

24th August 2017, 9:30 to 11 am

Panel 2: **Identity and Inclusion**

(**Discussant:** Sudeep Basu, **Chair:** Pradeep Bose)

Interstate Migrant Workers and Social Identity: A Case Study on Malayalam Films

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For the past two decades interstate migrant labourers are the major suppliers of labour needs of Kerala. The availability of jobs, left behind by Malayalees who are emigrating the world over, along with higher wage rates have attracted migrant labours from South, Central, North and North Eastern parts of India to Kerala. The migrant labourers from other southern States of India such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh are the migrant groups who came to Kerala initially. Later they were followed by migrant labourers from Orissa, West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and several North-Eastern states of India. Even migrant labourers from foreign countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh are also working in Kerala. Labour Department of Kerala estimates that there are around twenty five lakh interstate migrants working in Kerala. The development projects of Kerala depend on this labour force. They have now become an indispensable part of Kerala. More than a labour force their presence has made wider social impacts too.

Being an unorganized labour category they are socially and economically highly vulnerable in Kerala. They are exploited with, long work hours, low salary and unsafe work conditions. They are forced to live in unhygienic living conditions and are denied of basic citizenship rights. The linguistic difference adds to the problems that they confront in Kerala. These trends have ultimately resulted in making them vulnerable within their homeland (Kumar 2015). More than denying the basic human rights Kerala society look upon them with suspicion. Media is playing a crucial role in shaping their social identity. They are often being represented as potential threats to the Kerala society. They are being presented as criminals. The migrant involved crimes, especially the murder of a twenty nine year old lady of Perumbavoor, Ernakulam district have added to this situation in a big

way. Both visual and print media is not being sensitive in handling the migrant related issues. They are usually termed as 'annya samsthana thozhilalikal' (other state labourers). Their identity is being questioned based on their region of origin. The people from West Bengal are often doubted as the illegal migrants from Bangladesh. The cultural features of migrants who are predominantly from rural India make them being depicted as uncultured and uncivilized.

Their existence is even visible in Malayalam films. But how are they represented even when, the Kerala society depends on this work force and the number of migrant labourers pulled towards Kerala is always on the increase?. As seasonal Migrants, temporary Migrants, semi-permanent migrants, guest workers etc they are employed in all sectors which demands manual labour power. In spite of all their contributions, they are still framed with in all kinds of stigma and stereotypes. This is very well reflected in Malayalam films. Over the years they are being frequently depicted in Malayalam films including the popular movies. There are films which exclusively deal with the stories of these migrant labourers. More than the print media, the visual media occupy the social spaces of Kerala to a much wider level. Hence, this has to be scrutinized at a deeper level. The present article takes up this issue by analysing the presence of interstate migrant labourers in Malayalam films. It raises critical questions regarding, how they are portrayed in Malayalam films?, what is the identity they are attributed with in Malayalam films etc.,. The analysis is conducted based on Malayalam films that are released during the past one year. Theoretical concerns of the paper are related to questions of identity, public sphere and social transformation.