

Migrant Labour in Kerala: A Study on Interstate Migrant Workers

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Abstract

Kerala, a state of southern India is witnessing large inflow of migrant labour from different parts of the country in the recent years. Though initially the migrants were largely from the neighbouring states and mostly seasonal and short-duration migration, at a later period the state started getting migrants from far distant states. Higher wages for unskilled labour in the state, large opportunities for employment, the reluctance on the part of Kerala workers to do menial and hard physical work, and shortage of local labour led to the massive influx of migrant labour to the state. This study takes a multi-dimensional overview of migrant labour in Kerala by encompassing the factors like channels of migration, reasons for migration, nature of employment contracts entered into and the corresponding wages and benefits obtained by them. The study is largely based on the empirical findings obtained as a result of the primary interviews conducted on migrant workers in the different districts of Kerala.

The study concludes by saying that the State will inevitably have to depend on migrant labour and is likely to experience heavy in-migration of labour in future, provided that if the existing socio-economic and demographic situation persists. Therefore, the best way before the state is to prepare well in advance to welcome and receive the migrant labour in a hassle free environment, so that it would definitely play a vital role in further strengthening and sustaining the growth trajectory of not only Kerala's economy but also of the states of origin of migrants.

Keywords: Labour, in-migration, migrant workers, employment, replacement migration, Kerala.

Introduction

An absolute static population exists nowhere in this world. The movement of people in search of better living conditions and a more secure environment is as old as human civilization. Such movements not only transform the lives of the migrants profoundly, but also lead to significant economic and social changes in the regions of origin and destination of the migrants. The expansion and developments in transport and communication along with industrialisation have paved way for large-scale movement of people from villages to towns, from towns to other towns and from one country to another country in search of new job opportunities and avenues. Industrialisation has widened the gap between rural and urban areas, inducing a shift of the workforce towards the industrializing areas.

In the past few decades, the world has witnessed an alarming increase in the number of migrants. Globalization has led to a significant increase in human mobility within and across the countries (IOM, 2013). As per the latest WHO reports it has been estimated that about 1

billion people of the world’s population are constituted by migrants, of which 214 million are international migrants and the remaining 740 million constituted by internal migrants¹. Being a complex phenomenon, migration not only influences the size, composition and distribution of the population but more importantly impacts the social, cultural, political and economic life of the people and outcomes can be vastly different for men and women, for different groups and different locations (de Haan and Rogaly, 2002). So thus migration, be it internal or international in nature to some extent can solve issues related to work force deficiency or of problems related to population decline and ageing.

Internal Migration in India

Internal migration is considered as an important element of population redistribution and equilibrium. In developing countries, migration mostly takes place not due to the so called pull forces of the destination place as usually happens in the case of developed countries, but because of poverty, unemployment, natural calamities and underdevelopment at the origin place. According to Deshingkar and Anderson (2004), in countries like India migration is adopted as a routine livelihood strategy and not simply as a mere response to the shocks. Poverty and prosperity both are responsible for inducing migration. While the former is mostly true in developing countries, whereas the latter kind of migration is found in developed countries.

Migration in India is primarily of two types: (a) Long-term migration, resulting in the relocation of an individual or household and (b) short term or seasonal and circular migration, which is a peculiar feature of Indian labour migration which involves back and forth movement of between the source and destination. As pointed out by Srivastava & Sasikumar (2003), migration in India is predominantly short distance with around 60 per cent of migrants changing their residence within the district of enumeration and over 20 per cent within the state of enumeration, while the rest moves across the state boundaries. Estimates of short-term migrants vary from 15 million (NSSO 2007-08) to 100 million. Furthermore, studies have pointed that seasonal and circular migration is widespread especially among the socio-economically deprived groups such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs), who are asset-poor and face resource and livelihood deficits (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009).

The data from the recently released provisional D5 table shows that in India the proportion of the migrant population has increased from 9.56 per cent in 2001 to 13.33 percent, which can be attributed to the increase in the female migration from 6.3 percent of 2001 to 8.64 per cent of 2011. During the same period, the proportion of male migrants witnessed a growth of 1.19 percentage i.e., from 3.2 per cent of 2001 to 4.69 per cent in 2011.

Reasons for migration with duration 0-9 years, India 2011.

Reasons for migration	Number of migrants (in millions)			Percentage to total migrants		
	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
Work/Employment	18.70	15.48	3.22	11.58	27.28	3.07
Business	13.14	9.55	3.58	0.81	1.68	0.34

Education	5.15	3.00	2.15	3.20	5.29	2.05
Marriage	60.18	1.49	58.69	37.28	2.63	56.07
Moved after birth	20.94	10.99	9.95	12.97	19.36	9.50
Moved with household	3.55	1.53	2.03	22.01	26.87	19.38
Other	1.96	0.96	1.00	12.15	16.89	9.59
Total migrants	161.43	56.80	104.67	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Provisional D5 Tables, Census of India, 2011.

On a careful analysis of the reasons for migration based on Provisional D5 tables of Census 2011, it is interesting to note that marriage continues to be the predominant reason for migration in India, constituting about 37.28 per cent of the total spectrum. When it comes to males, work/employment was quoted as the main reason for migration constituting about 27.28 per cent of the total and among females marriage was reported as the major reason, constituting about 56 per cent of the total. It is interesting to note the percentage of females migrating for educational purposes have increased from 1.3 percent (in 2001) to 2.05 per cent.

It can be seen that over past few decades, the migration patterns of the country has underwent rapid transformations along with the developments in transportation and telecommunication systems resulting in the formation of new migration corridors, areas of origin, destination etc.

In our country, the state of Kerala holds a unique place when it comes matters related to migration as Malayalees are known for their mobility nature not only within the country, but also across the borders. But the situations were much different about a century ago, when most of the Malayalees lead a contented life within state boundaries (Joseph V. K., 2001). But with the independence and due to the oil boom in the 1970s, Keralites started venturing out of the state boundaries in large numbers in search of better opportunities and livelihood options. The continuous emigration of labour culminated in the scarcity of labour, which was followed inevitably by increase in the wage rate. These developments received the attention of workers from other states and they started flocking Kerala in large numbers. This has opened a new era of replacement migration to Kerala as the state once again becoming a fertile ground for migrating population after a break of about 60 years since the 1960s. Though initially the migrants were primarily from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu and that mostly characterised seasonal and short-duration migration, at a later period the state started getting migrants from far distant states like Bihar, Assam and Bengal.

Objectives and Methodology

The major objective of this study is to understand the circumstances that led to the large scale influx of migrants from the distant states of India. It also makes an attempt to examine in detail, the varying dimensions of living and working environment of migrants employed in Kerala. Thus, the stated objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To analyse the underlying factors responsible for the huge influx of migrants to Kerala.
2. To understand the channels of migration of the migrant labour to the state of Kerala.
3. To understand the nature of employment contracts entered into by the migrants and the corresponding remuneration/wages and benefits obtained by them.
4. To assess the living and working environment (conditions) of migrant workers.

The study is an exploratory attempt to understand the trends and patterns of in-migration taking place in the state of Kerala. This study is based on the empirical findings obtained through a primary survey conducted on migrant workers in Kerala. As a part of the study, 50 migrant workers were interviewed from the states of West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, Jharkhand, Manipur and Uttar Pradesh, employed in the districts of Palakkad, Malappuram and Ernakulam. The samples were selected on the basis of purposive sampling method, a type of non-probabilistic sampling technique which focuses on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest. Selection of samples was made in such a way that it may encompass maximum heterogeneity in terms of the socio-economic parameters, demographic features, the state of origin, nature of jobs, etc. Moreover, in order to make the extent of the study much wider and comprehensive, a series of interviews were conducted with key informants (individuals who work in tandem with migrant workers) such as labour contractors/ employers, head of the financial institutions like banks and local trade union leader in order to gather additional information about the migrants.

Findings based on Case Studies of Migrant Workers and Key Informant Interviews

1. Socio-Economic & Demographic Characteristics of Migrant Labour

The study revealed that most of the migrant labour were from agrarian joint families owning considerable area of land under cultivation. Since, the margin of profitability from agriculture has declined over the years, hence the size of family engaged in such activities also got diminished, and that in fact triggered migration to other states in search of better employment prospects. All the migrant workers interviewed were males and have belonged to the productive age group of 18-35 years. The educational profile of the respondents ranged from individuals having no formal education to the highest qualification of class twelfth.

2. Factors Responsible for Migration to Kerala

Economic reasons were identified to be the main factors for their migration towards Kerala. Almost all cited the factors like comparatively low level of wages, lack of employment opportunities (or to a great extent, the erratic nature of employment), the increasing unviability and uncertainty of the agriculture sector coupled with its seasonal nature, prompted them to take the decision of migration to seek employment elsewhere. BA, a migrant worker from West Bengal while comparing his home state with Kerala, has full praise for the latter especially when it comes to wages. Working as a helper in the construction work, he earns ₹400- ₹450 per day which is much more than the erratic and less hours of labour available in his home state. Another labourer from Dibrugarh district of Assam cited that the cost of production in agriculture has gone up in recent years and according to him, because of this reason, agriculture is no longer a profitable source of

livelihood; these are stated to be one among several underlying factors that would have forced them to migrate to Kerala.

3. Channels of Migration

There was a complete unanimity among the migrant workers while answering the question on channels of migration. All of them opined the role of either their friends or relatives or colleagues in bringing them to Kerala for employment. Many of these friends and relatives were already employed in Kerala and were highly aware of the existing opportunities and its associated benefits and privileges. In some cases, the indirect role of contractors/employers can also be taken into consideration, as they demand the migrant workers to bring their relatives and friends, whoever is willing in order to compensate the shortage of labour that keeps on fluctuating as per market conditions. This was quite evident at the time of investigation, as the migrant workers living in the same room were predominantly found to be hailing from the same state, district as well as same village. So, the role of friends and relatives are very much instrumental in directing a sizeable number of labour to the area of study in particular and to the state of Kerala in general.

4. Nature of Employment Contracts and Ensuring Identity of Migrants

Most of the migrant workers employed in the construction sector were identified to be working under contractors. This is equally true, irrespective of whether they were engaged in skilled or unskilled labour. The advantage of working under the contractual system lies in the assurance of getting regular employment, so that the problem of unemployment doesn't arise. As a consequence, such labourers are able to get work throughout the week, or in some cases, if the worker is willing, they could get a day off. But the irony is that, no kind of formal (written) contract had been negotiated in between two parties as some of the workers were found to be working under the same contractor for a long time.

The study also made an attempt to understand how concerned are the contractors/employers in ensuring the identity of the migrant labours. In order to get rid of future mishappenings and unfortunate incidents (arising due to anonymity), the employers used to ensure the identity of the workers before employing them. In the words of Manager of a quarry, *“Since the number of migrant workers employed here are much larger, we are bound to ensure the identity of the migrants, as anonymity becomes a big factor in causing several problems. So, we follow the system of maintaining a register exclusively for recording the identification details of these people. It is mainly done through the verification of various identity cards issued by concerned authorities. As per my knowledge, this is of great use especially at the time of police verification”*.

5. Sectors of Employment and Associated Issues

The study examined the sectors in which the migrant workers were employed and were found to be employed mainly as a manual labour in diverse sectors of construction, quarry, hotels and restaurants. There is no exaggeration in saying that the migrant labour has almost forayed into all sections of Kerala's economy. Construction sector, which is booming at its peak was identified to be the principle sector in which a major chunk of migrant population was employed.

There always prevails a sense of scepticism over the work efficiency and culture of migrant workers as compared to the local counterparts. For ascertaining the reality, I posed the same question to the Manager of the quarry. He replied *“It’s like the two sides of a coin – has both advantages and disadvantages. But the positives outscore the negatives while employing migrant workers and that’s why they are here……. ready to do work at cheap wages, easily available, flexibility in timings – even willing to work beyond conventional hours and also regularity in working. The biggest difficulty of employing local labour lies in their availability and once they are available, saying excuses for not attending the job is also so prevalent. In case of work efficiency, migrants are observed to be not at par with the local labourers as their work lacks quality and perfection. Only through regular training, we can make them highly efficient ……….”*

When asked about in what way their advent affected the labour dynamics of the region, the trade union leader said that *“……. to a small extent, it made the local population unemployed as the employers were no longer willing to pay higher wages to the latter”*. The migrant labour was always subjected to some discrimination and exploitation especially in terms of wages. For the same kind and nature of work, the migrants were generally offered lower wages in comparison to local counterparts. Asked whether the migrants are aware of labour laws and rights, the answer came suddenly in the form of *“No……. not at all. They are not even united to redress their grievances and rights…….”* They were also found to be completely oblivious of labour laws and privileges.

6. Wages, Remuneration and Other Benefits

The study examined the wages, remuneration and other benefits earned by the migrant labourers in detail. This factor proved to be a major determinant in deciding the flow of these workers to Kerala. The wages are generally determined on the basis of nature and pattern of the work that the migrant workers are subjected to - a skilled labour is able to receive much higher wages than its unskilled counterpart. Among the workers we surveyed, the minimum and maximum daily wage offered were ₹300 and ₹800 respectively. Apart from wages, other benefits and emoluments include – in some cases, the rent of the accommodation as well as the expenditure towards food or the food itself was provided by the employer/contractor.

All the migrant workers who were interviewed is of the same opinion that the wage level in Kerala is quite higher than what they earn in their state of origin or expect to get anywhere else, even though it is lesser than what the local labourers get. GP, a quarry worker from Barpeta district of Assam is highly contented with what he earns now (of about ₹700 per day) and the happiness was truly reflected on his face at the time of interview.

7. Remittances by Migrant Workers – Amount, Mode and Periodicity

The remittances sent by the migrant labour plays an inevitable role in determining the economic stability and in sustaining a better life of their family members. An analysis of information gathered from migrant workers revealed the universal acceptability of banking services among them in undertaking financial transactions. Banks are emerged to be the principle mode of sending their remittances back home. The Manager of the bank which I interviewed reiterated the role played by the banks in accommodating and meeting the financial needs of the migrant workers. Even though most of the surveyed workers still do

not have their own accounts, they used to deposit money in accounts of either their family members or friends. In order to avoid the loss of one day wage, there is a practice among the migrant workers to send one person, preferably their roommate to the bank for cash remittance by sharing wage compensation and other expenses. SN, a migrant labour hailing from the Murshidabad district of West Bengal expressed his disenchantment over the practice of depositing money in the bank – *“it’s a tedious task to stand in the queue and wait for a long time to pay the cashalmost take one full day of us, loosing wages Nowadays we assign one person for this, preferably one of our roommates to go to bank”*.

SM, 21 years old belonging to the Goalpara district of Assam became very excited when he talked about the new mode of cash remittance. According to him–*“ Now we are using the Green Remit Card of State Bank of India for sending our money back home this makes the transaction much more easier and comfortable”*.

The periodicity of remittances varies from one worker to another, but usually it ranges from once in a week to twice in a month to monthly. Based on the frequency of cash deposit, the average amount deposited at a time also varies from ₹3000-₹3500 per week to ₹8000 in a month. Some of the migrants held the practice of sending money as per the requirements and needs of the family; any way it never exceeds the timeframe of a month. The Manager held the view that most of the remittances deposited in the account are not meant for saving, instead it was withdrawn at the earliest, say within a week, for meeting the family expenses. After a week, nothing was observed to be left in the account. *“Out of 10 migrants, to a maximum of 3 would have something left in their accounts as savings”*- says the Manager. This amply shows the pathetic financial condition of migrant workers coming from other states.

8. Living and Working Environment of Migrant Workers

Most of the migrant workers being interviewed are staying in small rooms which are highly congested. A single room is usually shared by 5 to 6 persons and in some cases more individuals are accommodated. Most of the dwelling places didn’t have enough provisions for meeting the basic necessities of such a large number of residents such as separate kitchens, toilets etc. Toilets are common in nature and that seemed to be quite insufficient for the existing large number of migrant labourers staying in a single building. Predominantly, the food was prepared within the room itself, whereas during the working days, the employer used to provide food twice a day at the work site. The rooms were not having any furnitures like cots, chairs etc. and the migrants normally sleep on the floor. The hygiene around some settlements were pathetic and the premises were visibly littered with waste. In one case, we found the cooking being done in the open, as the building in which the migrants lived was in total dilapidated condition with no electricity, water and toilet facilities.

9. The Migrants and the Local Community

The migrant population has already become a decisive force to reckon with in influencing the social and cultural spheres of Kerala. It has become a well-known fact that their presence has almost percolated into all walks of economic activity of the state, which can neither be denied nor discarded.

When enquired about the kind of problems encountered by workers during the course of their stay over in Kerala, all of them were equally identical in saying ‘no problem’ without any hesitation. But it is totally difficult to believe such a liberal answer, as there exists a deep ambivalence in the way both the society and the government looks at them. What makes them to answer in such a manner was perhaps the inherent fear among them to not invite the wrath of the local population. They were highly - aware of the reality that the local population always consider them as second tier citizens or as workers from an ‘alien’ state.

SH, a migrant labour from West Bengal to a question on whether he is facing any kind of problems (social and cultural) in Kerala, he replied that “*Kerala is one of the finest places to work in which there persists ample scope for leading a peaceful, serene, calm and composed life immersed in common brotherhood, religious tolerance and secular outlook. Even though unfamiliar language continues to be a major problem (during conversations), it doesn’t stand as a stumbling block in establishing a good rapport with the local population*”.

“The factors of language barrier, temporary nature of their stay within the state and the floating nature of migrants continued to be the major barriers in reaching out to labour migrant population”, said the leader to a question on the intervention of union in the affairs of migrant population. As a result of this, the union failed to create an impact on their living and working conditions as well as unifying them as in the case of local community.

All of them held the opinion that their rapport with the local community was good and should not hold any outstanding issues with them. The only barrier comes in the form of language, that makes the communication little bit difficult. Some of them can speak Malayalam words of frequent usage which was observed during the field work. They have a great regard for Keralites, and according to them, Kerala is the best place to work in and earn a source of livelihood.

Conclusion

In the light of ongoing structural changes in the country and consequently changing contours of the economy coupled with fluctuating market conditions, the nature and pattern of migration has also undergone apparent changes over the years. This has been truly reflected and observed in the case of migration pattern of Kerala in which the continuous and steady outflow since 1970s has now been compensated by the new phenomenon of replacement migration especially the labour in-migration. This study which examined the multidimensional characteristics of migrant workers employed in Kerala from the other Indian states portrayed the harsh realities and facts behind their migration along with emerging challenges, which needs to be addressed comprehensively at the earliest.

The studies on Kerala’s demographic future conducted by several institutions in the past two decades have predicted, among other things, significant changes in the age structure, including a decrease in proportion of the labour force in about two decades from 2001, decline in young working age population, a doubling of older working age population in two decades ending in 2021, and more unemployment among the older age groups than among the youth in the foreseeable future. So, in the near future, a very explosive demographic situation will emerge in Kerala, where a major chunk 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.

No doubt, the state has now become a thriving job market for workers hailing from other regions in the country, owing to multiple factors discussed earlier and it continues to do so in the ensuing period. Kerala will inevitably have to depend on migrant labour and is likely to experience heavy in-migration of labour even from other regions of India which is not so prevalent nowadays, provided that if the existing socio-economic and demographic situation persists. Since, this is inevitable, the only best way before the state is to prepare well in advance to receive and accommodate such migrant labour to lead a comfortable life in a hassle free environment, so that it would definitely play a vital role in further strengthening and sustaining the growth trajectory of not only Kerala's economy but also the states of origin.

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