

Statement of Purpose:

State of Migrant Workers from Assam in Kerala

By Farhana Ahmed

Kerala is India's Gulf for workers from other states because of higher wages they get there than in their home states. Migrant labour from Assam consists of 17% of total migrant workers of 2.5 million (Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation-2013)—the second highest after Bihar (18%). The migration of its Malayalee labour force to the Gulf countries and a gradual decline in the flow of workers from neighbouring Tamil Nadu in recent times has filled the gap of the workforce in Kerala by the migrant workers from Assam and other states.

In Assam a large portion of these migrant workers to Kerala are from the marginalized Muslims of East Bengali descent often dubbed as 'foreigners' or Bangladeshis. Social insecurity, political volatility of the recent past and declining resources due to climate induced flood and river bank erosion compounded by a population increase in the community has propelled a large chunk of their youth to migrate to faraway places like Kerala for work in the last three decades.

At present a daily wage labour earns maximum Rs 500/- a day in Assam whereas in Kerala it is almost double with food. This arithmetic attracts young boys and girls to move to a place which is different geographically and culturally. They are mostly engaged in the plywood factories, horticulture and food processing industry in Kerala.

The Kerala state government too has adopted policies in providing better social security measures for its migrant workforce. However there have been tensions in recent years between an ageing local population and a growing migrant worker force in Kerala. It has started more visibly from 2016 onwards when a local young woman Jisha was allegedly murdered by a migrant worker from Assam. On 4 May, soon after Jisha's murder, Kailash Jyothi Behra, a 30-year-old migrant worker from Assam, was lynched by a mob in Kottayam on the very day of his arrival because they suspected him of being a thief. After thrashing him, they tied him down under the scorching sun for an hour. Behra succumbed to his injuries while 50 people stood watch. That was an example of the abhorrence and intolerance that Malayalee society displays towards migrant workers. Criminalising migrants workers have been an increasing social phenomenon that has been developing in Kerala by the locals in recent years.

Another important development that has emerged in Kerala with a large migrant population is its changing demographic profile. Due to various interventions like family planning programme, and factors like out migration to Gulf and other countries, is increasingly weighed towards the older age categories in the state. It is estimated that in another ten years, majority of the Malayalee population in Kerala will be 40 plus. Thus in the near future, a demographic situation will arise in Kerala, where a big majority of the host population will belong to the older age groups while the migrant population will dominate the other segment of the population that is young and working.

The purpose of this research is to conduct studies on this trend of migration to Kerala from Assam, its social contacts and relations with the host population and the possible outcome it might bring to the state which has the distinction of one of the best one in the country in the human development indexes.