



INTER-STATE LABOUR MIGRATION TO KERALA: KERALA'S DYNAMIC LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract

Migration in general, internal or inter-state, labor migration is an age-old phenomenon in India. People are mostly compelled to migrate due to driven or pull factors and distress factors or push factors. The massive labor shortage in the informal sector and the subsequent demand for labor for unskilled economic activities accompanied by much higher wages made Kerala a migrant central state. This paper synthesizes the literature on interstate migrant workers in Kerala and presents the outcomes from various studies conducted over the past years. The results have important implications for social development, future research, and policy implementation recommendations.

Keywords: *Interstate Migration, Internal Migrant Labors, Rural-urban migration, Labor Migration.*

Migration is a multidimensional phenomenon; it is to a great extent linked to the development process of a country or a region. Historically migration has been significantly low in the Indian subcontinent. The prevalence of the age-old caste system, caste-based occupational restrictions, joint family, traditional values, cultural differences, diversity of languages, etc., contributed to the low internal migration in India during the early periods. However, with rapid changes in the Indian economy, modernization, advancements in communication, technology, and transportation have influenced the internal movement of people, especially since the 1990s. The transition in age structure, high literacy level, higher out-migration, mainly to gulf countries and other European countries, consequent flow remittances in large volume, etc., brought socio-economic transformation in the society, especially in its labor market. Also, this gave rise to the flow of large-scale labor migration to the state. Shortage of workers in the labor market and subsequent rise in the wage rate attracted workers from all over India and even from adjacent nations to fill the gap in some segments of the labor market. The contemporary situation of Kerala is quite paradoxical; it is now facing a considerable inflow of remittances caused for a reverse flow of remittances to other regions within the country.

The Evolution of Labour Migration to Kerala

Kerala has been an in-migrant state ever since its formation. The massive labor shortage in the informal sector and the subsequent demand for labor for unskilled economic activities accompanied by much higher wages yet again made Kerala a migrant central state. Tamil migrant workers have come to Kerala from the 1970s onwards to occupy the employment opportunities, especially in the construction sector other than brick kilns, tea and rubber plantation, etc. (Anand, 1986). The interstate migration to Kerala has increased significantly from the past decade onwards. Almost half of the male migrants and approximately 10 percent of the female in-migrants came to Kerala for work in the past decade (Peter & Gupta, 2012).

The labor migration from outside the southern states of India started with the arrival of Odisha workers to the timber industries at Perumbavoor in Ernakulam district. The plywood industries at Perumbavoor are one of Kerala's significant manufacturing hubs. However, the industry could not employ its workers regularly due to a shortage of workers because of low wages. Even the native workers had the slightest interest in working in timber mill industries due to these reasons (peter &



Gupta, 2012). The employers did not prefer the Tamil workers even though they were locally available. Therefore, to resolve the issues, the sawmill owners transported cheap migrant laborers from places where they supplied their products (CMID Report, 2017). There has been a high migration rate of inter-state laborers to Kerala from then onwards. The employers preferred migrants from the eastern states of India over Tamil workers because they came single, were less expensive, more obedient and hardworking, and available throughout the year (Deepika & Savadatti, 2018).

The emergence of iron and steel factories in the 1990s at Kanjikkode in the Palakkad district of Kerala marked the beginning of the arrival of Bihari workers. The breakdown of forest-based plywood industries in Assam ended their monopoly in this sector and made Perumbavoor in Ernakulam a significant hub of plywood units in India (Deepika, 2021). These circumstances led to the considerable flow of workers from Assam to Kerala, apart from Orissa. Gradually unskilled workers from West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, and other north and northeastern states arrived in Kerala. Though plywood industries witnessed the new stream of in-migration first, later, it spread all over Kerala irrespective of the sectors.

Migrant Labors in Kerala

The statistical data about migrant workers in Kerala is very limited. Even though there are various studies done on this area, most of them are small in depth case studies about migrant workers. The stock of the migrant labor in Kerala is estimated to be around twenty-five lakhs (CMID, 2017). Presently the number of migrant workers in Kerala is found to be larger than the emigrants from Kerala. The study also found that the interstate migrants working in Kerala are largely male workforce aged between 18 and 35 years. There are around 454 million internal migrants in India, according to the 2011 census, which account for 37% of the total population, and in Kerala, this percentage is 48.9%. One out of two persons in Kerala is an internal migrant (Mishra & Rajan, 2018). Female migrants either come to Kerala as a result of marriage or for employment and higher wages. Majority of them belong to poor socio-economic backgrounds, they use friends, family members or relatives networks as the main channels of migration (Narayana et al., 2013).

Table 1. State-wise distribution of registered migrant workers in Kerala

States	No. of registered migrants
Assam	5,364
Bihar	4,829
Jharkhand	1,427
West Bengal	23,713
Uttar Pradesh	1,279
Tamil Nadu	1,597
Karnataka	3,859
Total	42,068

Source: Kerala building and other construction workers welfare board, 2015

Majority of the migrant workers in Kerala are from Bihar, Assam, West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (Narayana et al., 2013). Table 1. provides the state-wise distribution of registered migrant workers in Kerala according to the report published by Kerala Building and other construction workers welfare board, 2015. The highest number of registered



migrant workers are from West Bengal (23,713), followed by Assam (5,364) and Bihar (4,829). The number of registered migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh is significantly low (1,279). However, the table represents only the count of registered migrant workers. The actual statistics, including the registered and unregistered migrant workers in Kerala, are significantly high.

Table 2, Basic Survey Statistics

Sectors	Trivandrum		Ernakulam		Thrissur		Kozhikode		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Hotels, Domestic Works etc	100	32	70	31	36	15	63	15	269	362
Casual Work	100	5	71	30	34	16	95	14	300	365
Construction	93	10	78	34	73	30	108	21	352	447
Industries	79	12	73	24	35	17	51	8	238	299
Self Employed	91	2	33	15	68	31	52	9	244	301
Casual Work	100	5	71	30	34	16	95	14	300	365
Jewellery Work	31	0	20	0	147	31	83	0	281	312
Hotels, Domestic Works etc	100	32	70	31	36	15	63	15	269	362
Total	494	61	345	134	393	140	452	67	1684	2086
	555		479		533		519		2086	

Source: CDS-ISMSK, 2012.

Table 2. Shows the gender-wise statistics of migrant workers in four main districts in Kerala. According to the data, Trivandrum has the highest number of migrant workers in Kerala, i.e., 555, followed by Thrissur (533), Kozhikode (519), and Ernakulam (479). The data represents that most migrants work in construction and road works (447) and are employed in casual jobs (365). The actual count of male and female migrants is also shown in Table 2. More female migrant workers are found in Thrissur (140) and Ernakulam (134). Thiruvananthapuram has only 61 female migrant workers as per the data shown in Table 2.

Table 3. District wise distribution of registered migrant workers in Kerala

Districts	No of registered migrant workers
Trivandrum	1,763
Kollam	985
Pathanamthitta	2,295
Alappuzha	2,264



Kottayam	3,618
Idukki	1,142
Ernakulam	8,752
Thrissur	3,841
Palakkad	3,255
Malappuram	2,584
Kozhikode	4,377
Wayanad	6,632
Kannur	5,963
Kasargod	4,138
Total	51609

Source: Kerala building and other construction workers welfare board, 2015

Table 3. Depicts the distribution of registered migrant workers in Kerala. It is evident from the table above that the Ernakulam district holds the highest number of registered migrant workers (8,752). Northern districts like Wayanad (6,632), Kannur (5,963), Kozhikode (4,377), and Kasargod (4,138) are the other significant districts that show a higher rate of registered migrants after Ernakulam. As per the data, Kollam and Idukki have the least number of registered migrant populations, i.e., 985 and 1,142, respectively.

Social Security and challenges.

Though the Kerala government emphasizes the importance of the registration of migrant workers and has implemented various programs to fulfill this duty, the number of undocumented migrant workers in Kerala is more than the number of registered migrant workers. They have a poor socio-economic and educational background. Since most of them arrive in Kerala searching for better wages through friends or family networks, they usually do not voluntarily register anywhere. Most migrant workers are more prone to diseases due to unhealthy living conditions. The government of Kerala has introduced several welfare measures for migrant workers for their skill development, health, safe working conditions, and better economic security. However, lack of knowledge regarding the programs and measures, illiteracy, and language barrier, most migrant workers are unaware of the same and are excluded from these welfare programs.

Conclusion

The reluctance of Malayalees to take up low-skilled and low-paid jobs in their native place widened the labor gap and elevated the wage rates in Kerala. At present. The daily wage rate of manual workers in the state ranges from a minimum of 600 rupees to 1,000 rupees in general, while migrants demand only 300 rupees to a maximum of 600 rupees. For them, it is considerably better than the wages that they receive in their native place. Besides the high wage rate., constant availability of job opportunities, better living conditions, and a friendly atmosphere in Kerala have transformed the state into a hub of migrant workers. However, an uncontrollable inflow of laborers and their disorganized distribution in different employment sectors and poor living conditions will give rise to a myriad of



problems for the state and its people in the near future. High rate of immigration will quickly fill a densely populated state like Kerala with slums.

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