

FACTORS OF VULNERABILITY AMONG THE INTERSTATE MIGRANTS IN KERALA

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Abstract

The study examines the factors of vulnerability of migrant labourers in Kerala state. The state has been witnessing extensive inflow of migrant labourers not only from the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka but also from states in East India (West Bengal and Orissa), North India (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand) and Northeast (Assam, Manipur). Higher wages for unskilled labour in the state, extensive opportunities for employment and deficiency of local labour, paradoxically despite the high unemployment rate in the state, prompted the massive influx of migrant labour to the state. The paper examines the corroborative factors of the vulnerabilities of the interstate migrants in Kerala.

Key Words: internal migration, interstate migration, vulnerability

Introduction

The state, situated in the south-western tip of the Indian Peninsula, has been witnessing extensive inflow of migrant labourers not only from the neighbouring state of Tamil Naduⁱ and Karnataka (in South India) but also from states in East India (West Bengal and Orissa), North India (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand) and North-east (Assam, Manipur). There is also migrant flow to Kerala from Nepal. This has counterbalanced the shortage of labour caused partly because of the out-migration to different states and emigration to other countries.ⁱⁱ Higher wages for unskilled labour in the state, large opportunities for employment and lack of local labour provided necessary pull. The migrant labourers coming to Kerala were pushed out of their native place as a result of low wages and unemployment or underemployment in farming and different areas.ⁱⁱⁱ With the indications of rapid growth of Kerala economy and the expansion in activities especially in infrastructure and construction sectors, the in-migration is expected to become faster in the coming years. Apart from its significance in the economic development of the state, interstate migrant flow facilitate retaining the demographic balance in a state which has the highest proportion of aged population and where a good proportion of population in the working age group have migrated out of the state.

Inter-state Migrants in Kerala

In-migration of labourers to Kerala has a long history. But the recent migration is diverse in terms of the profile of the migrant labourers, the occupation they are engaged in and the extent of inflow. The migration in the 1990s was particularly from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.^{iv} Workers from states similar to West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand now rush to Kerala. The activities they are engaged in also got much more diversified than before. The migrant workers are now engaged in the works like construction works, casual labours, agricultural and plantation works, domestic works, masons, plywood factory works, quarries etc. Usually there is a tendency to allocate the more difficult, hazardous and menial jobs to migrant workers.

The linguistic, social and cultural differences between the states of origin and Kerala and long distance migrants have to travel to reach Kerala makes the inter-state migration.^v Certainly, there exist differences between international migration and inter-state migration in terms of visa requirements and restrictions on mobility imposed in some countries. The point emerging is that the interstate migration in a large country like India is different from the internal migration within a state in the country.

Vulnerability of Migrant Workers

Bustamante points out that ‘migrants are inherently vulnerable as subjects of human rights from the time they leave home to initiate their migration. In other words, any human being is less vulnerable at home than right after he leaves it to become a migrant. The same applies to the sociological extension of the notion of home to a community of origin. The same person that migrates had more resources, both material and human, to defend and or protect, himself, when he was at home, prior to moving elsewhere, than after the outward movement had taken place.’ According to Derose *et al*, vulnerability is shaped by many factors, including political and social marginalization and a lack of socio economic and societal resources.^{vi} Varennes states that ‘living in host states where they (migrants) may not master the official language(s), are unfamiliar with the workings of the legal system and administration, detached from traditional support and family networks, exposed to a society with ways of life or cultures which they may find at times alien, they may face trials that can leave them disoriented and disturbed.’^{vii} Thus, vulnerability of the migrants emerge on account of living in a place which is diverse in culture, dialect, social settings, legal protection, qualifications and utilization propensities from their native place and the loss of the traditionally supportive network they enjoyed in before migration. Despite the fact that these viewpoints are generally talked about with regards to international migration, the circumstance is more or less same when migrants cross borders of states within large country like India. In perspective of the host state’s inability to recognize their presence, interstate migrants are scarcely considered in policy making in the state where they live. It is likewise conceivable that their voices may not be heard in the state of their origin. The widely held feeling among local community that they are ‘outsiders’ adds to their vulnerability. As voiced by a migrant worker ‘Here wherever we go, people start telling -“bhaimaar” have come-such as when we go in bus. We do call each other bhai-bhai, that is ok. But when we go outside and Malayalees see us they say-there, bhaimaar have come. That we don’t like.’^{viii}

Limited Access to Rights/Privileges

Movement of people from one state then onto the next can prompt loss of specific rights and privileges they enjoyed in the state where they lived before migration. In the Indian federal system, individuals determine their privileges through the fundamental rights conferred on them by the Indian Constitution and the different laws authorized by the Union government and the state governments. Most of the central government plans are applicable throughout the nation. Indeed, even in central government schemes, the advantages reach the general population through the state or local government. Unless and otherwise specified, such benefits are available only to the permanent residents of the respective state. In such a circumstance, the interstate migrants lose their privileges when they cross borders of their native state. For example, a migrant worker from states like Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal or Assam who has been profiting rice or wheat and other arrangements at subsidized cost through the Public Distribution System (PDS) in the native state is probably not going to benefit by the PDS in Kerala. In spite of the fact that Kerala is known to have an elaborate public distribution system in the country, none of the migrant workers have ration card^{ix} in Kerala which is the document required for availing the advantages under the subsidized PDS as they don't have the residential status necessary for getting the advantages.^x The state has additionally been giving basic utilization things at subsidized rates through its outlets managed by the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation, for which also ration card is necessary. In this manner, the migrants need to depend exclusively on the open market and turn out to be more vulnerable against the price difference in the open market compared to the local community. In the open market, a few examples where migrants were made a request to pay more than what is requested from the local populace were also reported.^{xi}

A similar situation exists in accessing the benefits of Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), a health insurance scheme for the poor^{xii} families executed all through the nation by the Central government. At an annual charge of Rs. 30, the plan provides annual coverage for inpatient care of up to Rs. 30,000 to five members of a family. To take into account the necessities of the labourers belonging to BPL families who migrate, there is a facility to split the card which is given to RSBY recipient families. The smart card issued under the RSBY can be split at the time of first issue or subsequently at a district level office. But, the families of migrant workers have appeared to be not making utilization of these benefits and hence can't avail the advantages of the plan. In a taluk level government hospital in Perumbavoor, a town in Central Kerala well known for high concentration of migrant workers, there was not even an enquiry by the migrant workers to avail the facility. In such a way, practically speaking, the portability of benefits of RSBY scheme remains an issue.^{xiii}

Generally, advantages of the schemes run by individual state governments are accessible to people having resident status in the respective state. Migrants, in general, do not have resident status in the destination state. Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme (CHIS) is a scheme started by the Government of Kerala to stretch out coverage of medical insurance to families which are not covered by the RSBY. The plan benefits the 'additional poor', identified by the Kerala government who are ready to pay Rs. 30 and to non-poor if they are willing to pay the full premium of Rs. 778. Migrant workers are not covered by this plan also as they are not eligible for state specific plans. It is certain that a significant number

rights and privileges in the home state are not accessible when the workers crossed the borders of the state of the same country.^{xiv}This is regardless of the way that the Indian federal system envisages full portability of the benefits at least for the central government schemes. It gives the idea that there is a requirement for better coordination between the governments in the host state, state of origin and the central government to ensure that the rights of the interstate migrants are not lost on account of migration. The initiative to issue unique identity to citizens in India may help to address the issue by synergizing it with rights of citizens so that migrant labourers can enjoy their rights wherever they are.

Language Barriers

One of the significant issues that migrant labourers confront when they reach Kerala is related to the distinctions in the language spoken by the migrant workers and that of the host society. As stated elsewhere, though migration is between regions within the same nation, language spoken by the migrants and the local people are distinctive. Even though the migrant labours from Tamil Nadu managed to coup up with the situation.^{xv}The official language of the nation is Hindi and English. But Keralites speak Malayalam. This is different from the language spoken by people in West Bengal (Bengali), Orissa (Oriya), Bihar (Hindi) or Assam (Assamese). All these languages belong to the Indo-Aryan language family while Malayalam is a Dravidian dialect. Being unable to speak to the local community of the service providers in their language makes them vulnerable on many occasions.

Health and Safety Risks

Migrants are vulnerable because of unhygienic living conditions and insufficient arrangements for their safety at the worksite. The limitation to access health care due to language barriers, lack of time, lack of knowledge about the public provisioning of health care etc. further increases their vulnerability. However, one advantage the migrants in Kerala is that they may be able to benefit from the relatively better health system and health care seeking practices in the state.

Limitation to Access Education

The children of migrant workers generally remain back in their home villages. The majority of the migrant workers in Kerala are unmarried. Of the kids remaining in Kerala, language barriers pose the problem in attending schools run by the state which is in Malayalam or English language. A couple single teacher schools have been begun under the national school training program viz., Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. The difficulty to get instructors with knowledge in languages such as, Oriya, Bengali or Assamese is one of the issues related to the education of migrant's children. A migrant worker from Uttarakhand who sends his four year old child in a private pre-school in Kerala disclosed to the researcher that he will leave Kerala when the child attains the age of six. He feels that the language (Malayalam) and educational curriculum the child learns in Kerala may not be beneficial for her future as she has to live rest of her life in Uttarakhand.^{xvi}

Unequal Wages

Unskilled migrant workers get Rs. 300-350 for a day's work. If accommodation and food are given, usually there is cut in their salary and limits to Rs. 100. These wages are lower than the wages for local labour by about Rs. 100. But in large scale construction and

infrastructure work, migrant workers are recruited through contractors who set the wages. These contractors or agents will take their intermediary charges which is usually 20 – 30 per person. Regardless of the possibility that they don't come through contractor or agents, some of them pay cash to the workers who have come to Kerala from the same state earlier to find jobs and provide necessary support.^{xvii}

The earnings of the labourers after migration is around 3-4 times their earlier income in home state. It is likewise substantially higher than the minimum wages fixed by the state government for unskilled workers. While there is significant distinction between the monetary wages for casual work in Kerala and in their home villages, it is important to note that the difference in real wage rates to the migrant workers may not be as high, as they have to incur much higher costs for living in Kerala than in their native places.

Conclusion

Due to the limitations in portability of rights and privileges, the migrants are not able to avail the privileges offered by the central government they had enjoyed before migration. Subsequently, even when the migrant workers are from a same nation, the host state neglects to amplify them all the assurance that is accessible to the local labour. This being a national level issue, it has to be addressed for the country as a whole. The benefits in the Kerala state are not given to migrants as permanent resident status is necessary to become recipients. Even if the state is relatively better off in relation to legal and social protection, the benefits are not automatically transferred to the migrant workers. The state has to take initiatives to incorporate the demands of the migrant as well as the NGOs in relation to the effective implementation of the policy of the state and the central government.

It is likely that the factors that led to the vulnerability of migrant workers in Kerala may not be as strong as in many other parts of the country. Regardless of all these, they are not able to enjoy tolerable working and living conditions they are entitled to though they earn much more than that of their native places. The article analysed a couple of factors that pushed and pulled the migrant labourers to confront vulnerability in most of the spheres of life. Many of the factors are worth exploring further and there are many others too. Hence, to understand the vulnerability of the interstate migrants in Kerala in a comprehensive manner, a multi-dimensional study has to be initiated where NGOs and the Media can also be a part of it.

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^{vii}Radha Devi D. and Ajith Kumar N., Population Pressure on Land in Kerala, Working Paper No. 24, Centre for Socio- Economic and Environmental Studues, Kochi.

^{viii}Personal Interview with Gurung M.K., on 12.10.2016.

^{ix}Ration card is the document issued by the government making families to make use of Public Distribution System.

^xMichael Tharakan, Kerala Model Development Revisited: New Problems, Fresh Challenges, Working Paper No.15, Centre for Socio Economic and Environmental Studies, 2006.

^{xi}Personal Interview with Bikram Misra on 18 12.2016.

^{xii}Defined as those living below a poverty line fixed by the Planning Commission of India

^{xiii}Biswas J et.al., Seasonal Migration, Social Change and Migrant's Rights: Lessons from West Bengal, Econic and Political Weekly, 36.

^{xiv}From Personal Interview the scholar came to know that the supplementary food distributed through Anganwadis meant for pre- School children dose not deliver to the migrants because of the temporary residential status.

^{xv}The language barriers are not much affected to the Tamil migrants as the Malayalam and Tamil belongs to Dravidian language.

^{xvi}Personal Interview with Ad. K. Rainge on 22.11.2016.

^{xvii} Radha Devi D. and Ajith Kumar N., Op.Cit., p. 12.