A piece of Jharkhand in Kerala

THE MIGRANT WORKERS AT THE PLANTATIONS IN MUNNAR ENJOY A QUALITY OF LIFE NOT AVAILABLE TO THEIR CONTEMPORARIES IN MOST OTHER PARTS OF INDIA. WORKERS FROM JHARKHAND AND ODISHA PLAY A HOCKEY MATCH AT THE GUNDUMALAI TEA ESTATE.

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FAMILIES FROM THE TRIBAL BELTS OF JHARKHAND, CHHATTISGARH, ODISHA AND WEST BENGAL ARE JOINING A LABOUR FORCE IN MUNNAR’S TEA PLANTATIONS THAT WAS ONCE PREDOMINANTLY TAMIL. S. ANANDAN REPORTS ON THE FACTORS DRIVING THE TREND AND HOW IT’S A WIN-WIN FOR BOTH KERALA AND THE MIGRANTS.

ON A PLEASANT SUNDAY AFTERNOON IN THE UPPER REACHES OF MUNNAR, ON A PLAYFIELD HIDDEN IN THE ROLLING SLOPES OF THE GUNDUMALAI TEA ESTATE, A GAME OF HOCKEY IS IN PROGRESS. JUST BEYOND THE SIDELINES, STANDING BESIDE AN OLD CRICKET PITCH ROLLER, SIX-YEAR-OLD LALITA BARAYUDH, STILL IN HER SCHOOL UNIFORM, TAKES AN IMAGINARY SLAP SHOT WITH A CROOKED TWIG. SHE FOLLOWS THE UNFOLDING GAME WITH KEEN INTEREST.

THE SERIES OF WEEKEND HOCKEY MATCHES BETWEEN PLANTATION WORKERS FROM JHARKHAND AND ODISHA ARE PLAYED ON AN IMPROVISED PITCH MARKED OUT WITH QUICKLIME, OFTEN WITH A GOAT AS A WAGER. THE MAIN ORGANISER IS LALITA’S FATHER, LIPI BARAYUDH, A TRIBAL MUNDA YOUTH FROM JHARKHAND’S KHUNTI DISTRICT. LIPI IS THE MAN RESPONSIBLE FOR BRINGING NEARLY 400 LABOURERS FROM HIS NATIVE STATE TO WORK IN THE TEA GARDENS OF THE KANAN DEVAN HILLS PLANTATIONS (KDHP) IN MUNNAR. HE IS A PLAYMAKER IN HOCKEY AS WELL, PLAYING ON THE CENTRE-MIDFIELD POSITION.

THE IDYLIC SCENE OF A HOCKEY MATCH UNFOLDING IN THE COOL ENVIRONS OF THE HILLS REPEATS ITSELF EVERY WEEKEND. IT ALSO POINTS TO THE CHANGING PROFILE OF WORKERS IN KERALA’S PLANTATION SECTOR, WHERE THE RECEIVING TAMIL LABOUR POPULATION IS BEING RAPIDLY REPLACED BY WORKERS FROM THE TRIBAL DISTRICTS OF JHARKHAND, CHHATTISGARH AND ODISHA, BESIDES MUSLIMS FROM ASSAM.

TRAIN TO PROSPERITY

KDHP ALONE HAS ENGAGED THOUSANDS OF THEM, MOSTLY AS WHOLE FAMILY UNITS, TO WORK AS PLANTATION AND TEA FACTORY WORKERS. FOR THE RECORD, THE GUNDUMALAI ESTATE HAS ON ITS ROLLS 1,368 WORKERS, INCLUDING A FEW MIGRANT WORKERS FROM EASTERN INDIA. BUT THE 713-STRONG TEMPORARY WORKFORCE IS ENTIRELY FROM THE MIGRANT COMMUNITY.
“It’s their Persian Gulf,” laughs Jeevan Raj, manager of the Gundumalai estate. Deprivation back home, coupled with a dire shortage of blue-collar workers in Kerala, is driving the trend. Unlike the typical labour migration involving young, male footloose labour, Kerala’s plantation sector — primarily tea, coffee and cardamom estates spread over Idukki, Thrissur and Palakkad districts — has witnessed the relocation of entire families, mostly from the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Muslim communities looking for socio-economic security and mobility. Workers from Jharkhand typically hop on to the Dhanbad-Alappuzha Express and alight at Tiruppur for the onward journey to Munnar in Idukki. The migrant workers at these plantations enjoy a quality of life not available to their counterparts in most other parts of India. Lipi, with a middle school education, was working at a coffee plantation at Yercaud in Tamil Nadu when two of his co-workers left for the greener pastures of Munnar. He followed suit in 2014. His mother is now a permanent worker at KDHP, entitled to 14 days of paid leave and Leave Travel Allowance (LTA), besides health care benefits, gratuity, and incentives. Lipi’s wife, a temporary worker, enjoys the same benefits minus paid leave and LTA. With a robust network in his home town, Lipi started bringing more families to the plantation and acts as a vital link between these workers and the company. “You may get higher wages in big cities, but they will still fall far short of your housing, health care, and livelihood requirements. And if an accident at the workplace leaves you incapacitated, you are left to fend for yourself,” says Lipi, who takes pride in being able to send Lalita, in Class 2, to a CBSE school. Her schooling costs him about ₹40,000 annually.

Apart from decent employment, Kerala also holds other charms for Lipi. The hills of Munnar are “cool and breezy, with friendly people,” he says. “In the town, nobody stops you from going to a temple, mosque or church. Our caste doesn’t stand in our way.”

From tea-picker to Hindi teacher
The Lomga couple has more or less the same story to tell. Also from the Munda tribe, Amos Lomga, a matriculate from West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, used to drive a pickup van in Palamau. After seven years, he had nothing to show in the form of savings. Amos and his wife Rahil, a Hindi graduate from Khunti, followed in a relative’s footsteps to Kerala. They both found a job and a home in the plantation.

Amos and Rahil were both tea pickers when in October, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) engaged the latter to teach Hindi at a lower primary school in the estate. “There are about 45 children, and over half are Hindi-speaking. Earlier, just three children of migrant workers from the lower division used to come to school. Now there are seven, and even Tamil children have started communicating in Hindi,” says Rahil, as her husband demonstrates his fluency in Tamil. Within the community, they speak Mundari or Sadri (also called Nagpuri). But the multicultural environment has given confidence to their only son, Olive Bikas. “The mamas and mamis made us comfortable right from the beginning,” says Rahil. They own farmland back home, where rice and pulses are cultivated by Amos’s brothers. He says the job has made him fit and a game of hockey transports the community to Jharkhand, where hockey is very popular. “We don’t want to buy a bike now as the priority is to save up for the boy’s studies,” says Amos.
Rahil Lomga, a Hindi teacher at a lower primary school in the same tea estate.

Sunita Devi and her husband, from the OBC Kumhar community, came to work in Munnar last June at the suggestion of her brother-in-law. She has learnt tea leaf picking and the art of manuring the tea plants. Her only grouse is that leafy vegetables are at a premium in these parts. Migrants from the east constitute 80% of the workforce in the Kadukumudi division of the estate. In other divisions, their percentage is at level with that of the locals. Estates are divided area-wise into divisions for administrative purposes. There are Thenmalai, Benmore, Lower, Upper, Kadukumudi and many other divisions constituting the Gundumalai estate.

Indira Gandhi, supervisor of the lower division for two years, says she’s quite happy with the 50 hardworking migrants who report to her. “I communicate with them in Tamil, which they pick up fast. They come to me for anything they need, be it a requirement in the lines [their living quarters in the plantation, typically comprising three to five dwelling units] or for permission to go to the dispensary.”

Estate doctor Naveen Kumar recalls that initially it was difficult to get the migrants to the dispensary. “Even pregnancies would be kept secret till the last term, but things are different now. We have placed emphasis on hygiene, and on ante- and post-natal care to arrest malnutrition. We beat the language barrier by running a visual campaign on the importance of birth control. We have also intervened to curb instances of alcohol abuse and domestic violence,” he says.

Medical screening at a tertiary care hospital in Devikulam is a mandatory part of the recruitment process for migrant workers, and the State health department has been making frequent visits to the estate to prevent communicable diseases, says Raj. The KDHP covers the expenses for the first two pregnancies up to ₹60,000 each, and this has helped underscore the need for birth control.

**Seamless integration**

Premchand and Bamini were tilling the fields in Khunti until three years ago, when they decided to work in Munnar. They have just had a baby and a new bike, bought on cash payment. “He believes in one bike per delivery policy,” jokes Manimekhalai, a resource person of the SSA in the region. As is the case with many Tamils in the region, Manimekhalai’s parents still work in the plantations, something the next generation is keen to avoid.

Both the sons of Subramaniam, the estate watcher, have sought careers outside of the sector. “They do not want to do hard labour as we have done,” he says. A native of Tenkasi, Subramaniam hopes to build a house on the three cents of land he owns there, once he and his wife retire from their plantation jobs. “Until then, we can stay in the lines.” He is happy to be in the company of these workers from Jharkhand and Odisha. “Without them, we wouldn’t get a break as there would be no one to share the workload.” This is also echoed by the caretaker at
the crèche in the lower division, Arul Jyothi, whose two sons work outside the plantation as lecturer and engineer.

Such seamless integration with the local community is perhaps why the migrant workers have been so welcome. The first batch of migrants from these parts, starting with Pithai Munda, who arrived over five years ago and has a child studying in the nearby CBSE school, landed almost empty-handed. The locals provided them warm clothes, took them to the clinic, and helped them settle down until the company took over, issuing them the items needed for daily life. “Earlier, they would ask an older kid in the community to look after the infants. But with the government’s help, we were able to push almost all the children to school and infants to the crèches, where they can have a balanced diet. In fact, the salary of SSA teachers like Rahil is too little compared to what is earned by a worker in the plantation, but the position is empowering. It has helped the community become more aware of the need to educate their children. When the school is on a holiday, Rahil works in the field,” says Raj.

The real challenge for the government is to address the growing aspirations of the migrant labour community from the Hindi belt. “They would need Hindi medium schools and colleges for their wards,” Raj adds.

Workers like Premchand had slogged in the construction sector in Mumbai before arriving in Munnar. Now Premchand gets to save at least ₹10,000 a month in preparation for his child’s schooling five years down the line. Over the years, social networking and matrimonial alliances have carried word about these job opportunities from Jharkhand to neighbouring Odisha as well. Subhash Gudia and Maxwell Topno from Sundargarh work in the estate factory and live with four others in a bachelors’ pad in the line. “We encourage families or single men in groups of four or five,” says Raj.

Muslim families do not get employed in the plantations in Assam, according to Abdul Salam and Mansur Ali, from Udalguri district. In Munnar for a few years, they have also brought in their in-laws and extended family to work in the tea gardens. “It’s a five-day journey for us and we take the Guwahati-Trivandrum Express. Our women do not get employment even in West Bengal,” says Ali. His brother used to work in the plantation before returning to Assam, where he now owns two autorickshaws. The Assamese workers’ prolonged absence from the plantations has been a thorny issue, says Raj. While some return home for a month or two for no particular reason, some are forced to stay back due to verification requirements of the National Register of Citizens.

A win-win phenomenon

A recent survey by the Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID) documented the presence of a large number of migrant workers from the tribal districts of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Assam and Bihar in Nedumkandam, Peerumedu, Devikulam and Udumbanchola in Idukki, Mannarkkad and Nelliyampathy in Palakkad, and Malakkappara in Thrissur. “Although migrants from distant States are not skilled enough to work in plantations, shortage of labour has been forcing plantation managements to hire them. Plantations tend to hire families as they are less likely to move quickly compared to single men. Because of this, there’s a significant number of migrant children in the plantation areas,” the study, published in a volume titled God’s Own Workforce, noted.
The Economic Survey of the Kerala State Planning Board, published in January, points out that the decadal growth rate of Kerala’s population, going by the 2011 Census, was 4.9%, the lowest among States, with Pathanamthitta and Idukki districts registering negative population growth rates. “Given the situation, the influx of migrant labour from the east presents a win-win for all these States as well as Kerala,” says Benoy Peter, executive director of CMID.

“The tribal districts of these States are marred by inequitable human development and disparities in the sharing of livelihood opportunities. This has forced these people to look towards Kerala, a frontrunner in social development. The Tamil youth who used to fill the labour vacuum have become upwardly mobile. This has paved the way for mobilisation of a captive workforce that could carry out hard labour as demanded by the sector. For the undereducated, less informed youth in the source States, it is a survival strategy. Relatively high wage rates, sustainable job opportunities, a peaceful social environment and less discriminatory treatment, besides access to free health care, education, housing, and socio-economic mobility, are all factors that pull them to Kerala’s plantations. It is just a matter of time before they become its mainstay,” says Peter. “In the meantime, their remittances are sure to have a positive impact on the social development of their native States as well.” Strong social networks, direct rail connectivity, ease of sending money home, and better communication facilities are all factors catalysing the long-distance migration, he says.

But there are challenges too. “First and foremost, not every plantation is keen on the social development of the community, and labour exploitation is by no means unknown. Kerala, with its ageing population and changing demography, should gear up for a large-scale social intervention of the kind that it had marshalled in the 1970s and 1980s, because the future of its human development will depend on the pace with which the migrant population catches up with the State’s present level. It is therefore imperative to have migrant-inclusive development plans,” says Peter.

R. Pramod, chief inspector of plantations, Kerala, argues that all the workers in the sector, irrespective of their place of origin, are paid wages as fixed by the Plantation Labour Committee. But there is no guarantee that wages and allowances are uniform across the sector, as only those plantations with an area of at least five hectares and employing a minimum of 15 workers are registered with the Chief Inspector of Plantations.

“Data available with us shows that there are 58,000 workers in 634 estates in Kerala, not counting those working in the more than one lakh minor plantations,” Pramod says. There is no separate data on the quantum of migrant labour force in the minor plantation sector. These workers are covered under the relatively new Small Plantation Workers’ Welfare Fund Board, which is only subscribed by 16,000 workers.

Implementation of the State’s Awas insurance scheme for migrant workers, which guarantees medical care of up to ₹15,000 and insurance worth ₹2 lakh in case of death by accident, has made slow progress. Only about 2.5 lakh workers out of an estimated population of 30 to 40 lakh have been brought under its ambit so far.

As the CMID study concludes, Kerala needs to realise that it needs the migrant labourers more than they need it. Ultimately, the mainstreaming of migrant workers holds the key to successful integration.