



SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF MIGRANT LABOURERS IN KERALA: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Kerala has become a prominent hub for migrant labourers from various Indian states including Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, and Uttar Pradesh. These migrants play a vital role in sustaining the state's unorganised economy, especially in sectors such as construction, hospitality, manufacturing, and domestic services. This paper presents a comprehensive study on the socio-economic conditions, working environments, motivations for migration, health challenges, and systemic barriers faced by migrant labourers in Kerala. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods, this research provides nuanced insights into the complex realities of migrant livelihoods. While higher wages attract migrants to Kerala, they continue to face exploitative work conditions, inadequate housing, social exclusion, and limited access to legal and welfare protections. The paper argues for the urgent implementation of state-led interventions to promote equitable development, safeguard workers' rights, and ensure sustainable urban integration.

Keywords: Migrant Labourers, Socio-Economic Conditions, Working Conditions, Internal Migration, Informal Sector, Labour Rights, Policy Intervention

1. Introduction

Internal migration in India has witnessed a marked increase in recent decades, driven by economic disparities between regions. Kerala, known for its advanced social development indicators, has ironically emerged as a recipient of large-scale labour migration from economically underdeveloped states. Migrant workers have become indispensable to Kerala's economy, yet their lives remain precarious and under-researched. This study seeks to address this gap by offering an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic and working conditions of migrant labourers in the state.

2. Statement of the Problem

Kerala has become a popular destination for migrant workers from states like Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh. These workers are helping fill labour shortages in sectors such as construction, hotels, and domestic work. Although they earn better wages here compared to their home states, many face difficult living and working conditions.

Migrant labourers often live in poor housing, work long hours, and have limited access to health care, education, and government welfare schemes. They also face challenges like language barriers and social isolation. While some studies have been done on migration, there is very little detailed research that looks at the overall situation of migrant workers in Kerala.

This study tries to understand their socio-economic background, reasons for migration, working conditions, and health issues, and to suggest ways to improve their lives and support their welfare.

3. Scope of the Study

This study focuses on understanding the socio-economic and working conditions of migrant labourers in the state of Kerala. It covers migrant workers from various Indian states who are employed in sectors like construction, hospitality, manufacturing, and domestic services. The study examines their background, income levels, living conditions, reasons for migration, job security, health issues, and access to welfare schemes.

Both urban and semi-urban areas across Kerala are considered to get a broader picture of the migrant

experience. The research also explores how these workers are adapting to the local society and what challenges they face in terms of language, culture, and social integration.

The findings aim to assist policymakers, local authorities, NGOs, and labour departments in creating better support systems and inclusive policies for migrant workers in Kerala.

4. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the socio-economic backgrounds of migrant labourers in Kerala.
- To identify the push and pull factors influencing migration to Kerala.
- To assess the working and living conditions of migrant workers.
- To evaluate their access to healthcare, legal aid, and welfare schemes.
- To recommend policy measures for the protection and empowerment of migrant labourers.

5. Review of Literature

- Rajan and Zachariah (2011) – In their *Kerala Migration Survey*, they highlighted how migration patterns are shifting, with Kerala now receiving a large number of in-migrants from poorer Indian states due to labour shortages.
- Deshingkar and Akter (2009) – Their study focused on internal migration in India and found that migrant workers often face poor working conditions, low wages, and limited access to social security benefits.
- Narayana and Venkiteswaran (2013) – This study revealed that despite earning better wages in Kerala, migrant workers live in overcrowded housing, suffer poor sanitation, and lack healthcare facilities.
- Bhagat (2012) – Emphasized that internal migration is largely driven by poverty, unemployment, and lack of development in native states, while host states like Kerala offer better job prospects.
- Gulf Return Migration Reports (CDS, Kerala) – Showed how emigration from Kerala to the Gulf created a vacuum in the local labour market, which is now being filled by migrants from other Indian states.
- Kavitha (2016) – A micro-study on migrant labourers in Palakkad district, which found that most migrants were working in construction and lived in temporary sheds without basic facilities.

6. Research Methodology

- Type of Study: Descriptive and analytical study based on both primary and secondary data.
- **Primary Data Collection:**
 - Conducted through structured questionnaires and interviews.
 - Sample size: 50 migrant labourers from different parts of Kerala.
 - Sectors covered: Construction, hospitality, manufacturing, and domestic work.
 - Language assistance taken from contractors and local mediators due to communication barriers.
- Sampling Method: Purposive sampling to include diverse occupations and geographic representation.
- **Secondary Data Sources:**
 - Census reports, State Migration Survey (CDS), Government publications.
 - Panchayat development reports, academic articles, and NGO studies.
- **Data Analysis:**
 - Used simple statistical tools such as percentages and ratios.
 - Comparative analysis was done to identify patterns and challenges in socio-economic and working conditions.

7. Analysis and Interpretation

Demographic Profile

Majority of migrant workers were from Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, and Odisha.

Most respondents were male (94%), aged between 20–40 years, and had basic education up to primary or middle school level.



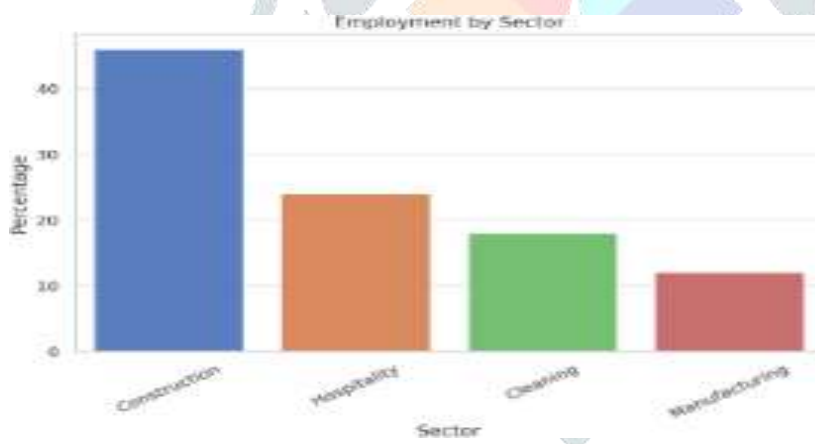
• Reasons for Migration

The major reasons cited were:

Unemployment and low wages in native states.
 Better income opportunities in Kerala.
 Influence of friends and contractors already working in Kerala.

• Working Conditions

Most migrants worked in construction (46%), followed by hospitality, cleaning, and manufacturing. Work hours were long (10–12 hours/day) with very few breaks or leave benefits. Majority were daily wage earners without written contracts or job security.



• Living Conditions

Migrants were found living in temporary shelters or congested rented rooms. Sanitation, drinking water, and ventilation were inadequate. Shared accommodations often lacked basic amenities and privacy.

• Health and Welfare

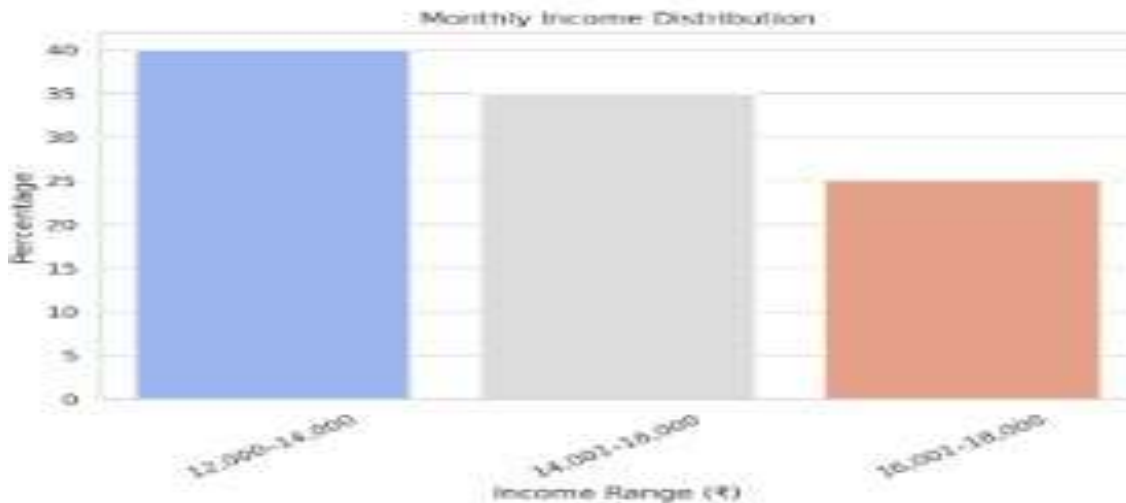
Health issues were common: skin problems, respiratory issues, and work-related injuries. Most had no access to health insurance or regular medical checkups. During illness, they relied on private clinics or home remedies due to lack of awareness about government health schemes.

• Income and Savings

Monthly income ranged from ₹12,000 to ₹18,000, depending on the sector.

A large portion of earnings was remitted to families back home.

Very few were able to save regularly due to high living costs.



• Social Integration

Majority of workers felt socially isolated due to language barriers and cultural differences. Interaction with local population was minimal, mostly limited to work-related activities.

8. Findings

• High Concentration in Unorganised Sectors

Most migrant labourers are engaged in physically demanding, low-paying jobs in the construction, hospitality, manufacturing, and domestic sectors.

• **Economic Motives Drive Migration** The majority of migrants moved to Kerala due to unemployment or underemployment in their home states, along with the attraction of relatively higher wages in Kerala.

• Low Wages and Limited Social Security

Though wages are higher than in their home states, many workers still earn only between ₹12,000–₹15,000 per month and lack job security, insurance, and pension benefits.

• **Poor Living and Health Conditions** Migrant workers often live in overcrowded and unhygienic accommodations with limited access to clean water, sanitation, or medical care.

• **Language and Social Barriers** Most migrant labourers face difficulty integrating with the local population due to linguistic and cultural differences, leading to social exclusion.

• Limited Awareness of Government Schemes

Very few migrant workers are aware of or benefit from state welfare schemes like health insurance, ration cards, or labour welfare boards.

• **Role of Contractors and Middlemen** Most workers were brought to Kerala by contractors, who often act as gatekeepers to employment and housing, sometimes leading to exploitation.

9. Suggestions

• Improve Housing and Sanitation Facilities

The state should develop safe, hygienic, and affordable housing clusters for migrant workers with proper water supply, sanitation, and electricity.

• Ensure Legal Protection and Registration

A state-level migrant labour registration system should be made mandatory to monitor working conditions, track inflow, and ensure workers are not exploited by middlemen.

• **Strengthen Health and Welfare Access** Provide migrant workers with health cards and ensure enrolment in schemes like ESI, Ayushman Bharat, and state labour welfare boards for medical and accidental coverage.

• Set up Migrant Help Desks and Labour Offices

Establish multilingual support centres in major migrant hotspots to assist workers with documentation, legal issues, and grievance redressal.

• Promote Language and Social Integration

Offer free Malayalam and English language classes and cultural orientation programs to help workers integrate better with the local community.

- Employer Accountability and Monitoring

Enforce labour laws through regular inspections and make employers accountable for providing basic entitlements like minimum wage, safe working conditions, and time off.

- Skill Development and Education Launch vocational training programs to upgrade the skills of migrant labourers, enhancing their earning potential and job security.

10. Conclusion

The study clearly reveals that migrant labourers have become an essential part of Kerala's workforce, filling gaps in unorganised sectors like construction, hospitality, and domestic services. While they migrate in search of better livelihood opportunities, their lives in Kerala are often marked by poor housing, health issues, exploitation, and social isolation. Despite receiving relatively better wages compared to their home states, most migrants continue to live in vulnerable conditions with limited access to welfare schemes or legal protection. There is a pressing need for comprehensive policy interventions that go beyond wage improvements to include decent housing, healthcare, social security, legal awareness, and cultural integration. Addressing the challenges faced by migrant labourers is not only a matter of economic necessity but also one of social justice and inclusive development. Ensuring the dignity and well-being of migrant workers is essential for Kerala's sustainable growth and humane labour practices.

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