

**IMPLICATIONS OF FOREST CONSERVATION  
INTERVENTIONS OF THE JUDICIARY ON HUMAN MIGRATION:  
AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION INTO THE CAUSES OF  
LABOUR MIGRATION TO PLYWOOD INDUSTRY IN KERALA**

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*The authors in their explorative study to understand the labour migration to plywood industry in Kerala, a Southern Indian state realised that nine out of every ten migrants were predominantly from far off Eastern Indian regions, specifically Western Orissa known for abject poverty and the North-Eastern state Assam which is 3000 kilometres far where the people are known for their sedentary life. Qualitative research to unearth why such tribal and backward communities travelled thousands of kilometres to work in Plywood industry in Kerala unearthed that till 1996, Assam was market leader in plywood production in India and industry was primarily based on forest in the region. Supreme Court (India) in December 1996 imposed a ban on veneer mills and plywood mills in forest areas in Indian states, particularly Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in order to protect the tropical wet evergreen forests in Arunachal Pradesh next to Assam leading to collapse of the industry in Assam and growth of the industry in Kerala which did not dependent on forest wood but rubber wood for which the state enjoyed a monopoly. While the presence of distress migrant labourers from Western Orissa to the timber industry Kerala preceding the growth of plywood industry was a reason for the evolution of the migrant stream from Orissa; it gained momentum as the plywood industry in Kerala bloomed and flourished banking the business opportunity due to the collapse of plywood industry in Assam. The migrants from Assam who had multiple dependents had no option than seeking refuge in plywood mills in Kerala as unemployment rose in the state from the fall of plywood sector which was one of the very few industrial sectors in Assam. Through the social network, more people from Assam also availed the better wages and continuous availability of job opportunities leading to the growth of migration stream from Assam.*

**Keywords:** Labour, migration, Kerala, Forest Conservation, Plywood Industry.

### **Introduction**

India is not only known as a labour exporting country, migration has been a matter of survival for a large chunk of population within India. Internal migration in India occurs as a response to regional disparities in the levels of socio-economic development over the national space; in general, movements arise from less economically developed regions to relatively more developed regions (Joe *et al*, 2009; Kundu *et al*, 2008; Mukherji, 1992; Premi, 1998). Illiterate and unskilled or semi-skilled male migrants comprise large

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bulk of total male migrant workers in India. They are primarily engaged in less skilled production- processing work. According to Census 2001, in India 1.44 crores persons migrated for work in the previous decade. One third of the total male migrants who changed their residence in India cited work as the reason for migration (Census of India, 2007). Findings from the National Sample Round 64 surveying migration in India reveal that nearly 29% of rural male migrants and 56% of urban male migrants had migrated due to employment related reasons (NSSO, 2010).

Labour migration within India has been a subject to extensive research (Chaganti, 2004; Kamble, 1983; Warriar, 2001). Kerala state with its outstanding performance as a demographic outlier in the country is renowned for its heavy emigration and out migration. Kerala supplied half of the Indian labour to the Middle East in the late 1990s (Premi, 1998). International migration from Kerala has been a subject to extensive research (Isaac, 1992; Joseph, 1998; Karoor, 1983; Mani, 2009; Nair, 1986; Prakash, 1998; Sekher, 1997; Zachariah and Rajan, 2001; Zachariah et al., 2004). Studies show that emigration from Kerala accounted for about one-half of the annual outflow of emigrants from India and the bulk of external remittances which helped India tide over serious foreign exchange crises after the mid-1970s (Kamble, 1983; Nair, 1998). The impact of such heavy a migration from the state has quite an impressive effect on the Kerala economy, which is better known as a 'Money Order Economy'. Besides international migration Kerala is also known for sending a large number of out migrants to other parts of the country.

### **Labour Migration to Kerala**

While the educated Keralites moved out of the state to metros in the country and the brain drained to West whereas the unskilled flew to Middle East leaving minimum labour force within the state leading to a squeeze in the unskilled labour, few noticed the poor illiterate *Tamilians*<sup>1</sup> coming in, mainly as groups of men, or families and gradually the unskilled workers at large scale construction sites were dominated by Tamilian migrants. According to Anand, from the mid-1970s onwards, the migrant Tamilian workers have come to occupy a crucial position in Kerala's construction economy (Anand, 1986). The quarries, brick kilns, Tea and Rubber plantations all paved their way in. From the 1990s at least central Kerala cities woke up to witness flocks of Tamilian men and women at major crossroads waiting with their implements for the day's master who would hire one or few either for a contract assignment or on daily wage basis. According to Swaminathan and Aiyar, the high wages in Kerala induced a large influx of Tamil labour, ready to work for less (Swaminathan & Aiyar, 2003). Analysing the trends of in-migration to Kerala from 1961 to 2001 using Census data it is found that interstate migration to Kerala has over the past four decades have been increasing. Almost half of male migrants of various duration and approximately 10% of the female in-migrants came to Kerala for work/employment in the past decade.

Zachariah and Rajan also find that an equally important "adverse" consequence of emigration from Kerala is the emergence of "replacement migration". "Emigration of

workers from Kerala, demographic contraction of the young workers, etc. have engendered the era of replacement migration in Kerala. For these workers from other states, Kerala is their Gulf. The way Kerala workers have penetrated in to every economic sector in the Gulf, the replacement workers from other states have started penetrating in all economic sectors in Kerala" (Zachariah and Rajan, 2001). Of late, Rajan and James examining the demographic transmission of Kerala commented that after a span of six decades, Kerala is becoming an immigration state as the transition resulted changes in the age structure of the population which had its repercussions on the availability of blue collar workforce (Rajan and James, Undated).

Kerala state in the recent past has been witnessing an increasing trend of migration of blue collared labour from various Indian states. Migration to Kerala has by and large been side lined as the state for the last few decades has demonstrated remarkably high out-migration and emigration rates. There are a number of studies on out migration and emigration from Kerala whereas the migration to Kerala from other states has been largely ignored. Analysis of in-migration to the state exploring census data also points towards increasing in-migration to the state. Discussing the economic consequences of emigration from Kerala, Zachariah and Rajan (2004) noted that, taking into consideration the emerging wide-spread impact of replacement migration on Kerala's employment sector, especially on unemployment and wage rates, a high level research on the length, breadth and socio-economic depth of replacement migration in the state be undertaken on an urgent basis and underlines that this has to be a major undertaking in view of its importance and technical requirements. There have been micro efforts which also identified the need for in-depth analysis of labour migration to Kerala acknowledging the presence of workers from beyond neighbouring states (Prasad, 2006; Rajan and James, Undated; Surabhi and Kumar, 2007). Government of Kerala noted that Migrant workers, seeking employment in Kerala from other states like West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Chattisgharh, Jharkhand etc apart from the workers already present in this State from Tamil Nadu, are increasing. This influx is viewed as an emerging 'social hazard' (Government of Kerala, 2009).

There was enough evidence from every nook and corner of the state to believe that worker migration from different states to Kerala is on the increase. However, there had been a dearth of scientific literature on labour migration to Kerala. One major industrial segment where the presence of migrants was strongly felt from the beginning of last decade was the Plywood industry in the state, which nearly depends on migrant labour for its manpower requirements. (*The Hindu*, 11 July 2002). Examining the flight of industries, both traditional and modern, from Kerala to neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka Thampy (1990) concluded that cheap labour and peaceful atmosphere are the most significant factors influencing the entrepreneurs' decision for locating their units outside Kerala. However, plywood industry was an exception. At this juncture, one is sceptical on the success of plywood industry in Kerala. Has migrant labour got something to do with this achievement? Is migration to plywood industry different from what was evident elsewhere in the state? Hence Plywood Industry was

chosen for a case study of the labour migration to Kerala which would provide deeper insights into the internal migration to Kerala for employment which by and large remained unexplored in 2004.

### **Data and Methodology**

Perumbavoor in Kunnathunadu Taluk of Ernakulam district in Kerala is the nerve centre of timber industry in the state for the past five decades. Kunnathunadu Taluk harbours most of the plywood and allied industrial units in the District. *Veneer*, the raw material for plywood is traded at the cheapest price in the country in Kunnathunadu Taluk in 2003. Taking into account of the proximity to source of raw materials; availability of suitably customised business development services; the abundance of clients attracted by the cluster tradition of the industry and the presence of skilled labour, the government of Kerala identified Perumbavoor in Kunnathunadu Taluk as one among the four industrial clusters in Kerala and the only cluster in plywood industry (Government of Kerala, 2004). Hence Kunnathunadu Taluk was taken as the universe for the study.

The unit of analysis for this study was migrant worker in plywood industry. All migrants working in plywood industry in Kunnathunadu Taluk in Kerala constituted the population. A migrant worker was operationally defined as a person engaged in a remunerated activity in Kerala, which is not his home state, for a period not less than six months. The reference duration of residence is set in line with the National Sample Survey definition of residence qualifying one to be a migrant and to consider a migrant worker and interstate migrant, state of birth was adopted as the criterion. There were 71 plywood-manufacturing units in the Taluk in 2004 according to the District Plywood and Saw Mill Owners Association records. On an average, 40 persons worked in a plywood unit. Migrant men from different states in India constituted most of the labour in almost all these units a conservative estimate of who at that time was between 5000 and 20000. In order to obtain a onetime good estimate of migrant characteristics, it was decided to draw a representative sample of 400 migrants for the quantitative survey. A proportionate stratified random sample was drawn for the quantitative survey. Based on the study design, a blend of qualitative and quantitative methods was employed in eliciting information about the research issue. Qualitative techniques employed included Key Informant Interviews, Focus Group Discussions and observation were the qualitative methods employed while quantitative data was gathered chiefly through semi-structured face to face interviews with the workers. Experienced research investigators fluent in Hindi, the common language the migrants used to communicate among the various ethnic groups were recruited and were rigorously trained on the research issues and the quantitative survey instrument by the researcher. All qualitative explorations were exclusively done by the primary author himself. The data collection for the quantitative phase took place between September 2005 and May 2006 while qualitative explorations continued even afterwards parallel with the data analysis.

### Key Findings

From the analysis, it emerged that unlike what is evident from other studies on internal migration to Kerala which reports the predominance of migration of married male workers from the neighbouring state Tamil Nadu, Plywood industry heavily depended on migrant labour from backward communities of Eastern Indian states with Orissa dominating as the sending state, followed by Assam, West Bengal and Bihar (see Figure 1). While examining the districts of origin, there appeared a clear spatial pattern at least in the major two sending states. A single cluster of 14 districts mostly with lower standard of living from Orissa with Nabarangpur in the west and Bhadrak in the east coast and Kandhamal and erstwhile Phulbani district (now Boudh and Kandhamal) supplied most of the migrants. In Assam, Dibrugarh district centred one of the two clusters of districts that emerge and Nagaon was the nerve centre of the other cluster of sending districts in Assam. Seven districts in Orissa, two in Assam and one in West Bengal together supplied four-fifths of the workforce to plywood industry in Kerala during 2005–2006.

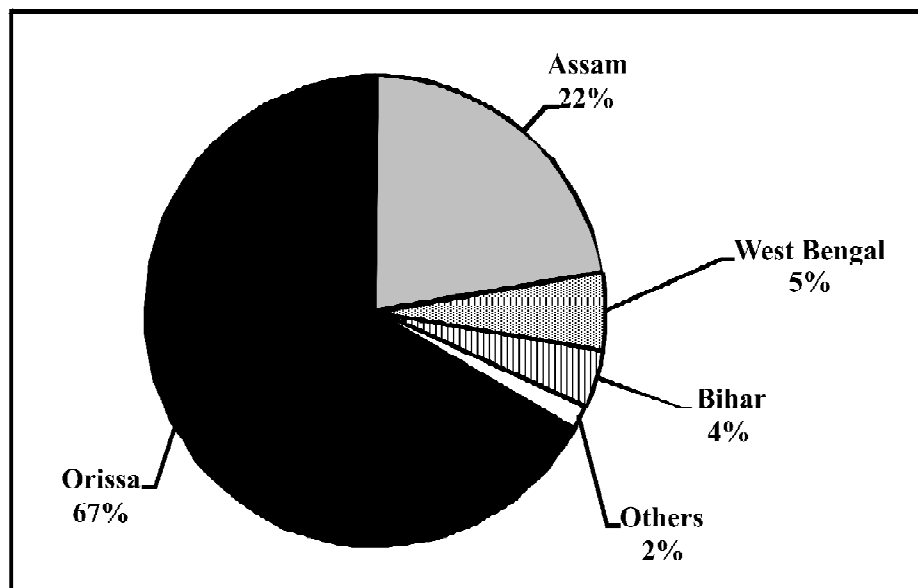


Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of Labour Migrants to Plywood Industry by Native State, N 400

Majority of the workers belonged to joint or extended agrarian families who lived in non-electrified *Kutcha*<sup>2</sup> houses with land holdings less than 5 acres with partial or no irrigation facilities. The average household size at native place was 6 persons with five non-earning and a single earning member. A typical migrant household in the native place had one minor and three adults solely depending on the income of the migrant who worked in Kerala. Migrants from Assam had more dependents compared to

migrants from Orissa. These households barely had any means of access to mass media at home and hardly possessed any consumer gadgets such as radio, electric fan, phone and the like. The average income of the native household from all sources was 2000 Indian rupees which just matched with the average expense of 1800 rupees per month. Most workers were agricultural labourers, students or seeking work before they moved out of native state for employment for the first time. The average wage earned by the worker at native place was about 50 rupees and work was not continuously available (See Table 1). for most migrants, migration to Kerala was their first ever inter-state move for employment.

**Table 1**  
**Per cent Distribution of Migrants by Number of Individuals in the Native Household**  
**Solely Dependent on Income of the Migrant; Regular Availability of Work at Place of Origin;**  
**Wages at Place of Origin and Destination by State of Origin**

Indicator	Native State			Total
	Orissa	Assam	Other	
<i>Total Dependents</i>				
Nil	9.0	0.0	0.0	6.0
1- 2	11.2	4.5	4.5	9.0
3 - 4	42.7	33.7	31.8	39.5
5 - 6	28.5	53.9	31.8	34.5
7or more	8.6	7.9	31.8	11.0
<i>Regular availability of work at place of origin</i>				
Regular	11.9	11.5	0.0	10.9
Irregular	88.1	88.5	100.0	89.1
<i>Wages</i>				
Median Wage earned at native place in Indian Rupees	45	50	40	50
Median wage earned in Kerala in Indian Rupees	115	120	120	120
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	267	89	44	400

Contrary to Tamilian migrants who come with their families, these migrants were mostly young unmarried and migrated without family. The proportion of Muslim migrants was found to be larger than what is found in other studies on labour migration to Kerala. The picture portrayed by married migrants to the plywood industry though different from what is true for Tamilian migrants to Kerala paints that of most cases of long distance internal migration in India for survival. Most married men had left behind their families at the origin and most of them had migrated after their marriage and in a fair share of cases they had at least two children. The analysis of socio-demographic and economic profile of migrant workers in plywood industry concluded that, the labour migrants to Plywood industry belonged to a different profile than what is narrated by previous studies elsewhere in the state on labour migration and pointed towards two Eastern Indian states. One was Orissa, the state with largest population

proportion (46.4%) below poverty line among the states in the country (Government of India, 2007), particularly in Western Orissa erstwhile Kalahandi, Balangir, Koraput (KBK) belt known for abject poverty and 2000 kilometres away from the destination and the North-Eastern state Assam which is more than 3000 kilometres far.

### **What made these migrants move 2000 to 3000 kilometres down south for work?**

The migrants were predominantly from socially and educationally backward castes, tribes or other backward communities belonging to entirely different ethnic backgrounds and lingos from Orissa and Assam. People of Assam are historically known for their sedentary behaviour. Weiner examining the migratory behaviour of people of India records that among the linguistic communities in India, the Assamese were the least mobile people. They even contributed a minority within most of their own urban centres in 1961. (Weiner, 1973; Weiner, 1978). People from Orissa are known to be migratory as the regions from where they hail had limited employment opportunities; however they were not reported in Kerala in sizable numbers as evident from previous studies. Hence further quantitative as well as qualitative analysis was carried out exploring the phenomenon. Information shared by the migrants on the duration of residence in Kerala was examined further. The median duration of residence in Kerala were 19, 12 and 10 months respectively for Oriya, Assamese and other state migrants. Proportion of migrants with two year or more duration of residence in Kerala was largest in the case of migrants from Orissa followed by migrants from Assam. Other states migrants had started flowing in the recent past only.

Based on the information on duration of residence, the year of arrival of the migrant was calculated and cumulative number of migrants by year of arrival was graphically plotted for each of the dominant states to understand the evolution and growth of the migration streams from Orissa and Assam. The data traced the origin of migration to plywood industry in 1997 with the arrival of migrants from Orissa and to a limited extent from Assam also (See Figure 2). Migration from Orissa was found picked up at a faster pace compared to migrants from Assam. The migration from Assam picked up with a lag of couple of years in 2000 onwards compared to migration from Orissa. Migration from other states was found to be a phenomenon that has increased from 2004 onwards.

But the questions why the migration to plywood industry started in 1997 and why people from Orissa and Assam dominated and why there was a gap between the streams to pick up pace remained unanswered. To understand this, veteran entrepreneurs in plywood industry in the Taluk were approached who gave insights on the growth of plywood industry in the locality while the authors also examined the literature available on the history of the plywood industry in India based on the insights gained from the plywood factory owners. Till the 1920s, India imported plywood (FPPI, 2009). The history of plywood industry in India originates in 1918 when the Assam Saw Mill and Timber Company floated the first Plywood factory in India. Assam Railway and Trading Company opened its plywood factory in 1924 (Goswami, 1981). Both factories were

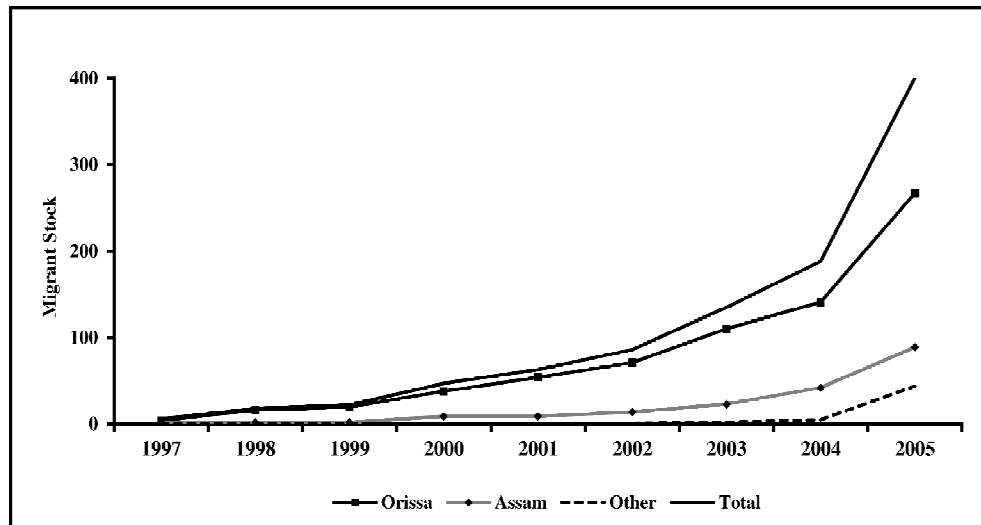


Figure 2: Labour Migration to Plywood Industry in Kerala: Trends from Survey Data, N 400

established in Assam to cater to the demand of tea chests from Assam, West Bengal and Kerala (FPPI, 2009). In 1981 there were 40 large plywood factories all owned by large industrial houses exploiting the forest resources of Assam, disturbing the ecological balance by the indiscriminate felling of trees (Goswami, 1981; Misra, 1980). Up to 1996, Assam produced 80% of the total plywood production in the country and plywood industry in Assam was primarily based on forest of the state (Pathak, 2009). Supreme Court in December 1996 addressing a petition between T.N Godavarman Thirumulkpad Vs Union of India ordered the closure of veneer and plywood mills in Assam and other states that situated in forest areas, particularly for Assam those even within proximity of 100 kilometres to the forest areas of neighbouring state Arunachal Pradesh. The excerpt of the court order is summarised as given below:

*Running of saw mills of any kind including veneer or plywood mills in forest land without prior permission of the central government is a violation of the Forest Conservation Act (India) 1980 and hence every state government must ensure total cessation of such activities. In the tropical wet ever-green forests of Tirap and Changlang in the State of Arunachal Pradesh, there would be a complete ban on felling of any kind of trees therein because of particular significance to maintain ecological balance needed to preserve bio-diversity. All saw mills, veneer mills and plywood mills in Tirap and Changlang in Arunachal Pradesh and within a distance of 100 Km from its border, in Assam, should also be closed immediately. The State Governments of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam must ensure compliance of this direction. There shall be a complete ban on the movement of cut trees and timber, from any of the seven North-Eastern States to any other State of the country either by rail, road or water-ways. The Indian Railways and the State Governments are directed to take all measures necessary to ensure strict compliance of this direction (Supreme Court of India, 1996).*



The judicial intervention to protect forest, biodiversity and ecological balance brought plywood industry in Assam which had a monopoly over the industry in India to a standstill. Plywood was one of the major but limited industries in the state in addition to tea, oil and timber; this had a severe impact on the economy and employment opportunities as noted by the Assam Human Development Report (2003).

*Tea, coal, oil, timber and Plywood industry were the major industries in Assam. The sharp reduction in timber related activities and closure of most plywood units has impacted adversely on the employment and income. Post 1997, timber processing and related industries have suffered setbacks and consequent economic activity, income and employment are at levels much lower than even a decade ago. Unemployment in rural Assam reached its peak in 1999–2000 and in rural areas it was as high as three times compared to the overall scenario in India: (Assam Human Development Report, 2003).*

Plywood industry in Kerala does not depend on forest wood, rather predominantly on rubber wood which is abundantly available in the state which enjoyed the monopoly in rubber with more than 80% of the area and more than 90% of the production in the country in 1997 (George and Kumar, 1997). Hence the ban of the judiciary on forest related activities did not disrupt the industry rather nourished it while rest of India suffered. Perumbavoor, headquarter of Kunnathunadu Taluk has traditionally been the nerve centre of timber industry in Kerala. *Packing case* (packaging wooden boxes for various industrial equipments and even vegetables such as tomato before the plastic/fibre era in India) was the major product of hundreds of saw mills in the Taluk in the eighties and early nineties. According to the key informants in the timber industry in Perumbavoor, “*Malayali*<sup>3</sup> labourers were known for their laziness and disinterest in labour intensive jobs”. Band Saw and rip saw units run by the local entrepreneurs had to struggle hard to cater to the *Marwadi*<sup>4</sup> orders for packing cases. Those days there was acute shortage of electricity and the unit hardly used to get two or three days of work to the employees. Also most of the times when wood comes late in the night, workers had to be available at the factory premises to unload it which was difficult for the *Malayali* labourers. To meet the order pressure from Gujarat and fear of losing the business to a fellow entrepreneur, the saw mill owners mobilised cheap migrant labour from places to where they supplied their products. Migrants from western Orissa that harboured abject poverty were present in abundance in Gujarat, West Bengal and other neighbouring states including Andhra Pradesh and also in Karnataka close to Kerala. Migrants from Orissa, who would live in the mill and work hard even at odd hours, were contented with whatever limited work was available and the free accommodation provided by the timber entrepreneurs in Kunnathunadu Taluk. They who earned much higher wages at the saw mills than what they earned in their native place where work was not regularly available enjoyed the work and life in Kerala.

Few Veneer units existed in Kunnathunadu Taluk from the late 1980s which had got matured to plywood units in the middle of next decade (Pereira, 2009). Due to the slump in the timber business as orders for packing case gradually got reduced. The high demand for plywood due to the crisis in Assam and the abundant availability of

rubber wood created a business opportunity and many owners converted their saw mills to veneer mills or plywood mills in the late 1990s. In 1997, government of India totally delicensed wood based industry which led to a spurt of growth in small scale plywood units in the country (FPPI, 2009). This also accelerated the growth of plywood industry in Perumbavoor and the pace of conversion of saw mills to plywood or veneer units. Since the work was as or even more demanding low or semi-skilled labour, that too for longer hours or in more than one shift, the already present migrant labour from Orissa shared the abundant availability of work in plywood industry with their natives who were seeking work and through their social network, there was heavy migration from Orissa, particularly from the erstwhile undivided Kalahandi (now Nuapada and Kalahandi) and Phulbani (now Kandhamal and Boudh) districts. Migrants from Assam who worked in plywood industry in Assam also initially mobilised by employers in Kerala and through their social network more people started coming forming two strong migration streams, one from Orissa and the other from Assam and gradually migrants from West Bengal also started flowing. As the number of plywood units in Kunnathunadu Taluk started increasing and the veneer units expanded to plywood units, the demand for migrant labour also increased. When the flow of migrants from Assam by year is examined, it may be seen that migrants from Orissa benefitted from the principal migrants from Orissa who already had been working in the timber industry and were available at the destination when the plywood industry began to grow in Kunnathunadu. The sedentary Assamese probably tried all other options in their own state in order to avoid the move which may be the reason for their late arrival to Kerala. This is also reflected in their employment status preceding the arrival at Kerala. As it is seen, the migration from Assam to Plywood industry in Kerala started picking up three years after the collapse of plywood industry in Assam. The unemployment after the closing down of plywood industry in the state also led to a peak of unemployment in Assam in 1999-2000 with rural unemployment in the state becoming almost three times higher than that of the country as a whole (Government of Assam, 2003), and this was the period when migration to plywood industry in Kerala from Assam picked up. When examined the focal points of labour migration to Kerala from Assam, one was Dibrugarh district which was an earlier plywood hub in Assam (Sen, 1995) from where the most of the Hindu migrants have come who belonged to tribal communities. The other source district of migration from Assam was Nagaon, the district with highest population density in Assam according to the Assam Human Development report (2003). More than four-fifths of the migrants from Nagaon were found to be Muslim. Nagaon is historically known as one of the districts to which the Muslim immigrants from erstwhile East Bengal (current Bangladesh) have flocked and settled. It appears that the Muslim migrants from Nagaon in Kerala are Bangladeshi settlers in Assam or their later generations who are not sedentary by history while the tribal Hindu's from Dibrugarh though did not want had no other choice than to travel the 3000 kilometres in the Guwahati-Trivandrum Express down to Kunnathunadu where they were assured better wages, immediate and continuous job, free accommodation. However, these migrants from Assam as well as the ones from Orissa banked on the

social capital of their kith and kin from Assam in Kunnathunadu who had already been working previous to their arrival to bridge the gap of 2000 to 3000 kilometres as one can easily infer from Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Per cent Distribution of Migrant Workers by Role of Significant others# in various Milestones Related to Migration and Native State**

Indicator	Native State			Total
	Orissa	Assam	Other	
<i>Presence of significant others</i>				
Prior to migration at destination	100.0	100.0	77.3	97.5
To migrate with	90.6	87.6	90.9	90.0
Staying with	86.1	94.4	95.5	89.0
To go out with	95.5	98.9	95.5	96.3
<i>Friends</i>				
Prior to migration at destination	84.6	89.9	50.0	82.0
To migrate with	81.3	87.6	81.4	82.7
Staying with	83.5	94.4	95.5	87.3
To go out with	95.1	98.9	95.5	96.0
<i>Relatives</i>				
Prior to migration at destination	34.5	39.3	22.7	34.3
To migrate with	31.5	22.5	30.2	29.3
Staying with	17.6	21.3	2.3	16.8
To go out with	22.5	33.7		22.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	267	89	44	400

# Significant others include friends, relatives or native villagers.

The industrial policy of Assam (Government of Assam, 2008) painfully notes that “it is a pity that the state of Assam, which was a market leader till 1996 producing almost 80% of India’s total plywood has now been reduced to producing only five per cent to eight per cent of India’s plywood”. Whereas Kunnathunadu in Kerala now supplies only 40% of its plywood produce to the domestic market and rest 60% is exported to countries in the Middle-East (Ply Reporter, 2009). In September 2008, plywood export from Perumbavoor (Kunnathunadu) to Dubai was 72000 tons worth 3.2 million USD in a month (Pereira, 2009).

### Conclusions

Given the demographic transition in the state and its implications on the labour force; limited empirical evidence on labour migration to Kerala; anecdotal evidence on the increasing labour in-migration of low or semi-skilled labour migrants from neighbouring and northern Indian states and insights from two preliminary studies on internal migration to Kerala, the attempt of this study was to uncover the labour migration to Kerala through narrating the case of plywood industry where the presence of migrants was fairly evident from the late 1990s through a descriptive approach. The labour migrants to Plywood industry portrayed a different scenario than what is revealed by

previous studies examining labour migration to Kerala in terms of socio-demographics of labour migrants, by the near exclusive presence of single male migrants from Eastern Indian states, predominantly distress migrants Orissa, and Assam.

Though the social development in Kerala and the repercussions of the resulted demographic transmission on the labour force set the stage for labour in-migration to Kerala, the key precipitating factor of the evolution and growth of labour migration to plywood industry was the judicial intervention of Supreme Court (India) in 1996 for the conservation of forests in the country in general and the tropical wet ever-green forests of Tirap and Changlang in the State of Arunachal Pradesh in particular and the resultant collapse of Plywood industry in Assam in 1997 who was the market leader in India weaning thenceforth the Plywood industry in Kerala which did not depend on forest wood. While the presence of distress migrant labourers from Western Orissa to the timber industry in Kunnathunadu Taluk preceding the growth of plywood industry was a reason for the evolution of the migrant stream from Orissa, it gained momentum as the plywood industry in Kerala bloomed and flourished banking the business opportunity due to the collapse of plywood industry in Assam. The sedentary Assamese and settlers who had multiple dependents had no option than seeking refuge in plywood mills in Kerala as unemployment rose in the state from the fall of plywood sector which was one of the very few industrial sectors in Assam. Through the social network, more people from Assam also availed the better wages and continuous availability of job opportunities leading to the growth of migration stream from Assam.

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#### *Notes*

1. A native of the state Tamil Nadu, Tamil is the language spoken in Tamil Nadu.
2. Houses that do not have a firm roof, wall and floor.
3. Native of Kerala.
4. Business community from Northern India

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