

Border crossings for better lives

Dynamics of emigration from India: effects on small societies, networks and life cycles

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Introduction

Indian emigrant culture in the English world is vibrant and alive for long time. Indian emigrants are now materializing the dreams, and represent the top professionals in their fields. They have emerged as one of the most influential ethnic communities in the English world, economically, professionally, and socially. Indians represent one of the most visible and advanced emigrant communities in many countries. Germany, Austria and Italy have a considerable number of Indian immigrants in caring professions long back from 1970's. Still, Indian emigration to non English world is a relatively less significant phenomenon. Here I would like to discuss about the effect and impact of migration on some of the unique Indian emigrant groups, their characteristics, dynamics of mobility, remittances, networking and survival in 'cold and silent' Finland

Characteristically unique emigrant groups from India

People from the states of Punjab, Tamilnadu and Kerala are the three prominent groups who migrated and integrated to three different regions of the world.- North America, South east Asia, and the middle east. Mass migration from Tamilnadu is not very much evident now. But keralites and Punjabis still continue the process. Considering the migration interests of these two groups, Punjabis have interest in business and keralites have their interests in employment.

I choose to discuss the migration pattern of keralites because of their inseparable relation between migration and employment interests and remittance patterns.



Kerala: A society staying apart

To Kerala's admirers, the state's struggles are those endemic to the developing world, while its achievements are unique. Kerala's life expectancy is nearly 74 years — 11 years longer than the Indian average and closer to the American average of 77 years. Its literacy rate, 95 percent, is much higher than Indian average of 65 percent, and closer to that of most developed nations 95-99. Literacy rate for younger adult generation (below the age of 50) is 100 %. Those enviable outcomes, as its supporters stress, are the result of policy choices: Kerala spends 36 percent more on education and 46 percent more on health than the average Indian state. Kerala was equally well known as a font of leftist politics and welfare state ideology. The state transferred land from the rich to the poor, set a minimum wage and invested heavily in health and schools. Though Kerala's tax rates have been comparable to other Indian states, its collection rates have been higher.

Kerala: Emigration and social impacts

Kerala's culture of human investment is at least two centuries years old. By the early 20th century, literate Keralites were already migrating internally, to work as clerks in Delhi and Bombay, and sending money home. Migration abroad has been the single most dynamic factor in the otherwise dreary development scenario of Kerala in the last quarter of the past century. Migration has contributed more to poverty alleviation and reduction in unemployment in Kerala than any other factor. As a result of migration, the proportion of population below the poverty line has declined by 12 per cent. The number of unemployed persons has come down by more than 30 per cent.

Migration and Gender equality

Migration has caused nearly a million married women in Kerala to live away from their husbands. Most of these women, the so-called "NRI wives" had experienced extreme loneliness to begin with. But over a period of time and with a helping hand from technological advancements, most of them came out of their feeling of loneliness. Their sense of autonomy, independent status, management skills and experience in dealing with the world outside their homes - all developed in a hard way. In the long-run, the transformation of these one million women would have contributed more to the development of Kerala society than all the temporary euphoria created by foreign remittances and the acquisition of modern gadgetry. Together with the large proportion of educated working women, Kerala society moved much further than most of the other states in terms of gender equality.

An interesting figure

world Bank report 2007

- Total income produced by Indian IT industry-850 billion*
- Total remittance from migrants to India from abroad-1285 billion*
- Contribution of keralite community- 644 billion*
- Total annual budgetary income of Kerala state -210 billion*
- Number of keralites working abroad-2 million
- Interestingly this 2 million is only 5% of the total Kerala population

* Indian Rupees

The message from Kerala

The low state wise economic level and the high living standards in Kerala is always an interesting topic of study for many researchers. From the point of view of migration studies, the dynamics and pattern of migration from Kerala is of normal character. But the utilization of their earnings and remittance is unique. If managed migration is a process advocated by international organizations to reduce the level of inequality between the societies, the Kerala model is an appreciable example for the expected end result.

International recognitions

Talk of the Kerala model began after a 1975 United Nations report praised the state's "impressive advances in the spheres of health and education." Starved for success stories from the developing world, a generation of scholars has celebrated the "Kerala model" as a humane alternative to market-driven development, a vision of social equality in an unequal capitalist world. Amartya Sen, Nobel laureate in economics, wrote widely on Kerala, arguing (in a book with Jean Dreze) that its "outstanding social achievements were of far-reaching significance in other countries". In a book on three places that inspire global hope, Bill McKibben, an American, wrote that "Kerala demonstrates that a low-level economy can create a decent life and shows that sharing works."

Present dynamics of emigration

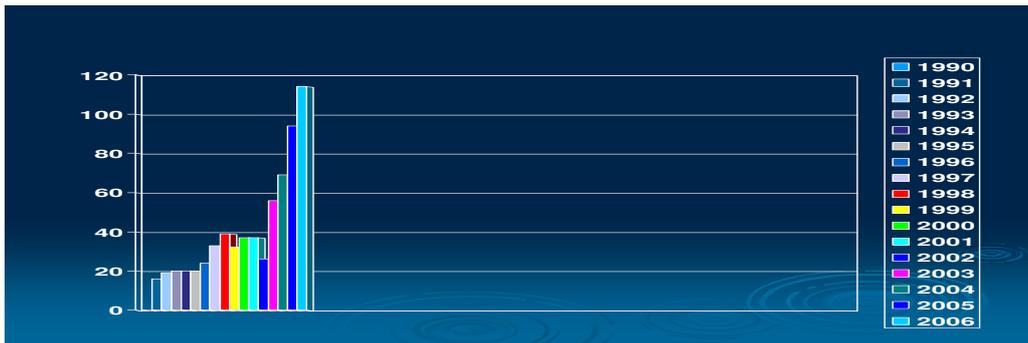
Now, the Kerala model is on an unexpected twist, each year Keralite migrants send home money equivalent to 5 billion US dollars. With nearly a quarter of this money being spent on education, some Keralites experience a painful cycle: migration buys education, which leads to more migration. Presently over two million Keralites work abroad and the new migrants are often heading to unfamiliar nations to find out the opportunities. On the other side it is now a natural tendency to capitalize the global opportunities to work or study abroad and to continue the remittances. Regardless of the fairly good living conditions in home country and respectable education levels, the new migrants in unfamiliar nations face frustrations from unsuccessful attempts to keep self respect, desperate tries for better jobs and separation from their families. These experiences have forced some scholars to rewrite the story of Kerala's triumphant escape from capitalism into a story that underlines their painful dependence on it. Now Kerala is becoming too much dependant on migration for employment, sustenance and other developmental activities. The inherent danger of such dependence is that, migration could stop abruptly as happened in the Kuwait war experience of 1990 with disastrous repercussions for the state. Local lessons would matter less if this were a section of Mexico or Manila — places known for the hardships that make migrants flee.

But Kerala's standing is still on the other side — the alternate path to development, an open method to capitalize globalization. The debate about migration from Kerala is a debate about future labor market strategies of third world workforce across the globalized world.

Keralites in Finland

Before the original emigration from India to Finland, one famous writer, Mr. S K Potttekad from Kerala had an opportunity to visit Finland on 1955 June 7th and he published a very interesting travelogue about the 'land of midnight sun' in 1956.

We have the data of keralites moved to Finland from 1990. Till 2006 there is a steady increase in migration. The following data does not include those people moved in to Finland and worked for less than one year. It is taken from the official website of statistics Finland.



Pattern of mobility

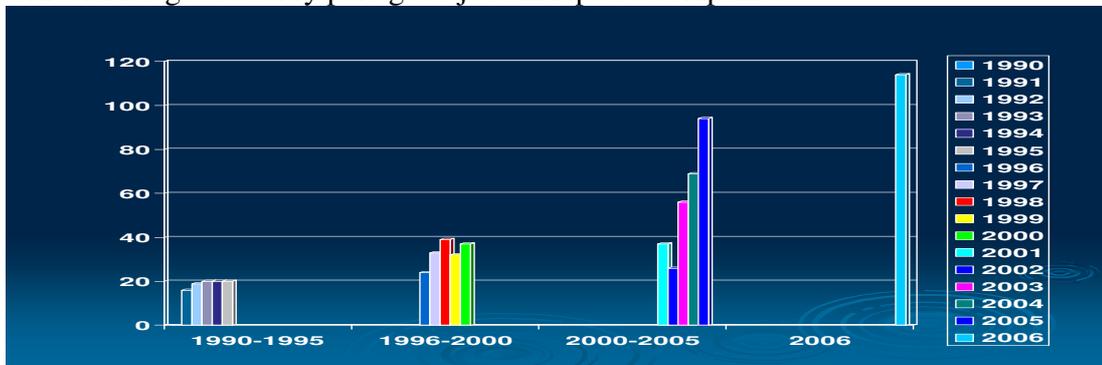
Till 1995 there is very small number of Keralite migration to Finland. After 1995 there are few known migrants and the reason for migration was mainly contracted jobs, study, love or marriage. In late 90's software companies started job outsourcing and more IT professionals moved to Finland on specific job contracts. Those professionals worked in Finland on specific period job contracts were working mainly in technology sector and after that, through their professional networking they got better jobs in US and most of them moved to the United States permanently.

Motivation factors: +ve & -ve

The reason for IT professionals to move to US was better pay scales. But this transit mobility disseminated information among the IT professionals that, a short contract in Finland can bring them a highly rewarding position in some other place. On the other side, the former information about Finland was that, it is a very unfriendly nation with a difficult language. Until Nokia mobile phones become very popular, no body was even thinking where this country is. Thus Finland was never an attraction for a prospective migrant from kerala for long time. Later more people moved to Finland with specific job assignments as short term consultants from Indian IT companies. One major difference they presented from central European countries was that 'Finns at least doesn't hate English!'

After 2003

The interesting observation is, after 2003 there is more people coming in and most of them are living here for over one year. After 2003, student mobility is equal or more than the professional mobility from Kerala. Students achieved education from Finnish Universities got decently paid good jobs in reputed companies



How the road turned to Helsinki?

After the Kuwait war, there was a slowdown in the emigration from Kerala for a short period. At the same time India was on the threshold of new economic reforms. Career forecasting became more precise and people start studying skills which is needed in the labour market. They chose IT and healthcare in the early 90's and in the late 90's most of them capitalized opportunities around the world. Those were the motivational factors of professionals. Concurrently there was another wave of thinking coming up of doing master study in a western country and make yourself competent to the globalized world. The study option in western world was really expensive and then the real useful information about Scandinavia came up - free education. Regardless of numerous advertisements in the news papers, so many people still cannot believe that there is some places in the first world where you can get the education for free. Interestingly, Paid foreign education was accessible only for the upper middleclass and richer section of the society and the free education in Scandinavia was accessible for most of the middle class people of kerala.

Reasons for recent increase in migration to Finland

Education is free and it is of high quality. Finnish educational opportunities are promoted officially more than ever before in the mass media. There is an evident change in the unfriendly nature of Finns and an immigrant can easily survive with English language. Through networking there are now more chances to get decently paid part time jobs. There are some semiskilled jobs and job places who give preference to keralites and Indians. An immigrant can maintain fair remittances to their home. In the technology sector there are more chances of getting good permanent jobs. For other professionals there are more chances to learn extra skills for survival. Success stories are not anymore rare. It is a peaceful, progressive country with opportunities, less crime and no bribe.

Attitudes and future plans

An unofficial study conducted among keralites in Finland showed the following findings.-the study group includes 10 students, 10 IT professionals and 5 early migrants who already settled in Finland. All the students and IT professionals are planning to move back to India or any other country after working for few years in Finland. The time frame for most of them is 8-10 years. Early migrants has already invested in real estate, mutual funds or hospitality industry in India and planning to move back around their retirement from active life. The level of satisfaction with daily life and earnings is high for all respondents. All of them have fairly well paid jobs and less serious experience with discrimination or violence. At the same time, the level of disapproval to Finnish attitude is high for all the respondents. They shared a common complaint that, Finns consider all foreigners are refugees and never accept the fact that immigrants may have better living standards in their home country. The level of appreciation to equality in Finnish society is high among IT professionals and low among students and moderate among early migrants. Students are mainly disappointed on giving opportunity to less competent Finns to key tasks even in base level jobs. Early migrants said there is too much equality that makes family life vulnerable for definite divorce after few years. At the same time all the three groups have high appreciation to the class wise social equality of Finnish system. The level of appreciation for family life in Finland is low in three groups. None of the respondents like to let their kids grow up in Finnish system and don't like to end up their life in an old age home. Responding to a hypothetical question about gaining permanent residence and living here for ever as a skilled migrant, 8 out of 10 students and 7 out of 10 IT professionals said they will apply. Those who said 'no' gave the reason as they don't like to pay too much tax.

Conclusion

Emigration from India is of totally different character in its objectives, rationale and dynamics from the other countries of south Asia. Within India also, there is different groups with different migration patterns. It is very interesting to identify certain unique emigrant groups in this world who defines migration in a very positive way and utilize the migration opportunity to upgrade the living standards of the whole native society. It is high time for the first world to realize the fact that migration management is a process of elimination of inequality in this world by extending humanitarian considerations and sharing of richness. It should recognize, promote and stabilise success stories of certain communities like kerala with poor background who managed migration to produce outstandingly significant social changes in their home community. The expected increase in mobility of people from Indian region will be mainly for the purpose of education in the next 10 years. Those students are prospective skilled workforce and it would be an advantage for the Finnish society if they use this migrant skills. Even though most keralites want to go back to their home country after few years, they would like to work for the host country for a considerable period. Also there is less chances for them to form a demanding ethnic minority group within the host country because migration is a part of their natural lifecycle to achieve better living standards in the home country.