

MIGRANT LABOUR

Slaving Away In Kerala

A V Sakhidharan

It is a curious paradox—a land where unemployment is proverbially high acts as a magnet for livelihood-seekers elsewhere. According to the latest available figures the unemployed constitute 10.7 per cent of the labour force in Kerala which has a population of less than 40 million. And the phenomenon of young men and women streaming out in search of jobs, to other states and the Gulf countries, continues unabated. Yet for impoverished Tamils, Bengalis, Oriyas and Biharis, among others, Kerala is now what the Gulf countries have for long been for Keralites. Agriculture, plantations and the building industry are some of the sectors in this state where one runs into migrant workers from far off provinces. These migrant labourers, it seems, are jostling with the dalits and the adivasis for a place at the rock bottom of the socio-economic pyramid.

At the outset it should be made clear that there is nothing unique about Kerala in the matter of employing- and maltreating-migrant labour. To cite just one instance, some years ago there were chilling reports of a number of adivasis from Madhya Pradesh employed in the silica quartz crushing factories in Gujarat dying due to acute silicosis, caused by silica poisoning. In the course of their work these tribals were breathing fine silica dust. The Pollution Control Board's stringent regulations for quartz crushing units were almost always ignored. Nor were there any health protection or other welfare measures for the migrant labour. It was noted that proper implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) would have helped the adivasis earn a living in Madhya Pradesh. But then the State willed otherwise.

Coming back to Kerala, occasionally there is resentment among indigenous workers over this 'labour import'. In the Kerala Spinners in Komalapuram in Alappuzha local people's protest forced the management to send back twenty Gujarati workers. However, such cases are few and far between. Thanks to the semi-feudal cultural values that are reinforced through the schooling, the educated Malayalis suffer from a false sense of dignity and prestige and are reluctant to soil their hands. Hence the shortage of farm labour—which is one of the causes of the pervasive crisis in the agriculture sector in the state. With the demand for labour mounting in the unorganised sector, Tamil labourers used to supplement local labour. Soon this too was found inadequate. So the job contractors and their agents moved down north and east.

But it will not be fair to blame the people of Kerala alone for the migrant flow into the state. In his illuminating book, *Exploited: Migrant Labour in the New Global Economy*, Toby Shelley has put labour migration in proper perspective. He argues that the sweatshops generated by migration are no aberration, but "an integral part of the global economy". The World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programmes and the resultant lack of job protection and the decline of the public sector and traditional industries have given a big boost to migration, the International Labour Organisation of the United Nations notes in a paper. The demand for migrant labour has also gone up in the rich countries for performing what are referred to as 3Ds—Dirty, Degrading and Dangerous—jobs.

Admittedly, Shelley is talking about country-to-country migration, but his observation can be seen to apply to inter-province migration in India too. As Shelley suggests, the bulk of the migrants being herded to Kerala are victims of what a well-known economist called 'developmental terrorism'; the State has been acting, especially in the last two decades of the neo-liberal regime, in cahoots with the Indian corporate sector and multinational corporations. Many lower middle class families have been dispossessed of their tiny plots of land for the construction of irrigation and power projects, special economic zones and industrial projects. Following the crash of the plywood industry in Asom, workers there headed for the south. Besides, it is a sad commentary on the poor wage rates prevalent in the northern and eastern states that the great unwashed there should rough it out in distant Kerala. The district authorities here do not keep proper records of who come from where to work under whom and so no clear information about their number and home states is available. According to unofficial

estimates, however, non-Keralite workers in Kerala number more than 800,000. The absence of the necessary details makes blatant exploitation easier.

The workers are recruited on a contract basis. The job contractors and sub-contractors only collect commission from the employers but also grab a share of what the recruits earn. While leaving their homelands the workers are not given a clear idea of the daily ordeal awaiting them. The new trend has thus spawned a wide network of operators—unproductive, parasitical and self-perpetuating. At day-break in various parts of Kerala towns and cities, even in some villages, mobile-toting agents can be seen taking orders from employers and despatching labourers to the work spots. The labourers are inhumanly packed in vehicles which then speed off. A prominent Malayalam weekly, *Madhyamam*, rightly called the whole business Kerala's *adimacchantha* (slave bazaar). This in a state which boasts of a progressive public sphere and a Left government headed by V S Achuthanandan, veteran trade union leader.

Ironically, the 'work-shy' people of Kerala are more than willing to sweat it out and suffer harassment in distant lands. The majority of the Keralites in the Gulf countries are employed as tailors, carpenters, welders, waiters in hotels and domestic helps. They may earn higher wages than in their native place, but their living conditions are appallingly inhuman. Denied citizenship and democratic rights, they are put up in labour camps with only communal kitchens and bathrooms. Unfair practices like extended hours without overtime payment and denial of wages are not uncommon.

It was the blood and sweat of the Gulf Malayalis that fuelled the construction industry back in Kerala which is the most conspicuous employer of migrant labour. Those who struck it rich in Dubai, Qatar, Muscat, Sharja, Kuwait and so on in the last four decades and more have invested mainly in houses, rather than productively in small industries or agriculture. With a wave of obscene consumerism sweeping the state, everybody aspired to own a swanky abode. As Lewis H Lapham, author of *Money and Class* in America, commented in another connection, it is wrong to assume that "happiness cannot be separated from a clean and well-lighted address". After all, people also inhabit "a landscape of the mind". The Kerala middle class is certain to dismiss Lapham's heretical views as mere hogwash.

The construction industry needs workers who are willing to put in long, back-breaking work, for 12 to 16 hours a day. Non-Keralite male and female workers toiling in this sector earn Rs 150 and Rs 100 respectively as against Rs 400 and Rs 250 in the case of Keralites. Such a wide gap in the matter of wages is hardly justified legally or morally. But then, all labour laws are violated in this sector involving workers from the north and the eastern states. Those questioning unfair treatment in matters of wage are beaten up and dubbed Maoists. Since the employers flout security rules with impunity, the workers risk their lives, especially while working on the upper floors of buildings under construction. Some of the accidents turn fatal. In the last couple of years, nearly fifty such deaths have taken place in the construction industry. Although the law says workers should be provided insurance cover, this provision remains on paper. The employers and contractors do not pay any assistance or compensation to the relatives of those killed in accidents, let alone make arrangements for sending the bodies home. In most cases the workers themselves pool their meagre resources for this purpose.

Migrants find employment in agriculture too. During the harvesting season a couple of years ago one heard *unfamiliar* folk songs from a paddy field in a Kerala village. On enquiry, one was told that the agricultural labourers had been brought from Orissa. In the cashew factories in Kollam district, male migrant labourers have long begun to replace Keralite women. Coming to plantations, there is rubber which contributes 36 percent of the state's agricultural SDP and over 91 percent of the country's total requirement of the commodity. Because of the unending flow of workers to the Gulf countries, the plantations faced a labour crisis. So the Rubber Board trains labourers from other states in tapping work.

As for pineapple, the annual production is 350,000 tonnes, the number of farmers involved being 1,000 and the cultivated area 13,500 hectares. The cultivation needs some 70,000 labourers, the bulk of whom come from outside the state. About 40 percent of the workers toiling in the high value cardamom plantations, which are spread over 33,000 hectares in Idukki district, are from the eastern provinces.

Why do employers and engineers prefer, sometimes even insist on, non-Malayalee workers? First, of course, is the wage factor. A few months ago *The Economic Times* quoted K M Michael, president of the Cardamom Growers' Association, as saying that although migrant workers do not score much in terms of skill, they come "relatively cheap"—as against the Rs 300-350 a day that a labourer from Tamil Nadu used to earn, the new crop of workers get Rs 200! The docile migrants are unlikely to organize themselves into militant unions and resort to protest actions, unlike the allegedly strike-happy Malayalis who work on their own home turf. The slightest protest may attract dismissal. Defiant workers may even be beaten up by the employer's goons.

Secondly, the workers from the northern and north-eastern states do not celebrate local holidays. So there is loss of fewer man hours. There are other, ulterior motives too. In some cases the factory managements have their own secrets to keep about the nature of the manufactured product and the effluents discharged, which may get leaked out if the employees know Malayalam. The migrant workers stay in groups of four or five in ramshackle shanties and under metal roofs—sometimes four or five in one room—where they are not provided even basic facilities like pure water. Workers from the neighbouring states can at least go back to their homeland frequently and keep in touch with their families and friends there, unlike their colleagues from far off places like West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa and Jharkhand. Neither do people from Tamil Nadu have a difficult time communicating and mixing with the local people—those who know Tamil can follow Malayalam and vice versa. Thanks to unfamiliarity with the local language, most of the time those recruited from far off states spend their leisure hours in their tenements.

Isolation makes their position particularly vulnerable. Homesickness and emotional distress haunt the poor workers, triggering depression and other diseases. Sometime back a bizarre illness was reported among Bengali construction workers in Kochi—shrinking of the male sex organ! In no time this unheard-of disease was reported from migrant workers in Kannur and Kozhikode in northern Kerala too. The superstitious Bengalis saw it as a case of goddess Kali's curse and started conducting pujas, even animal sacrifices. Finally it was diagnosed as a psychiatric ailment, a form of mass hysteria.

Also, there are lumpen elements—real and potential—among the migrants. The other day a court in Kottayam sentenced a migrant to death and three others to life imprisonment in a murder case, those killed being an Oriya couple. Crimes against women are reported frequently.

Just as the underdeveloped capitalist class wants super profit, the relatively privileged indigenous workers, fed on a steady diet of economism and having internalised a backward culture of capitalism, are interested in job security and decent remuneration for themselves and look down upon those from outside the state. Apparently, employers here have learnt the art of 'divide and rule' from the old colonialists! With US-dictated neo-liberal economic policies in full swing, the culture of workers' solidarity nurtured over several decades of trade union struggles has died a natural death. In many places mainstream workers' organisations look the other way when employers resort to crude exploitation. The more radical TUCI (Trade Union Centre of India) has been demanding nationalisation of the construction industry, implementation of the Inter-State Migration Act and other relevant legislations, living wage and end to contract labour. The media, both print and visual, have also been, by and large, giving short shrift to the acute livelihood problems facing the migrant workers. At the same time criminal acts by the non-Malayali workers as also their alleged extremist links get blown up. □□□