

SHRAM

Strengthen and Harmonize Research and Action on Migration

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Life of Migrants in Kerala

An interview with N. Ajith Kumar



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Ajith Kumar is the Director of Centre for Socio-Economic and Environmental Studies. He has a post graduate degree in Statistics and a Phd in Economics. In this interview he talks about the language barrier that a migrant has to face in Kerala. The migrant inflow has caused an increase in the working age group population. The wage rates in Kerala are higher than the wages from MGNREGA. Kerala government should provide more facilities to the in migrants.

You have done extensive research on the in-migration to and from Kerala. Can you highlight some of the striking features of this study?

Kerala has a long history of in migration mainly from the neighbouring south Indian states, particularly Tamil Nadu. But in the last one and a half decades, this south Indian state has been witnessing unprecedented flow of unskilled labourers from far off states in East, North and North-east India. The flow from Tamil Nadu has almost halted and some of the workers have returned to their native place. But the flow from the far off states continues to grow.

We need to distinguish between long distance inter-state migration in a large country like India from the internal migration within a state in the country or even inter-state migration to a neighbouring state. The physical, linguistic, cultural and social distance between the states of origin and destination state makes such inter-state migration more similar to international migration. Of course, differences exist between international migration and inter-state migration in terms of visa requirements and restrictions on mobility imposed in some countries. People from West Bengal and Assam have to travel 2500- 3500 kilometers to work in Kerala. This is almost equal to the distance they have to travel to migrate to countries in West Asia. The distance a Keralite travels to work in Dubai or Abu Dhabi in West Asia is also not much different. An important aspect for a migrant in Kerala is the linguistic differences. Keralites speak Malayalam, a Dravidian language. The mother tongue of the migrant workers- Bengali,

Oriya, Hindi or Assamese – all these languages belong to the Indo-Aryan language family. Due to language barriers the migrant workers face difficulty in accessing education and health care. The curriculum transaction in the schools in Kerala is in Malayalam, the local language or in English. The language barriers pose problems for the migrant children especially if they did not undergo pre-school education in Kerala. Doubts are also being raised about the relevance of the education that they receive in Kerala if they go back to the states of origin and live the rest of their life in the rural areas. Even though Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan had tried to recruit education volunteers from the migrant families to facilitate the transition from mother tongue to Malayalam/English, this has not been very effective. The difficulty to recruit teachers/volunteers is widely reported. The parents also find it difficult to communicate with the teachers. The large inflow of migrant children with different linguistic backgrounds has created fresh challenges for the school education system in Kerala, which is known for universalization of elementary education. To meet the challenges of extending quality elementary education to this vulnerable group of children, the state needs to develop new strategies and interventions which are appropriate for this group of children.

There also barriers in accessing health care- language barriers, inconvenient timings of the government hospitals, lack of knowledge about the public provisioning of health care. The presence of a public health care system which is responsive to the needs of the migrants is a necessity in states which have significant presence of migrant population. Such a system should be sensitive to the cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds of the migrants. As of now, migrant workers prefer to depend on the private sector for health care. They consult physicians who can communicate with them at least in Hindi. However, of late, the public health system in the state is slowly realizing the implications of not addressing the health issues of the migrant population as it has started affecting the health of the local population also. Some efforts to create awareness among the migrants through pamphlets printed in Hindi, Oriya and Bengali have been undertaken. However, public health personnel agree that only a section of the migrants is reached through such interventions. They attribute it to inadequate human resources available at their disposal. The availability of public health staff for field work has not changed even in pockets where migrants are concentrated in large numbers. Also, the strategy employed is to reach out to the migrant labourers through their employers where the willingness of the latter is a major determinant. Moreover, such a strategy will not help to reach out to casual labourers, domestic workers and those employed in small establishments.

In one of the news item published in the Business Line, the news item highlights that the migration to Kerala has increased over the due course of time. What are the pros and cons of this rapid influx of migration to Kerala?

In migration helped Kerala to offset the shortage of labour caused partly due to the out-

migration to other states and emigration to other countries. Migrant flow facilitated retaining the demographic balance in the state which has the highest proportion of aged population and where a good proportion of the population in the working age group have migrated out of the state. The age structure showed major changes during the last two decades. Even though the share of the working age group in the total population increased during this period, share of young workforce (20-34 years) came down significantly. In fact, the young workforce declined even in numbers. This shortfall was filled by the workers from other states. It is important to note that the late eighties witnessed a turnaround in the state's economy from a period of stagnation to growth. Kerala's state domestic product now is one of the highest in the country, thereby increasing the employment opportunities for migrant labourers as many structural changes were also happening in the state's economy. The share of service sector increased significantly which, in turn, led to opportunities in the non-agriculture sectors where the migrant workers prefer to work.

On the other hand, the large influx of migrants from different parts of the country with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds puts pressure on governance as well as civic amenities.

In the absence of reliable information on the quantum of in-migration of a floating nature, these migrants are not taken into account while making population projections and consequently in planning. For integrating the issues relating to migration into local governance, alternative population projections which include migrants of all types have to be made. The volume and diversity of the migrant population has to be taken into account in planning. The absence of data on the availability of number, type and state of origin of the migrant labourers below district level makes it difficult for the local governments to understand and respond to the needs of migrant workers. Kerala, a front runner in decentralizing administration and governance, has earmarked a quarter of its budgetary allocation to rural and urban local bodies. But the local bodies are yet to respond in any significant way to the presence of a large number of migrant labourers in their localities, their conditions of living and new issues of governance. Unless the numerous problems of the increasing number of migrant labour including their integration in Kerala society are not addressed in time, they can lead to violent social unrest as it happened in countries like France in recent years.

What are the conditions and what are the challenges do the migrants face at the destination (Kerala)?

Vulnerability of migrants arises because of living in a place which is different in language, culture, social settings, legal protection, entitlements and consumption habits from their native places and the loss of the traditional support system they enjoyed before migration. Migrants are rarely considered in policy making in the state where they live. It is also possible that their voices may not be heard in the states of their origin.

The widely held feeling among local community that they are ‘outsiders’ adds to their vulnerability. As mentioned earlier, the language barriers and not having residential status in Kerala poses challenges for migrant workers in accessing public services. The failure of the state to effectively implement labour laws increases their vulnerability.

In terms of giving security and protection to the migrants: Is the government doing enough to safeguard them?

Kerala is slowly recognizing the importance of addressing issues related to migrant workers. Obviously, enough safeguards are not available in Kerala though anecdotal evidence indicates that the situation in Kerala could be better compared to many other states where migrants are working. But more efforts are required to improve the life of the migrant workers in Kerala. The state agencies and the rural and urban local bodies in Kerala should make sure that the migrant workers are able to enjoy ‘decent’ living and working conditions and to help them benefit from the public service providers. There is also a need to strengthen the public facilities taking into account the increasing need of the migrant population. Trade unions also have to get involved in ensuring the labour rights of the migrant workers, to pressurize the government agencies to enforce the legal provisions and to make sure that the benefits of the welfare schemes reach them.

In your paper “Vulnerability of migrants and responsiveness of the state: The unskilled migrant workers in Kerala”, you have talked about government associated schemes and entitlements as not being provided to the migrants. What is it that is bringing this shortfall or lags?

Movement of people from one state to another can lead to loss of certain entitlements they enjoyed in the state where they lived before migration. In the Indian federal system, people derive their entitlements through the fundamental rights conferred on them by the Indian Constitution and the various laws enacted by the Union government and the state governments. The people are eligible to make use of various programmes / schemes executed by the central and state governments. Most of the central government schemes are applicable throughout the country. Even in central government schemes, the benefits reach the people through the state or local government. Usually, such benefits are available only to the permanent residents of the respective state. In such a situation, the interstate migrants lose their entitlements when they cross borders of their native state. For instance, a migrant labourer from states like Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal or Assam who has been availing rice or wheat and other provisions at subsidized price through the Public Distribution System (PDS) in the home state is unlikely to benefit from the PDS in Kerala. Though Kerala is known to have one of the most elaborate public distribution systems in the country, none of the migrant workers we met have a ration card in Kerala which is the document

required for availing the benefits under the subsidized PDS. Therefore, they do not have the residential status necessary for getting the benefits. The state has also been providing essential consumption items at subsidized rates through its outlets managed by the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation, an apex federation of cooperatives for which also a ration card is necessary. Thus, the migrants have to depend solely on the open market and become more vulnerable to the price differences in the open market compared to the local community. A similar situation exists in accessing the benefits of Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), a health insurance scheme for poor families implemented throughout the country by the Central government. To cater to the needs of the workers belonging to BPL families who migrate, there is a facility to split the card which is given to RSBY beneficiary families. But the families of migrant workers appear to be not making use of this facility and therefore are unable to avail the benefits of the scheme. Usually, benefits of the schemes run by individual state governments are available to persons 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 initiated by the Government of Kerala to extend coverage of health insurance to families which are not covered by the RSBY. Migrant labourers are not covered by this scheme also as they are not eligible for state specific schemes. It is clear that many of the entitlements one has in his home state are unavailable once he cross borders of state even when they are within the same country. This is despite the fact that the Indian federal system envisages full portability of the benefits across the country at least in the case of central government schemes. It appears that there is a need for better coordination between the governments in the host state, states of origin and the central government to make sure that the entitlements of inter-state migrants are not lost on account of migration. The initiative to provide unique identity to citizens may be made use of to address the issue by synergizing it with entitlements of the citizens so that migrant labourers can enjoy their rights wherever they are.

What is the wage structure of the migrants in Kerala? Please give your comments.

The unskilled migrant workers from other states in Kerala are mostly from the rural areas. They were forced to migrate because of the lack of job opportunities and low wages in their villages. They were attracted to Kerala because of high wages and opportunities to year round employment in non-agriculture sectors. Wages in Kerala is the highest among the states in India. According to the NSSO Employment and Unemployment Survey conducted in 2011-12, the average wage rate of male casual workers in the rural areas was only Rs. 124 in both West Bengal and Odisha and Rs. 143 in Assam. The wage rate in Kerala at Rs. 336 is significantly higher than not only the states of origin but also the potential destinations. In fact, the migrant workers in Kerala are getting much more than this now a days. They are getting close to Rs 500 per day. An important policy response to reduce migration from rural areas in India was the

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), the job guarantee scheme initiated by the Union government. But when the difference in the wage rates between states is very high, it becomes almost difficult to arrest the flow of people from one region to another. Moreover, the MGNREGS guarantees employment only for 100 days a year whereas migrant workers in Kerala can get job for 250-300 days. Therefore, the MGNREGS is unlikely to have major influence on the migration from one state to another if the difference in the availability of job opportunities and the wage rates are significantly high.

What can a Portal like SHRAM do to bring researchers in the field together?

The initiative of SHRAM to network researchers on migration is laudable. The purpose of the web portal is to provide well organized scholarly information in a single interface. The portal should be useful to practitioners and policy makers also, it is important that materials useful to them are available in the portal. They may not dig through all the materials available in the portal. Hence to aid them in coming out with policy options and or framing interventions, materials such as best practices and new policies for migrants should find a separate space in the portal. It may be better to place it as a separate title itself in the home page. Since the problems faced by the interstate migrants are often addressed by the destination states and the states of origin separately, it is important that state level initiatives and policies are given importance. It is easier for receiving information on national policies. But getting information on what is being done by respective state governments and by local organizations is much more difficult. The SHRAM web portal has been providing such information but we hope more can be done in this regard.