

LABOUR MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION IN KERALA

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This article employs survey data from the most recent Inter-State Migrant Survey in Kerala (ISMSK) to show how out-of-state migrants are kept isolated from the surrounding community. Migrant workers to Kerala are unable to integrate with local workers and residents to gain important information about local wage levels, worker rights and working standards. Worse, local labour unions are not trying to integrate these workers into the labour market or inform them about local conditions. This lack of integration poses a long-term threat to the strength and viability of the Keralite labour movement, and the larger social model in which it is embedded.

1 INTRODUCTION

“The alleged “advantages that would come to the Socialist movement because of such heartless exclusion [of immigrants] would all be swept away a thousand times by the sacrifice of a cardinal principle of the international socialist movement, for well might the good faith of such a movement be questioned by intelligent workers if it placed itself upon record as barring its doors against the very races most in need of relief, and extinguishing their hope, and leaving them in dark despair at the very time their ears were first attuned to the international call and their hearts were beginning to throb responsive to the solidarity of the oppressed of all lands and all climes beneath the skies’ (Debbs, 1910).”

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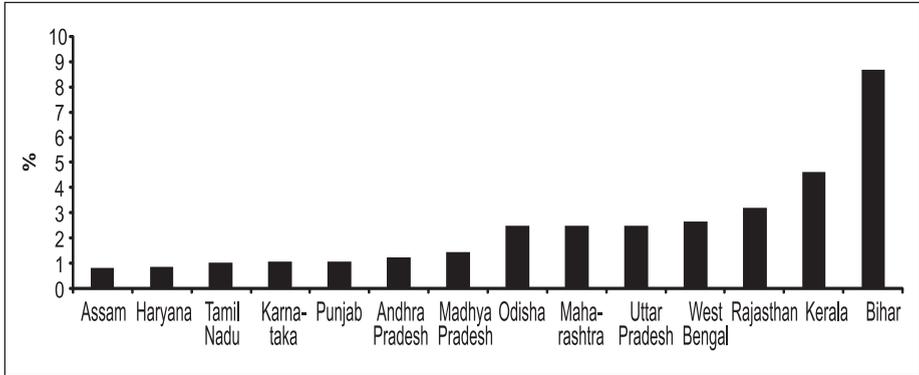
One of the greatest threats and challenges associated with labour migration is the effect that migration has on the bargaining power of local labour. Whether the worker comes from the other side of the globe, or the other side of the country, when s/he enters the local labour force and is willing to work at a lower wage, and/or under less regulated conditions, it forces the local workforce – organized or not – to respond. The question these workers often face is: Should they and their unions try to restrict immigration or should they try to organize these workers and seek their assistance in a common struggle against employers?

While the challenge of immigrant labour is usually noted with reference to international migration (both documented and undocumented) into Europe, North America and Australia, the same tensions can be found among legal migrants from within the same country – as long as the regional economic differences that propel migration are sufficiently large. Indeed, in large, culturally heterogeneous countries, such as in India, the pressures for, and challenges of, labour market integration can be intense.

This paper examines how out-of-state migrants to Kerala are (not) integrating with local labour markets. The labour markets in Kerala are especially interesting, in several regards. First of all, the state of Kerala is known for its success in delivering a relatively high level of human development (e.g. low infant mortality rates and population growth, high levels of literacy and long life expectancy), despite a relatively low level of per capita income (Sandbrook et al., 2007). Second, Kerala has long experienced very high levels of emigration to the Middle East and abroad, and this emigration has generated both wealth, and job opportunities at home.¹ Consequently, Kerala is able to attract inter-state migrants from across the country, lured by the promise of relatively well-paying jobs (compared to their home state). Third, the union movement in Kerala is relatively strong, as evidenced by its high density levels (see Figure 1) and by its stable growth in union members (until recently), compared to the national membership trends (see Figure 2). Finally, Kerala is home to the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Thiruvananthapuram,

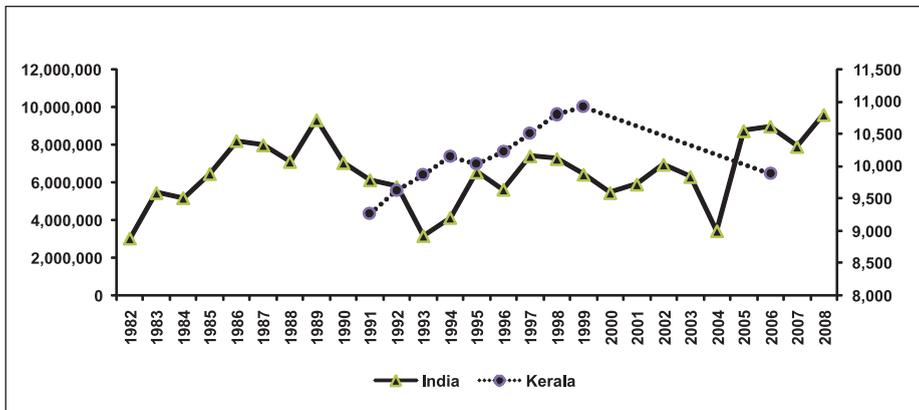
whose Migration (MIG) section has been conducting detailed surveys of migrants in Kerala since the 1980s.

Figure 1
Labour Union Density Rates, Selected States



Source: Alivelu et al., 2011.

Figure 2
Union Membership, Kerala and India



Note: The All-India membership figures correspond to the left-hand axis; the Kerala figures to the right.

Sources: The All-India figures come from India Labour Statistics, *Statistical Abstracts* and *Statistical Year Books* (various years). Most of the Kerala figures come from Varghese (2010); the 2006 figure comes the Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2010, Government of India.

This study draws on the most recent Interstate Migrant Survey in Kerala (ISMSK) survey results, collected over the course of 2012. This survey covered almost 2100 migrants, from across four distinct (city) labour markets and six sectors of employment: casual workers, construction workers, domestic workers, industrial workers, gold (jewellery) workers, as well as those who are self-employed (mostly informal retail traders or street vendors). While the survey was conducted with a much broader objective in mind, this paper's intent is to mine the survey data for evidence of labour market integration. The basic breakdown of the survey respondents, by place and sex, is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Basic Survey Statistics

Sectors	Trivandrum		Ernakulum		Thrissur		Kozhikode		Kerala		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
Construction and road repair	93	10	78	34	73	30	108	21	352	95	447
Self employed	91	2	33	15	68	31	52	9	244	57	301
Casual work	100	5	71	30	34	16	95	14	300	65	365
Industries	79	12	73	24	35	17	51	8	238	61	299
Gold jewellery work	31	0	20	0	147	31	83	0	281	31	312
Hotel industry, cleaners, domestic servants, helpers	100	32	70	31	36	15	63	15	269	93	362
Total	494	61	345	134	393	140	452	67	1684	402	2086
	555		479		533		519		2086		

Source: CDS-ISMSK, 2012.

2 EXPECTATIONS

One of the biggest challenges for contemporary labour unions is how to deal with in-migrant (national) or immigrant (international) workers. Left on their own, these workers can bid down local wages and undermine the bargaining position of local unions (and the gains these have secured). Organizing these workers can require significant effort and resources, as they often speak different languages and have very different work-place experiences and expectations. They can also be susceptible to xenophobia and racism. If organized, however, these workers could share the same benefits as local labourers, and the locals could enjoy a stronger collective voice when making future demands on employers.

From the perspective of local workers (and their unions) in Kerala, then, we can expect to find two distinct strategies when dealing with out-of-state workers. On the one hand, we might distinguish between an *inclusion* strategy—where migrant workers are embraced by the local labour movement, organized, and helped in their common struggle with employers; on the other hand we find an *exclusion* strategy, where efforts are made to restrict the entrance of migrant workers, and these workers are left on their own to deal with local employers.²

In the context of Kerala, where the level of social protection and unionization is relatively high, we might expect, a priori, unions to pursue an inclusion strategy. This strategy would require unions to reach out and organize out-of-state workers (with all the logistical costs that such an endeavour will entail), in hopes that these workers can be informed of local wage levels and protections—as a way of protecting those unionized workers and their local wages. After all, the local union movement has much to lose, when one considers the scope of its success relative to the rest of India.

As a first cut, we can gauge the scope of integration between the local community and out-of-state workers in an attempt to reveal local union strategies. This measure for the level of integration can be used as a surrogate measure for the migrant workers' capacity to obtain information about local wage levels, working conditions and rights. We can then examine the responses to a specific survey question, which asks if workers have been contacted by unions. With these figures in place, we can then begin to see whether the scope of contact varies with the scope of integration, in addition to several individual traits (e.g. skill levels, job-types, age, etc.). This constitutes the basic outline of the empirical data in the section which follows.

Obviously, measuring the degree of local integration and asking migrants about their contact with unions and other worker organizations is not—in itself—sufficient to map out union responses to increased interstate labour migration. In the next phase of research, we will need to spend more time talking directly with union representatives about how they see the nature of the challenges, and how they intend to respond. But this survey evidence provides us with a very good start.

3 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The first thing that strikes the reader when examining the aggregate data is that the migrants surveyed were young men (mean age, 28), from a variety of different educational backgrounds, coming from across India. While 26 per cent of the total migrants never went to school, 33 per cent had basic reading and writing skills, 27 per cent had attended primary school, and 12 per cent had attended secondary school.³ The mean (monthly) income for these workers, across occupational groups, was about ₹ 8,550, or roughly 164 US\$ (127€) at today's rates of exchange.⁴

Table 2
Aggregate Features of Migrant Workers in Kerala

	Total	Male	Mean Age	Level of Education				Mean Income
				None	Reading	Primary	Secondary	
Construction	447	352	28	124	107	148	61	8636
Casual	365	300	29	87	175	49	50	8646
Domestics	362	269	27	76	112	119	33	7399
Industry	299	238	26	54	99	94	45	8290
Self-employed	301	244	29	74	112	85	25	9252
Gold	312	281	30	118	90	74	26	9196
Sum/Average	2086	1684	28	533	695	569	240	8546
%		(80.7)		(25.6)	(33.3)	(27.3)	(11.5)	

Source: CDS-ISMSK, 2012.

These migrants come from the farthest corners of India, whether it is from Kashmir (<0.1%) or Andhra Pradesh (0.4%), as shown in Table 3. Remarkably, most of this migrant labour force did not come from neighbouring states (Karnataka, 0.8%; Tamil Nadu, 18.3%) – the largest sending state was West Bengal (22%), with a significant number of migrants coming from other distant states such as Uttar Pradesh (14.7%) and Bihar (11.5%).

Table 3
Migrant Home State, by Sector

	Casual	Construction	Domestic	Gold	Industry	Self-Employed	Sum	%
Andhra Pradesh	27	37	35	12	19	37	167	(8.0)
Arunachal Pradesh		4	3		1		8	(0.4)
Assam	31	40	33	3	29	16	152	(7.3)
Bengal				1			1	(0.0)
Bihar	55	56	44	23	36	25	239	(11.5)
Chhattisgarh	1						1	(0.0)
Gujarat		4			2	1	7	(0.3)
Jharkhand	5	13			4	5	27	(1.3)
Karnataka	6	5	4		2		17	(0.8)
Kashmir	1						1	(0.0)
Maharashtra	5	3	1	20	4		33	(1.6)
Manipur	1	4	9	1	1	7	23	(1.1)
Meghalaya			1				1	(0.0)
Mizoram		3				3	6	(0.3)
Odisha	64	58	42	19	39	14	236	(11.3)
Punjab	1					1	2	(0.1)
Rajasthan	7	1	2	2		5	17	(0.8)
Tamil Nadu	55	52	85	52	52	85	381	(18.3)
Tripura		2					2	(0.1)
Uttar Pradesh	50	57	38	60	45	56	306	(14.7)
West Bengal	56	108	65	119	65	46	459	(22.0)
Sum	365	447	362	312	299	301	2086	(100)

Source: CDS-ISMSK, 2012.

3.1 Integration

If workers are isolated from the surrounding community it is more difficult for them to find out about the local wage, rights and support systems available to them. When language barriers are high, or when the workers are physically isolated from the surrounding population, then the chances of abuse and exploitation increase. Our first glance at the data is aimed at uncovering general trends in the degree of isolation, concerning: 1) language and local communication; 2) recruitment channels; 3) accommodation and food provision; and 4) political integration.

One important measure of integration is the capacity to speak the local language. Table 4 provides two different measures of the ability for out-of-state workers to glean information about local working conditions from the surrounding population. In the middle 4 columns of Table 4 we find the number (and percentage) of those workers in each sector who know only their mother tongue, and the number of workers who are able to speak Hindi (the principal official language in India) and those who have a working knowledge of the local language in Kerala (Malayalam). Rather remarkably, almost 24 per cent of the migrant work force surveyed was limited to communication in their mother tongue. Indeed, among gold workers, the percentage was even higher (31%). These workers would find it very difficult to establish contact with locals to learn about what the prevailing wages and working regulations might look like. On the right-hand side of this table we find a similar sort of pattern: 14 per cent of these workers do not communicate with the locals, and just under half (49%) are only communicating a little with the local population in Kerala. Under these circumstances, one might expect that migrant workers are especially exposed to misinformation and exploitation by employers, as they will have difficulty learning about the prevailing (local) working wages and conditions.

Table 4
Communication

	Total	Language				Communicate with Locals			
		Mother	% Mother	Hindi	Malayalam	Little	None	% None	Local Language
Construction	447	93	(20.8)	115	55	247	105	(23.5)	95
Casual	365	82	(22.5)	34	49	173	19	(5.2)	173
Domestics	362	100	(27.6)	36	44	190	47	(13.0)	125
Industry	299	55	(18.4)	58	24	138	66	(22.1)	95
Self-employed	301	65	(21.6)	19	37	107	38	(12.6)	156
Gold	312	97	(31.1)	25	11	168	21	(6.7)	117
Total	2086	492		287	220	1023	296		761
%		(23.6)		(13.8)	(10.5)	(49.0)	(14.2)		(36.5)

Note: For languages, the survey asked which languages were known: only mother tongue, Hindi, working knowledge of Malayalam, or other); as for communication, the question asked how they communicated with local people (to which they could respond: little, none, or had learned the local language).

Source: CDS-ISMSK, 2012.

In the next table, Table 5, we consider how these workers were recruited to work in Kerala, and whether they have any previous experience working in Kerala's job markets. Most of the workers, 73 per cent on average, came to Kerala as part of a group, even though most of them (75%) were not recruited by labour contractors, employers or agents. Significantly, 79 per cent were working in Kerala for the first time. Here too we find an indication that migrant workers often arrived as part of a group, were likely unfamiliar with the labour market in Kerala, and were not recruited by the sort of people (employers, contractors, agents) who we can presume would have accurate information about the conditions in Kerala's labour markets (although they may not have an incentive to share that information with the migrant workers).

Table 5
Recruitment

	Total	Individual Migration, via		First Job in Kerala		Recruitment Mode			
		Single	Group	Yes	No	Contractor	Employer	Self	Agents
Construction	447	80	358	338	109	143	6	278	20
%		(17.9)	(80.1)	(75.6)	(24.4)	(32.0)	(1.3)	(62.2)	(4.5)
Casual	365	99	253	270	95	13	9	327	16
%		(27.1)	(69.3)	(74.0)	(26.0)	(3.6)	(2.5)	(89.6)	(4.4)
Domestics	362	97	261	287	75	2	50	280	30
%		(26.8)	(72.1)	(79.3)	(20.7)	(0.6)	(13.8)	(77.3)	(8.3)
Industry	299	53	238	252	47	37	27	207	28
%		(17.7)	(79.6)	(84.3)	(15.7)	(12.4)	(9.0)	(69.2)	(9.4)
Self-employed	301	75	211	243	58	32	14	251	4
%		(24.9)	(70.1)	(80.7)	(19.3)	(10.6)	(4.7)	(83.4)	(1.3)
Gold	312	104	197	265	47	26	38	213	35
%		(33.3)	(63.1)	(84.9)	(15.1)	(8.3)	(12.2)	(68.3)	(11.2)
Total	2086	508	1518	1655	431	253	144	1556	133
%		(24.4)	(72.8)	(79.3)	(20.7)	(12.1)	(6.9)	(74.6)	(6.4)

Note: The first two columns (on Individual Migration) focus only on individual migrants (basically people who have left their families at home), but such individuals can migrate by themselves, with other friends, or by any other means. In other words, these responses focus exclusively on the migrants' mode of arrival at the destination. The purpose behind these questions is to understand whether migration across long distances is done by a single individual or whether it is part of a group initiative. The right-hand column responses, on 'Recruitment Mode', are concerned with how the migrants were recruited: either through an agent, a contractor, or directly through the employer or by him/herself. 'Self' here implies s/he found the job by herself/himself (an intermediary played no role).

Source: CDS-ISMSK, 2012.

Table 6 describes the workers' reliance on employers for both food and accommodation. On average, over 40 per cent of these workers live at their place of employment, which means they will have limited contact with the outside world. Not surprisingly, this figure is highest among domestic workers (60.8%), but it is fairly

consistent across the other sectors (except the casuals, who are more likely (73.2%) to live off-site). Similarly, most workers (61.9%) did not get their food from employers – but certain groups (especially domestics) were very dependent on their employers for providing food. Although a majority of workers did live away from the worksite, and got their food from other sources, 37 per cent of these workers were heavily dependent on their jobs to secure accommodations and food. This does not bode well for integration in the local community – as many workers have no reason to actually leave the worksite!

Table 6
Accommodation

	Total	Accommodation		Food provided by employer	
		Off-site	Worksite	Yes	No
Construction	447	274	173	94	353
%		(61.3)	(38.7)	(21.0)	(79.0)
Casual	365	267	98	46	319
%		(73.2)	(26.8)	(12.6)	(87.4)
Domestics	362	142	220	342	20
%		(39.2)	(60.8)	(94.5)	(5.5)
Industry	299	173	126	81	218
%		(57.9)	(42.1)	(27.1)	(72.9)
Self-employed	301	195	106	59	221
%		(64.8)	(35.2)	(19.6)	(73.4)
Gold	312	174	138	152	160
%		(55.8)	(44.2)	(48.7)	(51.3)
Total	2086	1225	861	771	1291
%		(58.7)	(41.3)	(37.0)	(61.9)

Note: The Accommodation question asked if they lived outside or in the workshop; the food question asked if food was provided to the migrant by the employer (Yes/No).

Source: CDS-ISMSK, 2012.

Joining a union is only one way of gaining protection and support in an unfamiliar labour market. There are other organizations and measures that exist to protect workers as well, and it is interesting to see if migrant workers enjoy access to these. Table 7 lists four different measures of political integration. Toward the left of the table, we find that a shockingly high percentage (99.4%) of migrant workers is unaware of the migrant organizations that exist to protect and help them. Similarly, almost 98 per cent were not members of a Welfare Fund Board – these are Boards which the State of Kerala’s Labour Department uses to organize many of its welfare measures. In addition, most (98.2%) of these workers are not in possession of a ration card (for securing subsidized food stuffs). Remarkably, almost 24 per cent of the workers do not have the ID cards which employers are required to supply as part of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act of 1979.

Table 7
Political Integration

	Total	Awareness of Migrant Orgs.		Welfare Fund Board		Ration Card		ID Card	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Construction	447	0	447	6	441	3	447	304	143
%		(0)	(100)	(1.3)	(98.7)	(0.7)	(99.3)	(68.0)	(32.0)
Casual	365	0	365	0	365	9	356	254	111
%		(0)	(100)	(0)	(100)	(2.5)	(97.5)	(69.6)	(30.4)
Domestics	362	0	362	1	361	4	358	277	85
%		(0)	(100)	(0.3)	(99.7)	(1.1)	(98.9)	(76.5)	(23.5)
Industry	299	1	298	5	294	2	297	224	75
%		(0.3)	(99.7)	(1.7)	(98.3)	(0.7)	(99.3)	(74.9)	(25.1)
Self-employed	301	3	298	6	295	8	293	251	50
%		(1.0)	(99.0)	(2.0)	(98.0)	(2.7)	(97.3)	(83.4)	(16.6)
Gold	312	8	304	26	286	14	298	279	33
%		(2.6)	(97.4)	(8.3)	(91.7)	(4.5)	(95.5)	(89.4)	(10.6)
Total	2086	12	2074	44	2042	40	2049	1589	497
%		(0.6)	(99.4)	(2.1)	(97.9)	(1.9)	(98.2)	(76.2)	(23.8)

Source: CDS-ISMSK, 2012.

Along each of these four measures of integration, we find migrant workers isolated from the local population, and poorly positioned to secure information about local working conditions, wage levels, and the rights and benefits available to them while living in Kerala. These workers are vulnerable to exploitation as they have little recourse to good information about the rights they enjoy, or the prevailing wages and regulations in the local labour market. In short, these workers are in desperate need of support from fellow workers. Worse, their condition of ignorance can be used to undermine the long-term position of local labour providers in Kerala. In this light, the question is: are these desperate workers being approached by unions?

3.2 Union Contact

Of the 2086 migrants surveyed, from this broad spectrum of professions, only 65 workers, or just 3 per cent, had been approached by a local union (see Table 8). When we look at where these workers were employed, we find that most of the workers approached by unions were either self-employed (52%) or working in the industrial sector (25%). When we look closer at the patterns of contact in these two industries (in Table 9), we find few discernible patterns.

Table 8
Union Contact, Number (%)

	Total	Approached by Local Union?	
		Yes	No
Construction %	447	4 (6.2)	443
Casual %	365	3 (4.6)	362
Domestics %	362	1 (1.5)	361
Industry %	299	16 (24.6)	283
Self employed %	301	34 (52.3)	267
Gold %	312	7 (10.8)	305
Total	2086	65	2021
%		(3.1)	(96.9)

Note: Respondents were asked 'Do local unions approach you?'

Source: CDS-ISMSK, 2012.

Most of the 34 self-employed migrants contacted by a union were male (26), but they came from varied educational and language backgrounds, as shown in Table 9. Of interest may be the fact that most of these workers lived off the job site (this is more common among self-employed workers than among the other groups), and were responsible for getting their own food. It is also interesting to note that workers contacted by unions were more likely than the average migrant to be members of a Welfare Board (5.9% vs. 2%) and to have ration cards (5.9% vs. 2%), but less likely to have ID cards (32% vs. 76%).

Table 9
Union Contacts

	Total	Male	Level of Education				Integration Factors					
			None	Reading	Primary	Secondary	Lived Off-Site	Bought their Own Food	Members of other organizations	Welfare Board Members	Ration Cards	ID cards
Self-employed	34	26	10	10	10	3	34	21	2	2	2	11
%		(76.5)	(29.4)	(29.4)	(29.4)	(8.8)	(100)	(61.8)	(5.9)	(5.9)	(5.9)	(32.4)
Industry	16	13	6	3	6	1	9	8	0	0	0	4
%		(81.3)	(37.5)	(18.8)	(37.5)	(6.3)	(56.3)	(50.0)	(0)	(0)	(0)	(25.0)

Source: CDS-ISMSK, 2012.

The pattern among industrial workers was similar in terms of individual characteristics (mostly male, and with varied educational background), but these workers were less integrated than the self-employed workers who had been contacted by unions. For example, almost 44 per cent of these workers lived at the job site, and almost half of them had their food provided by the employer. None of the industrial workers who had been contacted by a union were members of other organizations, members of a Welfare Board, or had ration cards; and only 25 per cent (compared to 76 of the total migrant sample) had ID cards.

4 CONCLUSION

The CDS-ISMSK (2012) survey data reveals how migrant workers are largely isolated from the local community. Lacking local language skills, and often confined to the worksite, these workers will have difficulty learning about the rights afforded to them in Kerala, or about the level of prevailing wages and protection. This ignorance allows workers to be exploited, in that they can be kept unaware of the fact that local workers are enjoying higher wages and more protections (and that they too could enjoy these). For the migrants—unaware of the local labour market—the relative standard of comparison for many is the (lower) wages and working conditions offered in their home labour markets, far away.

While the individual migrant workers may be satisfied with earning a higher wage than can be earned at home, their willingness to underbid local wages will have an effect on the long-term position of workers in Kerala. In short, these workers are sacrificing their long-term class interests in return for short-term individual gains. In this light, it is remarkable that labour unions have been so ineffective, or uninterested, in reaching out to these workers. This needs to become a new focus of attention and organization for local unions in Kerala. Should these conditions persist over time, one can only expect that the privileged position of organized labour in Kerala (relative to the rest of India) will be undermined by this new source of (unorganised and uninformed) labour.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., Zachariah and Rajan (2009); Rajan (2010, 2011) and Rajan et al. (2011).
2. This dichotomy in strategies might also be described in terms of a long-term versus a short-term strategy.
3. This corresponds, roughly, with the national averages, where about 22 per cent of the population is illiterate; 69 per cent has received up to secondary level education; and 9 per cent has received education above the secondary level. For the national figures, see NSSO (2009, 10:27).

4. To provide some points of comparison: in 2006, the average monthly salary in India for a worker in the manufacturing sector was ₹ 3,525.9 (ILO, 2012). Devonshire-Ellis (2012) reports that the current average monthly minimum wages are ₹ 3,720 (Chennai); ₹ 8,112 (Delhi), ₹ 5,702 (Mumbai) and ₹ 4,620 (Kolkata).

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