living in the urban spaces that they occupy with their employers neither considering a guarantee through the promise of a permanent occupation nor providing them with the basic safety measures especially in the context of industrial labour. Almost unaware of their rights and inaccessibility to the schemes that intend to protect them these labourers remain vulnerable to

accidents and fatalities. These risks seem to be a willing chance that they are taking in their quest for “fortune”. With work life being the primary priority for the migrant population, the living conditions often practically become an adjustment. Dozens of individuals who come in flocks to Kerala cram together either in the employer provided in the most minimalist living space while many live under the shade and security provided by bridges or metro pillars, while some others opt to live inside small tents often made of torn cloths or disposed of advertisement boards. Some who can afford, do live in rented spaces. But as reported by one of the *Bhais* in a casual conversation, the options that are offered to them are extremely minimal forcing them to live inside almost collapsing buildings. Irrespective of where they live, the access to basic sanitation facilities or safety, security and privacy is almost impossible for them to attain.

With the magnitude of migration to Kerala becoming hard to miss in the present decade, the call for better facilities have been heard from various quarters. While initiatives such as Project Roshini for improving the academic performance of migrant children and to address language barriers have been executed,¹⁹ their scope, however, has been limited. There have been attempts to bring the migrant populations to already existing projects such as Kudumbasree and Kerala Literacy Mission have also been headway.²⁰ Every citizen’s constitutional right to live and work at any place of their choice in the country has often been cited as a reason for the impossibility of either successfully implementing a registry for the migrant labourers and for the largely successful implementation of any policy or scheme aimed at improving the migrant workers’ work-life conditions.

Reports suggest that over 57 per cent of the migrant population belong to socially and economically disadvantaged classes of the country who find themselves restricted to low paying job positions that the natives are often not ready to occupy.²¹ Most often than not these migrant labourers are employed in agriculture and allied industries in their lands of origin but have to take up manual labour in Kerala. While some of the migrants have managed to snatch rare opportunities of being the security personal or peon of reputed academic institution of the state and earn a steady income as well as command respect, more than 95 per cent of these workers lack the power to unionise, ironically in a state with a rich history and tradition of labour right movements and unionisation.²² While call for better working conditions, wages and living arrangements are frequently being raised from various quarters, these “fortune seekers” have not been able to access the same protection and rights as their Malayali counterparts and continues to remain excluded from the promises of betterment. The economic dependency of Ernakulam especially in industries such as construction, textiles, manufacturing, hospitality to meet its increasing demand for labour forces are sustained by the incoming flocks of migrants are rarely acknowledged and the dominant picture is often the reverse. Migrant populations from the Northeastern states have now become a prominent presence in the beauty and hospitality industries. Today Nagaon–Ernakulam and Murshidabad–Ernakulam are marked as the major labour corridors in the

country with the actual numbers of the migrant labourers gradually increasing. The limited possibility and expense that could be incurred to acquire access with limited access to education, healthcare, or social services and the knowledge of the precariousness of the life does not prevent this influx. The growing resentment and stereotyping faced by migrant workers from the host population further complicate their situation.

Observing Perumbavoor

Perumbavoor, a municipality in the Ernakulam district that has over time evolved into a significant hub for migrant labourers in the state. Situated approximately 24km north of the district collectorate in Thrikkakara, Perumbavoor is part of the Kochi metropolitan area and lies 32km northeast of Kochi's city centre. Recent estimates indicate that the migrant population in the Perumbavoor region alone approaches 200,000 contributing to a total of approximately 2.5 million domestic migrant labourers in Kerala. The local economy of Perumbavoor is heavily reliant on these migrant workers, particularly in the plywood industry. With over 1,200 plywood units operating in and around the area, employing more than 100,000 migrant workers, these labourers are integral to sustaining the industry. They are involved in various stages of production, from veneer processing to block board manufacturing, with skilled workers primarily hailing from Assam. Beyond the plywood sector, migrant workers have influenced the socio-cultural landscape of Perumbavoor. The Sunday market, colloquially known as “Bhai Bazaar,” exemplifies this transformation.²³ Catering predominantly to the migrant community, the market offers necessities such as vegetables and clothing. Electronic gadgets are in high demand, serving as vital links for migrants to stay connected with their families and cultures back home.

Religious institutions have adapted to this demographic shift. Local mosques now conduct prayers in multiple languages, including Bengali and Oriya, to accommodate the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the congregation. Cinemas that once faced declining attendance have found resurgence by screening films in languages such as Bengali, Oriya, and Assamese, aligning their offerings with the preferences of the migrant populace. The educational sector reflects this demographic change as well, with local schools witnessing increased enrolment of migrant children. To address the unique challenges these students face, initiatives like Project Roshni have been implemented to improve academic performance and bridge language barriers. Numerous small enterprises have emerged, offering services such as travel bookings and assistance with government schemes, tailored to the needs of the migrant community. Culinary preferences have also shifted, with markets now stocking vegetables and ingredients uncommon in traditional Kerala cuisine but essential to the diets of the migrant population. This diversification highlights the bidirectional influence between the migrants and the local community. However, despite the economic benefits derived from this influx, some local shop owners express ambivalence. While they profit from the patronage of

migrant labourers, there are underlying tensions, with complaints about cleanliness and cultural differences surfacing in casual conversations. This dichotomy underscores the complex dynamics of integration and acceptance within the community.

As a researcher navigating the streets of Perumbavoor, particularly areas densely populated by migrants, it becomes evident that many labourers exhibit a palpable sense of apprehension. Their cautious demeanour reflects underlying fears and uncertainties, possibly stemming from experiences of discrimination or marginalization. This observation highlights the need for more inclusive policies and community engagement initiatives to foster a harmonious coexistence. As Kerala continues to rely on migrant labour to fill gaps in its workforce, Perumbavoor serves as a microcosm of the larger tensions between economic necessity and social acceptance. The town’s evolving landscape raises pressing questions: Will economic reliance eventually foster social inclusivity? Or will migrants continue to exist in a space of economic utility but social exclusion?

Penning the Narratives

The persistent representation of the migrant workforce in Kerala is informed by a residual colonial ethos, an enduring framework of culture and development shaped by historical processes of subjugation and exoticisation. Kerala’s unique cultural mosaic, moulded over centuries by the Jews, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, and English, among others, offers a lens through which the present-day portrayal of migrants can be critically interrogated. This historical pluralism contrasts sharply with the contemporary narratives that reduce migrant identities to monolithic categories. Recent migratory waves from North and North-East India are not simply constituted by lone male travellers. In plain sight, women and children form a significant part of this demographic. However, while existing records may suggest a dominance of male labour migration, there is a systematic underrepresentation of migrant women in official statistics, a discrepancy that calls for a nuanced understanding of gendered migration dynamics. The movement of these migrants often originates from regions fraught with caste and religious rivalries, which further complicates their identity formation.²⁴ Paradoxically, the label “migrant” in Kerala is sometimes perceived as less toxic than the entrenched social tags rooted in caste and religion that they carry from their places of origin. This recontextualisation, however, does not eliminate the problematic dynamics at play. The arrival of migrant women has predominantly been framed through a male lens, a fact exemplified by popular media practices such as makeover videos circulating on social media platforms. In these videos it could be observed that a migrant labourer randomly chosen from everyday walks of life, given a makeover, and celebrated visually in trending Instagram reels and YouTube shorts.²⁵ While some online debates offer a counter-narrative to this objectification, the practice undeniably places these women within a framework of commodification and sexualised representation. Such portrayals reinforce a

dangerous stereotype that labels migrant women as morally loose, a trope that not only undermines their agency but also perpetuates their vulnerability in public and private spheres.

A particularly disturbing case that encapsulates these trends is that of Moni Bhosle, popularly known as Mona Lisa, a 16-year-old girl from Indore. Her viral rise began with a video of her selling garlands at the Mahakumbh Mela in Prayagraj, which was subsequently marred by incidents of harassment and physical assault.²⁶ Despite these experiences, an industrialist, accused of sexual harassment and undergoing investigation, while on bail chose her as the ‘perfect candidate’ to inaugurate a new shop of his jewellery chain²⁷ and made overtly sexist remarks during a press meet, framing her as a new sensation²⁸ while simultaneously demeaning the actress who had complained regarding sexual harassment she had to face.²⁹ The press meet with Bhosle and the entrepreneur was aired with high clickbait value.³⁰ This incident not only underscores the extent of objectification and sexual exploitation but also highlights the precarious position of migrant women in contemporary society, where their bodies become sites for both commercial gain and cultural degradation. These intersecting trends rooted in historical colonial influences, skewed gender representations, and the socio-economic pressures of migration complicate the narrative of migrant labour in Kerala. Colonial narratives constructed Indian women as both hyper-visible and voiceless, figures of exotic desire and moral suspicion.³¹ These representations cast female bodies as objects of spectacle and control, legitimizing gendered hierarchies that persist in contemporary media and labour relations. In today’s digital economy, such colonial tropes resurface in the commodification of migrant women like Moni Bhosle, whose visibility is mediated through viral culture and male patronage. The framing of her story that fetishizes her poverty while silencing her exploitation reflects how colonial patterns of sexualized display and moral judgment have adapted to neoliberal contexts, turning precarity into marketable entertainment. Such constructs demand a critical interrogation of the multiple layers through which identity, labour, and power converge.

Manufacturing Superiority

The multifaceted representations of migrant labour in Kerala reveal an enduring sense of superiority among the local Malayali population, a sentiment that continues to shape and constrain the discourse around migration. Historically, as the unorganized labour force in Kerala transitioned from being dominated by workers from Tamil Nadu, identified by the label “Annachi,” to today’s predominantly “Bengali” workforce, the underlying dynamics of class and cultural hierarchy have remained remarkably consistent. Despite the relative absence of the hyperemotional rhetoric associated with Gulf migration, the everyday portrayal of migrants here continues to be steeped in notions of cultural purity and hygiene, terminology reminiscent of the colonial lexicon employed by British administrators. This evolving narrative, framed within the context of a “fortune-seeking” mentality, not only reflects the pragmatic

realities of economic migration but also signals a gradual decay of the rigid social hierarchies that Malayalis have long upheld. The ostensibly benign use of labels like “Bengali” belies a deeper moral economy that perpetuates new forms of exploitation and demeaning representation. Fieldwork conducted in Perumbavoor demonstrates how the label “Bengali,” though seemingly neutral, operates as a category of social distancing that legitimises unequal relations within the local labour economy. In everyday speech, employers, contractors, and even local residents employ the term to refer to all migrant labourers from eastern and northern India, disregarding their distinct linguistic and regional identities. Within this usage, “Bengali” connotes not simply a place of origin but a moral and cultural position which is often hints at a situation that is associated with low cost, manual efficiency, and limited social refinement. Such representations, reinforced by popular media and public discourse, convert the label into a convenient shorthand for an entire class of expendable workers. This everyday normalisation of the term enables a quiet rationalisation of substandard wages, poor housing, and restricted mobility, all framed as inevitable outcomes of the migrants’ supposed temperament or background. What appears as an ordinary identifier thus becomes an instrument through which hierarchy is reproduced, allowing the local community to maintain a sense of moral superiority while continuing to rely on the labour it marginalises. These dynamics underscore that Kerala’s economic landscape, despite its robust labour movements, remains inextricably linked to external influences and collaborative ventures. While the state’s future economic independence is unlikely, as it continues to depend on intricate networks of migration and inter-regional exchange the representations of migrant workers in Kerala must be critically re-examined, not merely as reflections of economic necessity, but as complex cultural artifacts that reveal the interplay between historical prejudices and contemporary labour practices. This study calls for a more nuanced understanding of migration, one that acknowledges both the exploitative tendencies inherent in these representations and the potential for transformative change in the socio-cultural fabric of Kerala.

Notes

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