

## Socio-Economic Problems of Unorganized Interstate Migrant Workers in Kerala: A Qualitative Study

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Migration as a human phenomenon having historical roots and wider implication has always existed in India. Migration is an integral part of population dynamics. Struggle for survival and the desire for a better life has ever remained the stimulating and stirring force behind migration. Internal migration is a survival strategy for millions of rural people. India's internal migration is four times more than the international migration with about 100 million internal migrants, which is about one-fifth of India's labour force. Kerala remains one of the most sought after destinations by unskilled interstate migrants with its high wage rates and sustained availability of job opportunities. The state with significantly high human development index has seen a complex demographic transition and its consequences leading to low availability of native labour force for unskilled, low-valued jobs. According to Post Disaster Need Assessment Report 2018, Kerala has about 3.5 million inter-state migrant workers. Migration even though primarily for economic reasons have wide social, political, cultural, environmental and health implications. Migrant population, being a non-native population, is vulnerable and is exposed to many social problems like social discrimination and stigma, economic exploitation, political exclusion, lack of access to quality health services, lack of safe and decent working and living conditions, lack of access to justice and exclusion from social benefits and welfare schemes. In this backdrop, this study intends to qualitatively explore the socio-economic problems faced by unorganized interstate migrant workers in Kerala.

**Keywords:** Interstate Migrants, Unorganized Workers, Socio-economic Problems, Vulnerability of Migrant Workers

### INTRODUCTION

Migration is the movement of people from one place to another. Migration as a human phenomenon having historical roots and wider implication has always existed in India. Migration is an integral part of population dynamics. Struggle for survival and the desire for a better life has ever remained the stimulating and stirring force behind migration. Internal migration is a survival strategy for millions of rural people (**Laczko & Aghazarm, 2009**). India's internal migration is four times more than the international migration with about 100 million internal migrants, which is about one-fifth of India's labour force (**Economic Survey of India, 2017**).

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human development index has seen a complex demographic transition and its consequences leading to low availability of native labour force for unskilled, low-valued jobs (**Parida et al., 2020**). According to Post Disaster Need Assessment Report 2018, Kerala has about 3.5 million inter-state migrant workers (**PDNA, 2018**). There are four broad employment arrangements for migrant labour in Kerala, namely, footloose migrant labour, informal employee, formal employee, and confined labour. While these four groups do not preclude each other, they clarify the distinct labour dynamics (**Peter & Narendran, 2017**).

Among the four categories of workers mentioned above majority of them work under unorganized sector and these migrant workers are highly vulnerable. These workers are free to choose the type of work, job location, and have reasonable bargaining power over their wages. But their chances of getting work every day are highly unpredictable. They are totally unorganized and have no one to speak and act on their behalf. It is a fact that there is a lot of prejudice against the migrant workers (**United Nations Human Rights, 2014**). Labour migration is more a requirement of the state than that of migrant workers themselves, and it is essential to raise awareness among key stakeholders. Every effort must be made to introduce inclusive migrant development (**Peter & Narendran, 2017**). In this backdrop, this study intends to qualitatively explore the socio-economic conditions faced by unorganized interstate migrant workers in Kerala.

## **METHODS AND MATERIALS**

### **Study Setting**

The study was undertaken to develop a comprehensive understanding about the socio-economic conditions of the unorganized migrant workers and the problems faced by them in Kerala. The study was carried out in Ernakulam District of Kerala. Ernakulam district has the highest number of interstate migrant population in Kerala state. According to Kerala's Post Disaster Need Assessment Report 2018, the migrant population in the study city is about 6.03 lakhs. Rapport was established among this population before conducting the study. For establishing rapport, researcher approached the population through an NGO working for the welfare of this community. Several meetings were organized with the help of the NGO personnel. Subsequently, researcher made several visits and had light talks with the people on general issues. Thus, the researcher was able to build a mutually respectful harmonious relationship with the population.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative, descriptive design was used in this study to obtain an in-depth understanding about the characteristics of the respondents. Qualitative descriptive design allows a straightforward description of study participant's experiences in their own language, without the interpretation of existing theories (**Sandelowski M, 2000**).

### **Sampling Procedure**

This study employed criterion sampling, in which the selection of participants is according to some predetermined criteria of importance (**Patton, 2001**). Selection criteria were: Indian nationals from states other than Kerala, at least two years of stay in Kerala and unorganized interstate migrant workers residing in Ernakulam district of Kerala. The respondents were selected

## Socio-Economic Problems of Unorganized Interstate Migrant Workers in Kerala: A Qualitative Study

with help of the NGO and data was collected until data saturation, meaning that the data was yielding no new information relevant to the research objectives (Mason, M, 2010). A total of 6 respondents participated in the study.

### Data Collection and Research Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews from six unorganized interstate migrant workers using a checklist. Purpose of the study was explained to all the respondents and consent was obtained before the interview. Confidentiality is strictly maintained. The checklist consisted of questions exploring the social and economic conditions of the respondents like conditions of accommodation, wages, healthcare facilities, welfare schemes, discrimination etc. The personal characteristics of the respondents like age, native state, level of education, religion, caste, marital status etc. were also collected. Initially, the check-list has been prepared in English and was translated to Hindi. All the interviews were conducted in Hindi with the help of an interpreter. The interviews were audio recorded and manually transcribed in Hindi and were then translated to English.

### Data Analysis

Each transcript was repeatedly read by the researcher and was then manually coded and analysed using content analysis. The codes were then organised into categories and common themes between them identified. The themes were then compared across categories to identify and describe the overarching findings of the study. Throughout the analysis process, any discrepancies in the interpretation of the data were resolved by referring back to the original audio files wherever necessary. The findings have been reported by using Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research guidelines (Tong A, Sainsbury P, Craig J, 2007).

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Individual codes were generated from the transcripts and broad categories were formed by combining similar codes. Totally 51 codes were generated which were combined to form 18 broad categories. These categories were compared with each other to the overarching experiences of each respondent as an unorganized interstate migrant worker. Data from the initial coding categories and emerging sub-categories are structured thematically into six sections summarizing the main findings.

### Personal Characteristics of the Respondents

Most of the respondents hail from West Bengal and are Muslims aged between 20 years and 50 years. Majority of the study participants are illiterates making it difficult for them to get a permanent employment. Duration of stay in Kerala ranges from 2 years to 12 years among the sample population. Most of the respondents are able to speak Malayalam apart from their mother tongue and Hindi. The effort taken by these workers to learn Malayalam shows their commitment to survive in the host state. Irrespective of their marital status many choose to migrate to Kerala considering the high wages offered in the state. Most of the unorganized interstate migrant workers engage in odd jobs as a helper or handyman in construction sites, farms, small industries etc. Majority of them have been working in Kerala for more than five years.

### **Overview of Living Conditions**

For a small room that is shared between 10 persons one has to pay an average of Rs. 1000. This is rather high. There are hardly any facilities such as kitchen, washing and drying area etc. They have to manage everything in a single room. One toilet also has to be shared between 10 persons. It was observed that there is exploitation by middlemen or the leader of the group of workers. They collect Rs. 1000 and pay less to the house owner. In some cases the house owners admit as many as possible to get more income. Cleanliness and hygiene is completely lacking. They smoke in the same room. They burn plastic to cook and dispose of the waste. Their living area is really congested. The neighbours don't allow them to sit outside the room or house as it disturbs them. One of them says: *"Practically all the places where people like us stay are like this. We can't afford better places as we want to save as much as possible. We are ready for any sacrifice."* There is need for more awareness on health and hygiene. In a study conducted by Chandran and Chacko about migrant construction workers in Kerala also have come out with the similar finding that the working and living conditions of interstate migrants involved a number of health hazards. The living conditions needs to be given a better attention as neglect in this regard leads to several other health issues (Chandran & Chacko, 2017).

### **Overview of Working Conditions**

Majority of the migrant workers feel discriminated in their work place. The employers don't treat them with respect. They shout at them, insult them and make fun of them. The migrant workers don't react although they understand that they are being put down. They are ready for any sacrifice to earn as much as possible. They are willing to do any type of work to earn a living. The migrant workers are happy with the wages as they receive more than what they get in their native. But they are aware that the local workers from Kerala get more than them and they are not happy with that disparity. One said: *"We are aware that when the same work is done by a Keralite they are paid more. Why is it so?"* In a study by Parida et al., on the wage inequality in Kerala also reveals the fact that although relatively higher wages attract many migrants to Kerala to work in construction and other fields, migrant workers earn less on average than their non-migrant counterparts. The existing wage disparity between migrants and natives is not due to differences in productivity or endowment; rather, it is due to discrimination against migrants (Parida et al., 2020).

### **Challenges in Healthcare**

As far as possible they do not go to any hospital for treatment. They manage with some medicines from the medical shops and good rest. The next option is to go to a government hospital where treatment is free. This is also done for smaller cases. For serious illnesses they prefer private hospitals. But they find the treatment at the private hospital very expensive. When they can't afford the treatment they get discharged and go back to the native. The migrant workers feel discriminated in the hospitals too. There exists communication barrier. They are not listened to properly. They feel that they are looked down upon them. The timings of the hospitals are also not convenient for them. In the study of Sithara and Ajeesh it is revealed that there is a gap in local healthcare facilities' ability to meet the health needs of migrants. The migrants' behavior is averted by cultural and other obstacles, forcing them to rely on chemists or private clinics. As a result, change is needed. It's not

## Socio-Economic Problems of Unorganized Interstate Migrant Workers in Kerala: A Qualitative Study

just about lowering out-of-pocket costs; it's about re-tuning public health care to be more affordable, accessible, affordable, and appropriate to them **(R.S. & Sebastian, 2017)**.

### **Access to Government Welfare Schemes/Benefits:**

Majority of the workers are unaware of the Awaz Health Insurance programme. It is a state government initiative developed by the government of Kerala to provide health insurance and accidental death coverage for migrant workers living in the state. This is a first of its kind scheme intended for migrant labourers working in a state in India. They also don't get many of the other benefits from the government. A vast majority of them are unaware about the Interstate Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme (ISMWWS-2010) which has several provisions for the welfare of the migrant workers. They would appreciate subsidized food items and other benefits. They also do not enjoy the benefits of PF and ESI. A study by Peter et al., appreciates the purpose and provisions of the various programmes undertaken by the government of Kerala for the interstate migrant workers. The welfare initiatives and interventions are exemplary and promising. However, it appears that certain steps were taken without proper consideration of grassroots needs and implementation processes to increase access. These interventions have been tangential rather than complementary in the absence of institutionalized and pragmatic mechanisms carefully planned to execute and track the programs while maintaining synergy within and between departments. As a result, despite the policy intent and major investments, the outcomes have not been commensurate **(Peter et al., 2020)**.

### **Stigma and Discrimination**

The migrant workers feel suspected for any crimes that happen around their place. They are checked and questioned at any time of the day and night by the police department. Majority of them are sincere and dedicated and yet they have to undergo this humiliating experience frequently. One said: *"There are times when we were woken up at night and interrogated about some issues about which we were unaware."* Sreedharan and Murale conducted a study on the social integration of migrant workers in Kerala and have come out with the finding that there have been several allegations of systematic police violations of human rights. Migrants are often misunderstood as criminals by some residents and police personnel due to which innocent migrants have to suffer a lot **(Sreedharan & Murale, 2018)**.

### **CONCLUSION**

Migration is an integral part of population dynamics. Internal migration is a survival strategy for millions of rural people. Migration even though primarily for economic reasons have wide social, political, cultural, environmental and health implications **(UNICEF, 2011)**. Kerala is one of the favourite migrant destinations, due to better wage, good climate, transport, and other facilities available compared to other states **(Ashok & Thomas, 2014)**.

Migrant population, being a non native population, experience social discrimination and stigma, economic exploitation, political exclusion and lack essential provisions like access to quality health services, safe and decent working and living conditions, access to justice and are generally excluded from social benefits and welfare schemes. The need for survival compels them to bear all sorts of discrimination and injustice in the host state. The findings mentioned in this paper are only a few of the several challenges experienced by the interstate migrant workers especially in the

unorganized sector. Therefore this study is just a beginning and this has to be further investigated quantitatively with larger sample size to identify the magnitude and extent of the problems faced by this population. Everyone must play their part to create a migrant friendly place where they are respected and are given their due space.

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Socio-Economic Problems of Unorganized Interstate Migrant Workers in Kerala: A Qualitative Study

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