

Plight of Migrant Labourers in Kerala: A Study on the Livelihoods of Migrant Labourers

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ABSTRACT

The movement of people in search of better economic conditions and a more secure environment is as old as human history. Such movements not only affect the lives of the migrants profoundly, but also lead to significant economic and social transformation in the regions of origin and destination of the migrants. In-migration of workers to Kerala has a long history. But the recent migration is different in terms of the profile of the migrant workers, the occupation they are engaged in and the magnitude of inflow. Kerala which relies heavily on migrant workers, whose number makes up to close to a tenth of the resident population. The acute shortage of manual labours and semi skilled workers coupled with the keralites reluctance to do manual, menial tasks has led to the influx of people from the north and eastern states. The present study examines the plight of migrant labourers in Kerala. The paper also makes an assessment of the livelihoods of migrant labourers. Livelihood is commonly defined from an economic perspective as an occupation, work or other means by which one earns income to provide the necessities of life. Livelihood Assets including human capital, social capital and financial capital are analysed.

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INTRODUCTION

Kerala has now become a lucrative job market for workers hailing from various parts of India, especially Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. High literacy rates and better education has prompted Keralites to look for higher wages and skilled labour abroad which are sometimes considered more respectable. The acute shortage of manual labourers and semi skilled workers coupled with the keralites reluctance to do manual, menial tasks has led to the influx of the people from north and eastern states. At present, migrant labourers are 10 per cent of Kerala's total population. While friends and relatives are the main channel of migration, they mostly work under contractors and get employment for six to seven days a week. The migrant community is unfortunately very vulnerable to exploitation because of their plight, lack of awareness and their willingness to compromise for a comparatively better life. The issue of socio

economic security of internal migrants becomes pertinent.

Higher wages for unskilled labour in the state, large opportunities for employment and shortage of local labour, paradoxically despite the high unemployment rate in the state, led to the massive influx of migrant labour to the state. With signs of rapid growth of state's economy and the increase in activities particularly in the infrastructure and construction sectors, the immigration is expected to grow faster in the coming years. A small section of the migrants from other states are professionals and skilled workers, large majority of them are unskilled or semi skilled workers engaged in various jobs at rural and urban Kerala. The migrant labourers get much higher monetary wages than in their native places. But, they work for longer hours and their real wages may be lower as they have to incur higher cost for food,

shelter and transport. They live in small houses/rooms on a sharing basis.

The migrant workers are now engaged as construction workers, road workers, domestic workers, carpenters, masons, plumbers, casual labourers, agricultural and plantation workers, electricians etc. They are also employed in plywood factories, flour mills, quarries, brick kilns, jewellery making, hotels, slaughter houses, cashew processing units, petrol pumps etc. There is also a trend towards allocating more difficult, hazardous and menial jobs to migrant workers. According to Derose *et al* (2007), vulnerability is shaped by many factors, including political and social marginalization and a lack of socioeconomic and societal resources. vulnerability of the migrants arise because of living in a place which is different in culture, language, social settings, legal protection, entitlements and consumption habits from their native places and the loss of the traditional support system they enjoyed before migration. Bustamante (2011) points out that "migrants are inherently vulnerable as subjects of human rights from the time they leave home to initiate their migration. In other words, any human being is less vulnerable at home than right after he leaves it to become a migrant. The widely held feeling among local people of Kerala that migrant labourers are 'outsiders' adds to their vulnerability. In view of the Kerala state's failure to acknowledge their presence and their living condition or plight, interstate migrants are barely considered in policy making in the state where they live.

Livelihood

Livelihood is commonly defined from an economic perspective as an occupation, work or other means by which one earns income to provide the necessities of life (Asong *et al*. 2000). When asked "what is a livelihood", few would struggle to answer. "Making a living", "supporting a family", or "my job" all describe a livelihood. The term is well recognized as humans inherently develop and implement strategies to ensure their survival. The hidden complexity behind the term comes to light when governments, civil society, and external organizations attempt to assist people whose means of making a living is threatened, damaged, or destroyed. From extensive learning and practice, various definitions have emerged that attempt to represent the complex nature of a livelihood.

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future,

while not undermining the natural resource base. (Chambers & Conway, 1991).

Livelihood Assets

Human capital: Skills, knowledge, health and ability to work

Social capital: Social resources, including informal networks, membership of formalized groups and relationships of trust that facilitate co-operation and economic opportunities

Financial capital: Financial resources including savings, credit, and income from

Employment, trade and remittances

Living condition and Housing

The housing pattern of Migrant laborers and the facilities available to them are very minimum. They live in crowded rooms with hardly space to move around. Most of them are staying in temporary sheds and vacant shop floors. Some of them are live at the work site in temporary sheds or shacks in common lands, one room tenants or one bed room houses and many of them living in open places in huts made of plastic sheets or tin sheets. The land or shop floors they are staying are belonged to local people, for which they paid rent. These huts in common land or open spaces don't have the facilities of kitchen, or toilets and the bath rooms. There were instances of open defecation too. Wherever they had facilities they were the bare minimum. The hygiene around these places is very worse and such premises are littered with waste. Cooking, eating and sleeping are done by them in public or open spaces, and many of them are unskilled workers and getting low wages only. Availability of water, access to safe drinking water and sewage facilities are the common problems in most of this settlements. 6 to 7 person's occupied one room, some of which had small television and radio sets.

Labour and Wage

The migrant labourers integration to the local people is differ from place to place and profession to profession. The employers are satisfied about these peoples dedication to work and output. In skilled jobs their productivity is less when compared to local people doing the similar jobs. In construction industry the quality of masonry work differs between the local masons and migrants, with regard to its finish and perfection. But the time and quantity of labour put in by an average migrant worker is much more than that by the local labourers,

The average daily wage of a local mason and a migrant mason vary up to Rs 100, and in many jobs that need complex calculation and perfection, they are

yet to achieve a level of efficiency that is at par with the local workers. The migrant labourers are easy to supervise and manage, they do their jobs continuously without breaks. They also work for longer hours and are ready to do overtime. Among the construction workers they are two categories, one category is those who work with a contractor and have assurance about regular employment, and those who seek daily employment by casual employers. Employment is depending upon market needs and demands; the contractor gives them regular employment, employer shifting them from site to site where he has work. These regular employments in a site or work with skilled workers help them to acquire expertise to become more skilled and demand for better waged jobs. Migrant labour being a population in flux and virtually being a reserve army of labour for different productive sectors, the level of awareness about minimum wages and demand for such legal rights are non-existent. They work for long hours during working days and have only one day off. In construction sites they work for 12-14 hours a day and there is no time for relaxation they are continuously working whether it is day or night. After work they coming home late, they don't have time for anything else but cooking, eating and sleeping. Sunday they get to enjoy and relax. Most of them do their weekly chores during that day, like washing etc. Some people stay in their rooms watching movies on television.

Unskilled migrant labourers get Rs. 300-350 for a day's work. If accommodation and provisions for food are given, there is a cut on their wages to the tune of about Rs.100. These wages are lower than the wages for local labour by about Rs. 100. But in large scale construction as well as infrastructure works, migrant workers are generally recruited through contractors or agents who settle wages, after retaining part (Rs. 20-50) of their earnings from the payments received from the employer.

The earnings of the workers after migration is about 3-4 times their earlier earnings in home state. It is also much higher than the minimum wages fixed by the state government for unskilled workers. While there is substantial difference between the monetary wages for casual work in Kerala and in their home villages, it is important to note that the difference in real wage rates to the migrant workers may not be as high, as they have to incur much higher costs for living in Kerala than in their native places (eg. rent, cost of food, transportation, communication etc.).

Entitlements

Movement of people from one state to another state can lead to loss of entitlements that they have enjoyed

in their state, where they lived before migration. In the Indian federal system, people acquired their entitlements through the fundamental rights conferred on them by the Indian Constitution and the various laws enacted by the Union government and the state governments. Apart from these rights and legal protection, people are eligible to make use of various programmes/schemes executed by the central and state governments. These services are only available to the permanent residents of the respective state. In such a situation, the migrants will lose their entitlements when they cross borders of their native state. So they are not included in the subsidized or public distribution system in the state. Thus, the migrants have to depend solely on the open market and become more vulnerable to the price differences in the open market compared to the local community. In the open market, some instances where migrants were asked to pay more than what is demanded from the local population were also increasing their burden.

Safety and Health care

The migrants are more vulnerable to safety risks at work place. Instances of migrant workers working at dangerous heights without necessary protection have been reported in the media. Often the local community accepts this by saying that "they are willing to climb any heights and work there dangerously". The necessary precautions to ensure the physical safety of workers in the industrial units also leave much to be desired. Added to this, the poor language skills prevent them from understanding the safety precautions that the employer or his supervisor gives them verbally. Kerala is related to the differences in the languages spoken by the migrant workers and that of the host society. Being unable to speak to the local community or the service providers in their language makes them vulnerable on many occasions

Health is the basic component of human development, health of migrant labourers is also an important concern. They are mostly engaged in construction and long hour employments, their occupational health is very important. The governments, both union and state, must play the constitutional duty of protecting the life and health of people. The presence of a public health care system which is responsive to the needs of the migrants is a necessity in states which have significant presence of migrant population. Such a system should be sensitive to the cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds of the migrants. Treatment is expected to be made available from the government hospitals almost free of cost to residents of Kerala who are poor which is ascertained by the hospital authorities on the basis of

the type of a ration card they hold. With no ration card, these migrant labourers are not eligible for free/subsidized treatment in government hospitals. But it appears that public health system has slowly started responding to the requirements of the migrants. In response to the increasing presence of migrant labour and in view of the current attention on the link between migration and spread of HIV/AIDS, state-funded AIDS Control Society is implementing targeted intervention programmes among the migrant workers. The project titled 'Migrant Suraksha Project' is implemented with the help of nongovernmental organizations.

Conclusion

Migrants are vulnerable because of crowded and unhygienic living conditions and inadequate provisions for their safety at the worksite. Migration of poor, unskilled and uneducated population not only perpetuates their economic deprivation, but also causes loss of their cultural and social capitals. Together they cause exclusion and marginalisation. The limitations to access health care due to language barriers, lack of time, lack of knowledge about the public provisioning of health care etc. exacerbates their vulnerability. However, one advantage the migrants in Kerala is that they may be able to benefit from the relatively better health system and health care seeking practices in the state. Social security measures should be made accessible, affordable and achievable to the Migrant labourers. They should not be treated as mere instruments which are to be exploited. Adequate policy advices and legal systems are available in this regard. The state should play active role not only in regulating the sector, but also in implementing the justly made laws and acts. Development cannot be achieved without implementing the principles of equity. Inclusive development is the proved path of ensuring sustainable development.

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