Inter-State Migrant Labourers in Malayalam Films: A Critical Review

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Over the past few decades interstate migrant labourers from different parts of India, are satisfying the labour needs of Kerala. This indispensable labour force is often represented as a possible threat to the Kerala society. They have been subjected to exploitation, exclusion and marginalization. Recently, Malayalam films has shown interest towards characters and themes related to Inter State migrant labourers from North, East, West and North-Eastern parts of India. Characterization of migrants does not limit to stereotypes and stigmatized images. Films have begun to depict their elevated social acceptance and the problems they encounter. However, these films fail to portray the hardships they encounter in Kerala. They are objectified to elicit crime and humour

Key words: Inter State Migration, Labourer, Film

Over the last two decades the migration trends of Kerala is in flux. It is no longer a place with large number of out migrants. Kerala is now becoming an in-migrating state (Rajan & Sumeetha 2016). Better health and educational standards, migration of skilled and unskilled labour force; both within and outside the India, stagnation in agriculture sector, awakening of construction sector, new developmental projects etc., has transformed Kerala into an employment generating destination (Rajan & Sumeetha 2016; Reddy 2015). The labour opportunities created under the skilled and unskilled sectors in Kerala were occupied by Inter State Migrant (ISM) labourers. The presence of ISMs from South Indian states, especially Tamil Nadu has a long history. Since 1990s they were outnumbered by migrant labourers from West Bengal (20%), Bihar (18.10%), Assam (17.28%), Uttar Pradesh (14.83%), Orissa (6.67%) and several other States of India. Though there is no consensus arrived regarding their estimated population as around 25 lakh (Narayan and Venkiteswaran 2013), their presence is visible all over Kerala. They are often been identified as, ‘Hindi speaking people’ or ‘bhais’ or ‘anyasamsthana thozhilikal’ in Kerala (Prasad 2016).

The unorganized nature of this labour category has made them socially and economically vulnerable. They are exploited with long work hours, low salary and unsafe work conditions. Their basic human rights are violated and the citizenship rights are denied. The linguistic
difference adds to the problems they confront in Kerala (Kumar 2015; Narayan and Venkiteswaran 2013). The native society looks upon them with suspicion. Their identity is, always under question. Recently reported crimes involved by migrants especially, the rape and murder of the girl named Jisha, in 2016 is prominent among them. Media often present them as a threat to the native society. They are always stigmatized in the name of increased crime rates and spread of epidemics. Their labour power is tapped through construction sector, industrial sector, hotels, agriculture sector, domestic work etc., but native people keeps a sense of ‘otherness’ towards them (Kumar 2015; Prasad 2016). The questions raised and arguments put forward in this article are couched on this background.

Malayalam films, a reference point to evaluate Inter State Migrants

The sensitivity shown by Malayalam films towards social issues is commendable. Migration of Kerala people (both within and outside India) is one such theme which have become the central plot for oodles Malayalam films. To trace the theme ‘migration’ in Malayalam films is beyond the limits of a few pages. The presence of ISMs from the South Indian States especially Tamil Nadu has a long history. In the recent past, themes and characters related to ISM labourers from North, Eastern, Western and North-Eastern parts of India are becoming common in Malayalam movies. A labour category which is; socially, culturally and linguistically diverse at one side; vulnerable, exploited and marginalized on the other hand, deserves critical evaluation based on their presence in movies. Because, Cinema as a powerful modern audiovisual medium of communication, is capable of wielding a powerful influence on human minds with its photographic realism, and is particularly effective on the minds of the gullible, illiterate masses who take all that is shown on screen for reality (Prasad 2010). A couple of questions formulated on this context are (i) How ISM labourers are portrayed in Malayalam films? (ii) What kind of Social Identity is evolved through these characters or storyline? The films are analysed using these queries.

The term ‘Inter State Migrant (ISM) in Kerala’ is operationalized as, migrant workers working in Kerala, who belongs to North, Eastern, North-Eastern and Western parts of India especially from the states of West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, U.P etc., In Kerala they are usually called as ‘Hindikaar’ (Hindi language speaking people) or ‘Bhai’. The presence of migrant labourers from South Indian States is acknowledged but they are conveniently kept aside from the purview of this article. Among the Malayalam films released during the last three years eleven films are identified as portraying ISM related characters or storyline. To be
specific these films include Masala Republic⁴, Bhaiyya Bhaiyya⁵, Chandrettan Evideyya⁶, Amar Akbar Antony⁷, Appuram Bengal EppuramThiruvithamkur⁸, Darwinte Parinamam⁹, Kismath¹⁰, AnnMariaKalipilannu¹¹, Oru muthassi gatha¹², Jomonte suvisheshangal¹³ and C/o. Saira Banu¹⁴.

Films: a space for new identity formation

Aforementioned films were scrutinized to accomplish the objectives. Keywords encapsulating the characterisation of ISMs in these films were derived. A word cloud is generated (Fig.1) based on the frequency of this keywords. It is powerful enough to describe the evolved identity of the ISMs, the qualities associated with the characters, their employment nature, native societies attitude towards them, symbols used to represent ISM labourers, cultural interfaces, etc.,

Fig:1 Distribution of ISMs and their related themes in Malayalam Films (Courtesy: WordItOut.com)

The term ‘Bengali¹⁵’ is generally used to represent a person who belongs to ‘West Bengal’ and use Bengali language as their mother tongue. It is true that ISMs from different districts of West Bengal occupies a major share of the migrants in Kerala. But the term is not restricted to address migrants from West Bengal. In the film ‘masala republic’, all migrants including the two ISM protagonists Sanju Bhai form Arunachal Pradesh and Bheemta from Assam are collectively referred as ‘Bengalis’. The migrant from Assam in the film kismath is addressed as Bengali. This Categorization is affirmed by tagging names or events to the term
‘Bengali’. Couple of movies such as ‘masala republic’ and ‘bhaiyya bhaiyya’ portrays the Malayali16 contractor who supplies migrant workers with the name ‘Bengali Babu’. Dialogues packed with humour such as, ‘without onion there is no Bengali and without Bengali there is no Malayali’, ‘Children’s, Malayalis and Benglis are using panmasala’, ‘shambhu will snatch Bengali guys’ etc., are commonly used in the film ‘masala republic’. These dialogues and words are capable enough to assert the term ‘Bengali’ as a symbol to represent the whole ISM labourers. Like the term ‘bhai’, which Malayalam media (especially print media) use to address the ISMs (Prasad 2016), the term ‘Bengali’ gets wider connotations. In Malayalam movies a single word ‘Bengali’ becomes a common word symbolizing the whole group of ISM labourers who are diverse within themselves.

The ascribed characteristics

Characterisation of ISM labourers results in presenting regional languages such as Bengali and Assamese in Malayalam films. The title song of the film ‘masala republic’ is a combination of Bengali and Hindi languages. In the film Kismath, Assamese language is used. The Bengali couples in the film ‘appuram bengla eppuram thiruvithamkur’, speaks in Bengali language. Hindi is commonly used in these films as a means of interaction between the native and the migrant. Thus ISM related characters and themes give an opportunity for Malayalam films to become multilingual and multi cultural. Like that different types of characters are evolved out from theme Inter State Migration.

The film ‘Masala Republic’, released on 2014 is identified as the first film which exclusively deals with the ISMs. The storyline revolves around two ISM’s Sanju Bhai from Arunachal Pradesh and Bhimta from Assam. It tries to humorously depict the misery of ISM’s due to the Kerala Governments ban on manufacture, storage and selling of Gudka, pan masala and their variants. Horde of ISM’s were shown chased down, arrested and jailed by the Anti Gudka Squad of Police Department for using ‘pan masala’ (it is the term used in this film to represent Gudka and related products). Dialogues such as, ‘Bengalis can’t survive without pan masala’, ‘because of the ban on pan masala Bengalis have lost stamina to do hard labour’, ‘the ban has affected construction sector’ etc., were used to establish ISMs addiction towards tobacco and related products.

The bond of brotherhood between a Malayali and a Bengali is the central plot of the film ‘bhaiyya bhaiyya’. The film depicts Babu Ram Chaterji (BRC) as the first person from West Bengal to come Kerala during 1980’s. He grew up with a Malayali child named Babu. Since
their childhood strong brotherly relation has evolved between the two. They stand in support of each other throughout the film. The story is narrated by Babu during his journey to West Bengal along with Mr.BRC, his girlfriend and another friend of him in an Ambulance. They are travelling with the dead body of Usirali Mandal of Chota Lalgaad who met with an accident in their worksite and died. The fun filled moments attains a serious phase when reaching West Bengal. It is revealed that the dead man is not Usirali Mandal and his ID proof is fake. The dead man is presented as Bindra, who is one of the most wanted Maoist criminal in West Bengal. The existing speculations over migrant labourers as having criminal background are used to craft this film.

The same strategy is used by the makers of the film ‘amar akbar antony’ to give a dramatic effect to the film. This film is basically an entertainer which narrates camaraderie and bondage between three Malayali youngsters; amar, akbar and antony. But the very serious and sensitive issue of rape and murder of girl children is wrapped inside the film. The film stars with a news report cautioning natives on sheltering migrants. From the opening scene onwards a tall well built ISM labourer is presented as a criminal character committing rape and murder of small girl children. His physical appearance and gaze is used to present him as dangerous. The film attains an entertainer mood but twice in-between he is presented as committing rape and murder of girl children.

At the end of the film a ten year old girl named ‘pathumma’ who is near and dear to the trio was raped and killed. At this moment the complete identity of the person is revealed as, ‘dhapan’ from West Bengal, a habitual offender who got trial from West Bengal for rapping a ten year old girl. He is shown under suspicion when the trio fights and beat him down. But the twist happens at the climax. The story reveals a senior citizen as offender for the rape and murder of pathumma. A boy child was also presented as a victim of his sexual misbehaves. Finally both culprits were lynched by the mob. The character ‘dhapan’ never speaks a single word in the film. But the film is successful in personifying him as a symbol of ‘danger’. The ISM labourer is used only as an object to keep the suspense by hiding the crime. The existing speculation over the migrant labourers is exploited to give a dramatic effect to the film.

Surprisingly the films which presented ISM labourers in the last year (2016) have a different story to tell. Sibichan, Jopan and Ambrose, the three best friends who shares a rented room, has never expected a brotherhood relation will be formed with the Bengali couple, Kumar and Dev Janaki who rents a room nearby their rented room. The movie ‘Appuram Bengal
eppuram Thiruvithamkur is the story of this relation. The inter caste marriage has forced the couple to leave their village. For the past three years they are living in Kerala. Kumar had a clerical job in a footwear company but lost it due to the company’s close down. He fails to find another job and his physical state, cardiological problems to be precise rules him out of any prospects to achieve manual jobs. Unfortunately Kumar was beaten heavily by a group of native people accusing him for robbery. Even though he was rescued by sibichan, the attack was followed by prejudiced statements from the mob such as, ‘The migrants are all robbers and they roam around to plan robbery’, ‘for them Kerala is their Gulf. No one hast to be believed, all are thieves’. The couple fail to find a solution to their financial problems and tries to kill themselves but the trio friends rescues them. Finally the three friends donate 3 lakh rupees for Kumars surgery, which they have raised to buy an auto of their own. The film ends when the two groups working together and living harmoniously. This film is the first one to share a friendly attitude towards the ISDs.

Role transformation of ISMs from construction labourer to a domestic labourer brought changes in the way they are looked at. The movie ‘orumuthasigatha’ shows a glimpse of it. Bhushan Babu from West Bengal is presented as the new domestic worker sheltered in the house of Sibichan. He is presented as a character that does all household works from cleaning to cooking food. He turns to become a fitting companion to sibichan’s mother and mother in law, around whom the story revolves. Dialogues such as, ‘Bengalis’ are now present everywhere in Kerala’, ‘Native students have started learning Bengali to ease communication problem with other Bengali student in the school’, ‘Bengali language has more demand than Malayalam in future’ and ‘It is only left to see a Bengali in the shoes of a Malayali priest’ are satirically used to evoke laughter. Even though the climax reveals that it was a Malayali who was in the guise of a Bengali, the way the ISM character was casted and the dialogues uttered by others are highly relevant.

The ten year old girl named ‘Ann Maria’ has a dream to secure first prize in long jump at fourth standard like her father. The story line of the film ‘Ann Maria kalipilannu’ is the events associated to make her dream true. She is the only daughter of doctor couple, who has a dysfunctional family life. Mother, maid and a migrant servant are the peoples at Ann Maria’s home. The only male in that house is ‘sanath’, an ISM labourer from West Bengal. He is the sole companion of Ann Maria. Along with the household work he manages to be with Ann Maria wherever she goes. To avenge on her PT instructor for shattering her dreams Ann Maria seeks the help of Gireesh, who disguised himself as a goonda. He cheats her
initially and sanath makes statement against gireesh at the Police Station to recover the mobile phone which was given as reward. as the story upholds gireesh and ann maria become close friends but sanath is not left behind. the film never uses any tag names such as ‘bengali’ to identify sanath. he is always called by his name and treated with dignity. sanath is shown as a person who takes the responsibility of the girl by himself. The permission to travel with gireesh was granted by Ann Maria’s mother because sanath assures to accompany her. this film stands apart from all other films in treating a migrant labourer.

A Transformation on its way

Considering the number of Malayalam films released annually the films which deals with ISDs is small in number over the last three years. The full length as well as single scene migrant characters depicted in these films are powerful enough to make an effect on the viewers. The number of films dealing with the ISDs is increasing year after year. Most importantly the ISM related roles were enacted by migrant labourers. The persons named Sumangal Singha Roy, Rupesh Bhimta and Santhosh Lakshman are now becoming common in big screen. The migrants who were shown primarily as construction workers behold a stereotyped identity. ISM characters shown as drug addicts, Maoists and Criminals reflect the popular image about them as a potential threat to the native society. But very recent films have began to take a different position on them. Migrant characters as domestic workers are on the increase. Even though the government records and existing studies fail to find migrants as domestic workers films are exploring new horizons. Qualities of brotherhood, love, care and trustworthiness are being attached to these characters. Also they are used to evoke laughter among the audience. The problems confronted during the communication between the native people and migrant workers, the way in which migrants talk in Malayalam etc., are commonly used as humour generating scenes. Certain films to be specific ‘Darwinte Parinamam’, ‘Chandretan Evideya’, and ‘Jomonte Suvisesham’ provide screen spaces for the migrants only to depict humour.

The social identity evolved through these characters is not leading to a single identity. Even though there is consensus on addressing them as ‘Bengali’ the films are exploring wide range of themes such as, criminal, friend, danger, humour etc. This diversity in showcasing characters associated with the migrant labourers can be seen as a reflection of elevated level of social acceptance.
Migrants as new ‘object’ for story telling

Sumangal, who got arrested for a bike accident in the film kismath becomes the symbol of injustice shown towards migrants. He was accused for causing the accident by hitting a Malayali’s bike. He argues for his justice several times but the police were not willing to listen to him. The inspector scolds him. Later when he reveals that he belongs to Assam the Inspector doubts him as a Bodo terrorist. Finally he has adjusted to compromise the issue by paying an amount of Rs.2000/-. Though nobody listens to him, he persists to make arguments to get his justice. Rather than a migrant who fear to speak out in public sumangal stands apart from others. Though no one is ready to hear and help him he advocates for himself.

‘Sairabanu’ is the story which revolves around the death of a migrant labourer named Kishan Kumar, who lost his life in a road accident. Police records testimonies kishan kumar is from sonathpur, minarvagaav, siliguri district, West Bengal. The son of sairabhanu is presented before the law as culprit. The character named Advocate Annie, the most reputed and experienced lawyer who advocates bringing justice to Kishan Kumar. No lawyers were willing to take a case against her. So Saira was forced to become the advocate of her son under the special legal provisions with the concern of the Court. She later finds that it is Advt.Annie’s teenage son who was behind the wheels during the collision with Kishan Kumar which turned out to be fatal. But, Saira neither have evidence to prove the truth nor she wants to bring a teenage boy before the law. Being a post woman she comes across the fact that there are multiple persons with the same name and her doubts and instincts lead her to the truth that the person who the police say in the FIR is indeed alive. On the final day of trial she presents the real kishan kumar before the court with proper identity cards. The available documents fail to identify the dead person. On the basis of that the accused was released. The Court raises its concern over similar incidents in the near future and rules for further investigation over the identity of the dead man. The film concludes with Saira at Malda Town railway station in search of the dead man’s beloveds.

The cinema is widely considered a microcosm of the social, political, economic, and cultural life of a nation. It is the contested site where meanings are negotiated, traditions made and remade, identities affirmed or rejected (Stead 1989). It is acknowledgeable that films are using migrants in a varied manner. They are no longer looked upon with stereotyped images alone. Migrants are used to make humour and evoke laugh. They are becoming objects to
hide crime and to present humour. But the humour is generated with degrading type of events and dialogues. Two events in the film ‘orumuthasigatha’ are perfect examples. The comment made by the old duo over bhushanbabu as, ‘belonging to the category who use pan masala instead of toothpaste’. The restaurant waiter’s statement as they, ‘don’t employ migrants is their speciality’ are formed in a degrading manner. The communication issues during the migrant-native interactions and the way in which migrants talk in Malayalam are also situations which are used to make laughher.

More than considering them as human beings, films objectifies them to portray crime or humour. Their life and hardships is always neglected. The issues they confront and the problems native society face at the deeper level has to be explored. The film sairabhanu is an initiative towards this. It points towards the undocumented recruitment of migrants to Kerala especially by the construction companies. They are recruited without any social protection means or schemes. The labour registers in the work sites are subjected for malpractices. This makes the workers out from the insurance schemes which they are protected with. With the dialogue, ‘two mothers fought for their son but there is a mother who is expecting the return of her son’, the film brings attention to the large number of undocumented deaths of ISMs happened in Kerala.

**Conclusion**

Different categories of interstate migrant labourers are working in Kerala. The migrants from North, East, North-Eastern and Western parts of India who are often referred as ‘Hindi language speaking community’ has outnumbered migrant labourer from southern states in numbers. This has ultimately resulted in getting a representation in Malayalam films. In films the term ‘Bengali’ is often used to represent this category of people. The persons who came here as labourers are also getting chance to share screen with the Malayali community. Themes related to ISMs and the way the characters are portrayed shows that the existing stereotypes on migrants as criminals is existing in films also. But over the years different aspects related to the migrants are discussed. They have been represented as trustworthy domestic workers, friends, brothers and guardian. An elevated level of social acceptance is visible at the peripheral level. Analysing the films shows that the films fail to address the real problems they confront. The ISMs are objectified to hide crime and evoke humour. Considering the dependence of Kerala society towards migrants the films should be sensitive in handing migrant issues.
Notes:-

1) Bhai, is a term used in Hindi which means brother

2) Anya samsthana thozhilalikal:- it means ‘laborers from other States’.

3) Jisha a 29 year old law student was brutally raped and murdered on April 2016. The police have arrested 24 year old Ameer-Ul-Islam, a migrant labourer from Assam for committing the crime. The trial is going on.


15) According to Oxford Dictionary ‘bengali’, is an ethnic group speaking Bengali language and living in Bangladesh and Eastern India. West Bengal comes under Eastern part of India.

16) Malayali, according to Oxford Dictionary it is a term used to represent a person who is a native of Kerala State in India.
17) The armed separatist group of people who seeks to obtain a sovereign Bodoland for the Bodo people in Assam, India. The Government of India designates it as a terrorist group.

Reference


