



Labour Migration to Kerala: Challenges, Opportunities and Need for an Institutional Response

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1. Rise in Labour Migration to Kerala

In the recent decades, Kerala has emerged as a prominent migrant hotspot with a growing significance in India's migration story. While migration away from Kerala has often been written about and discussed, the large influx of workers into Kerala has received much lesser attention. It is estimated that Kerala has over 2.5 million migrant workers from other states of India, and from Bangladesh and Nepal - a number that is notably close to about 7 per cent of the state's current populationⁱ.

A review of the macro-economic indicators of the Kerala economy suggests that a major demographic transition in the state caused due to declining fertility rates and an increasingly ageing population significantly reduced the overall availability of labour supply, accentuating in-migration. Paradoxically high unemployment rates have also been a persistent feature of Kerala's development trajectory.ⁱⁱ While the overall unemployment situation has been severe, there are jobs in the unorganized sector completely vacated by local labour. Monumental strides made by the state in the sphere of education also resulted in a state of delayed entry or complete withdrawal of local labour from many work sectorsⁱⁱⁱ. While high rates of emigration of Keralites to destinations outside Kerala resulted in a huge vacuum in the state's labour market, their remittances spurred a construction boom which created a heavy demand for unskilled as well as skilled workforce. All these factors, coupled with very high wage rates, which amount to almost double the national average^{iv}, have together contributed to a high magnitude of labour in-migration that the state has experienced in recent decades.

2. Shift in Migration Patterns: From Tamil Nadu to the Arrival of 'Bhais'

From the mid-1970s onwards, workers from Tamil Nadu came to occupy a crucial position in Kerala's construction economy - low or stagnant per capita availability of employment in both the agricultural and industrial sectors in Tamil Nadu coupled with the spurt of growth in construction activity triggered such migration.^v

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The 90s witnessed a shift in the pattern of migration to Kerala. A stream of migration from states beyond south India evolved rapidly. These single male migrants are popularly known as 'Bhais' in Kerala. The emergence of Perumbavoor in Ernakulam district in Kerala as a plywood manufacturing hub in India in 1996 initially attracted migrants from Odisha and Assam and subsequently from West Bengal.^{vi} This was largely driven by social networks of migrants already arrived. Many multinational companies also mobilized and recruited labourers through contractors from north Indian states like Bihar and West Bengal to work in their infrastructure projects in Kerala.^{vii} The entrepreneurs in Kerala preferred migrants from northern/eastern India over migrant workers from Tamil Nadu because they came single, were less expensive, more hardworking and relatively available throughout the year.^{viii} Data on migration from the 55th round of National Sample Survey (2000) reveals that Kerala ranks first among the migrant receiving states in southern India in terms of internal labour migration.^{ix}

3. Estimates of Inter-state Migrant Workers in Kerala

A study commissioned by the Department of Labour and Skills, Government of Kerala estimated over 2.5 million inter-state migrant workers in the state in 2013 with a net addition of 182,000 workers per year.^x While construction sector absorbed a sizeable majority of the migrants, manufacturing as well as hotel industry were also found to significantly engage migrant labour. This study, based on long distance trains terminating in Kerala did not cover workers from neighbouring states who use other modes of transport, indicating that the actual number of inter-state migrant workers could be much more than 2.5 million in 2013. Extrapolating the growth of the migrant population based on the 2013 estimation of Department of Labour and Skills, by 2016, there could be about 3.5 to 4 million migrant labourers from other states in Kerala.

Preliminary findings from a mapping of migration in the state conducted during December 2016 revealed that migrant workers have penetrated almost all economic sectors in the state. In 2016, two major migration streams found present across cities in Kerala were labourers from Tamil Nadu as well as those who reported their source states as 'West Bengal'.^{xi} Workers from Assam, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand are also widely present along with undocumented emigrants from Bangladesh. Construction and infrastructure development, hospitality, fishing as well as farm sectors throughout Kerala depend to a great extent on migrant workers. Iron and steel industry in Palakkad district, footwear industry in Kozhikode, quarries in Malappuram district, plywood Industry in Ernakulam district, fish processing in Alappuzha, plantations in Idukki, apparel parks in Thiruvananthapuram and brick kilns in Kollam district predominantly depend on migrant workers. While migrant workers from Tamil Nadu come as single or couples, migration from north India is dominated by single male migrants from backward communities in rural areas, representing the classical features of long distance migration.^{xii}

4. Working Conditions of Migrant Workers

Labour migrants to Kerala, similar to other major destinations in the country, have come to occupy vocations that are often avoided by the native workers. These low skilled, low value jobs call for ardent physical labour and expose the workers to elevated risk of accidents/injuries and death.^{xiii} A significant proportion of the migrant workers do not have access to required preventive gears that will reduce their vulnerabilities to health risks. Helmets, masks, chest guards, gloves, spectacles, shoes, thermal insulators,

safety nets, etc. are seldom deployed. Their lack of awareness and the resultant complacency is leveraged by the employers who perceive such investments as 'unnecessary'. Besides, the emergency response systems of such workplaces generally tend to be weak or nominal. The eight hour work schedule is seldom applicable to migrants who on an average work about ten to twelve hours.^{xiv} The workplaces of migrants also generally lack sufficient rest rooms, lockers, first aid or for that matter sufficient ventilation and lighting.

5. Conditions of Employment, Living Arrangements and Social Protection

In many sectors, migrant workers are usually engaged through a labour contractor to whom the work has been outsourced by a principal employer. This contractor is often a migrant worker to whom payments are made on a piece rate/bulk basis. By doing so, the employers escape from the burden of providing the worker benefits such as Employees State Insurance (ESI), Provident Fund, Gratuity, etc. The workers are not engaged through a written contract, but rather through a verbal agreement on the wages. However, many a times, such fluidity in employment result in non-payments, part-payments or lesser than agreed wage payments. Aggrieved workers, given their limited access to information and grievance redressal mechanisms coupled with the language barriers, have no other recourse than parting with their hard-earned money.

Most of the labour legislations are not complied with by the employers in the case of migrant workers. The Interstate Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 is applicable to only a section of migrant workers in Kerala as most of them are not recruited by a contractor at the state of origin. Besides, the law has not been strictly enforced. Similar is the case of most of the other legislations related to social protection of workers.

Most migrant workers live in makeshift camps, cramped rooms or other shared accommodation akin to slums with limited lighting and ventilation and no separate kitchen. Available evidence also suggests that access to safe water and sanitation facilities are also poor.^{xv} For the shared accommodation, migrants are charged high on rental, disproportionate to the facilities provided. The congested living conditions make these migrants highly vulnerable to diseases such as Tuberculosis. Their access to certified health providers is constrained by the work timings and language barriers and hence practices such as buying medicines over the counter are widely prevalent. Most workers are neither aware of organizations working with migrant workers nor have membership in welfare funds in Kerala.^{xvi} The trade unions in Kerala are yet to undertake significant action to mainstream the migrant workers.^{xvii,xviii}

As has been the case in other high in-migration states, there is a growing suspicion among local public of workers from other states in Kerala. The media projection of in-migration as a population, law-order and public health crisis may erode the sensitivity in the Kerala society that has been amply showed in the case of hardships of Keralite workers abroad.^{xix}

6. Key Recommendations for Policy Uptake

Following are some key recommendations that may be initiated and anchored by the Department of Labour and Skills, Government of Kerala in order to enhance the work and living conditions of the many

millions of labour migrants in the state. These are based on policy proposals that are under active consideration of state governments in other high migration corridors of the country:

a. Instituting “Kerala Migrant Labour Protection and Welfare Authority”: The scale and diversity of the migrant workforce in Kerala calls for the creation of an empowered Authority/Board that combines regulatory, vigilance and welfare functions. The suggestion is not to set up a separate department but for the institution of such an Authority / Board within the purview of the Department of Labour and Skills. Its major functions would include the following:

- Gathering of data on migrant workers through a system of voluntary registration and enrollment followed by the issuance of a verified ID card. This may be undertaken in partnership with Local Self Government institutions and or civil society organizations at the panchayat, block or district levels throughout the state.
- Designing and overseeing the implementation of dedicated social security schemes for migrant workers.
- Advocating for mainstreaming the rights of migrant workers and their access to entitlements in health, food, education along with their inclusion in key schemes of the Kerala government.
- Activating linkages with key migrant employing industries with a special focus on vulnerable migration streams.
- Maintaining active linkages and coordination with key source states for grievance redressal, legal aid and linkages with schemes for migrant workers.

b. Establishing Dedicated Facilitation Centres for Migrant Workers: On account of their frequent mobility, migrant workers require structures that they can easily access in their usual migration corridors. Facilitation centres for migrant workers in key migrant hotspots are very useful in this regard. These centres can offer migrant workers with a number of services – registration, photo ID, information, social security linkages, financial inclusion, grievance redress and emergency support. These may be set up in partnership with Local Self Government institutions or civil society organizations.

c. Creation of Fast- Track Mechanisms for Protection of Worker Rights: Any framework for support of migrant workers must rest on effective regulation, vigil and a swift redress system to address their issues. A special desk to register and act upon complaints of workers in distress may be set up at sub-district/district level to ensure that the workers are not forced to remain silent or helpless in the face of fraudulence or manipulative work arrangements. Most workers' cases are likely to be relatively “small ticket” and hence will remain unlikely candidates for litigation, which in any case is a complicated and indeterminate process given the state of Labour Courts as well as the generally poor compliance to their rulings. In these cases, the format of mediation done within a credible paralegal framework is likely to be more effective.

Phone based Labour Helpline services for migrant workers can help open up the gateway to distressed workers in need of counseling, support and urgent action, especially in scenarios such as deaths or serious workplace accidents. Experiences from the Labour Line set up by Aajeevika Bureau suggest that this forum for redress of grievances and guidance is highly impactful.

d. High Priority Programme Interventions for Migrant Workers: In order to render the pursuit of livelihoods in cities more dignified and transformative, the state may introduce the following programme interventions on a priority basis:

- **Low Cost Accommodation on Sharing Basis:** With a view to address the sub-optimal quality of living conditions that a vast majority of the migrant workers persist in and its implications on the public health scenario, the state may ensure low cost rented accommodation for migrant workers on a sharing basis in high migrant density clusters. Minimal rent could be charged from them on a daily basis. Provision of a mess to provide cheap and healthy food may also be included as part of the accommodation arrangements.
- **Community Kitchens:** Migrant workers are often unable to access low-cost fuel options including Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), since it is relatively expensive and they do not possess the requisite proofs of residence; this ends up being a big drain on their hard earned money. The state government may setup community kitchens in residential settlements of migrant workers. These may be equipped with stoves and LPG cylinders for which workers may be charged a nominal fee.
- **Low Cost Diagnostic and Curative Facilities:** Migrants workers are exposed to multiple health risks including communicable diseases like malaria and tuberculosis, and occupational health hazards, including accidents and injuries at work places. Alien to the city and its healthcare systems, and possessing limited liquidity, they defer seeking care when ill. To address this, the state may set up low cost diagnostic and curative facilities for migrant workers at major destinations. Apart from the assessment and treatment of common ailments, these facilities may be equipped with screening for occupational diseases such as asthma, tuberculosis, skin allergy, etc. These clinics could also have diagnostic facilities for life-threatening conditions such as HIV and cancer and may be equipped to refer more serious patients to relevant government/private hospitals in cases of emergencies. In the case of private health care providers, the referrals may provide for either subsidized, low-cost or free treatment depending on the financial condition of the worker. Health awareness camps/meetings may also be organized from time to time at the work sites or the residential settlements of migrant workers where information regarding promotive and preventive health practices could be given to the migrant community.

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ⁱⁱThe 4th Round of Report on Employment & Unemployment Survey, 2013-14, Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour & Employment, and Government of India shows that Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in Kerala is 49.7%, compared to a national average of 52.25%, with the rural LFPR in Kerala being exceptionally low at 50.6%.

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About Us:

Aajeevika Bureau is a specialized public service initiative working to promote the wellbeing and advancement of rural migrant workers in the South Rajasthan-Gujarat migration corridor. It offers a range of services to migrant workers and their families- photo ID, skill training and placement, legal aid and literacy, social security linkages, financial inclusion and health services. Centre for Migration and Labour Solutions is a dedicated unit within Aajeevika Bureau that does specialized research and policy work on issues related to seasonal migration in India.

Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID) is an independent non-profit organization with a focus on migration and inclusive development. Set up in 2016 by a fraternity of international development experts, CMID provides evidence informed solutions for mainstreaming inter-state migrant workers in Kerala.

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