
A STUDY ON WELFARE SCHEMES FOR INTERSTATE MIGRANTS IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Interstate migration has emerged as a significant demographic and socio-economic phenomenon in India, with Kerala witnessing a substantial influx of migrant workers from states such as West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh. Attracted by better wages and employment opportunities, these workers contribute notably to Kerala's economy, particularly in sectors like construction, hospitality, manufacturing, and agriculture. However, despite their contributions, migrant workers often face challenges related to living conditions, health, social security, and integration into the host society. This study aims to examine the range, implementation, and impact of welfare schemes designed for interstate migrants in Kerala. It explores state-led initiatives such as the Aawaz Health Insurance Scheme, Apna Ghar Housing Scheme, and the Interstate Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme, assessing their effectiveness in addressing the socio-economic vulnerabilities of the migrant population. This research highlights both the achievements and challenges in Kerala's model of migrant welfare and offers policy recommendations aimed at improving the socio-economic integration of interstate migrants. It underscores the importance of inclusive governance, responsive social protection systems, and sustained political will to uphold the rights and dignity of migrant workers in a rapidly transforming socio-economic landscape.

Keywords: Interstate, Migration, Workers, Employment, Welfare, Schemes, Vulnerable

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

This paper examines the dimensions of social security of migrant labourers in State of Kerala. A large number of migrant workers are coming to Kerala from Tamil Nadu (neighbor State), Karnataka (neighbor State), Orissa (East India), West Bengal (East India), Bihar (North India), Uttar Pradesh (North India), Uttarakhand (North India), Assam (North-east) and Manipur (North-east). The shortage of local labour opens large employment opportunities for interstate migrant workers in the host state. Higher wages for unskilled labour is another important aspect which attracted migrant workers to Kerala. Migrants are vulnerable group. Movement of people from one state to another can lead to loss of certain entitlements they enjoyed in the state where they lived before migration.

1.2 History

In 1970's, large number of peoples from Kerala migrate to other countries, majorly West Asia in search of better livelihood and opportunities. Still the emigration of Kerala peoples continuing and that leads to scarcity of labour and therefore the wage rate got increased. These situations are got attention of labourers from the other states and the State has been witnessed for large inflow of labourers from the other states. Initially the interstate migrants were mainly from the neighbouring states of Kerala. i.e., Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Later the migrants labourers from the other states such as Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal, Assam, Manipur, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand etc are started to migrate.

1.3 Significance

In our country, people derive 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. Further, people are eligible to make use of various schemes/yojanas executed by the central and state governments. Most of the central government schemes are applicable throughout the country. Even in central government schemes, the benefits arrive at the people through the state or local government. Unless otherwise specified, such benefits are offered only to the permanent residents of the respective state. In such a situation, the interstate migrants lose their entitlements when they cross borders of their native state.

1.4 Literature Review

According to Deshingkar and Anderson (2004), “in countries like India migration is adopted as a routine livelihood strategy and not simply as a mere response to the shocks. Poverty and prosperity both are responsible for inducing migration.”¹

De Haan and Rogaly (2002)² opined that, “being a complex phenomenon, migration not only influences the size, composition and distribution of the population but more importantly impacts the social, cultural, political and economic life of the people and outcomes can be vastly different for men and women, for different groups and different locations.

The study conducted by S. Anand³ in Migrant Construction Workers he is pointed out that, “there are some evidences in the previous literature that the Tamil migrant workers have first arrived to Kerala to occupy the employment opportunities in construction sector, brick kilns and in tea and rubber plantations from the mid-1970s onwards.”

Migrants are vulnerable group. 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 same applies to the sociological extension of the notion of home to a community of origin. The same person that migrates had more resources, both material and human, to defend and/or protect, himself, when he was at home, prior to moving elsewhere, than after the outward movement had taken place."⁴ They stay in crowded and unhygienic living conditions.⁵

N.V. Kumar (2011) observes that “migration sometimes leads to loss of entitlements such as rice, wheat, etc., at a subsidized price through Public Distribution System (PDS) or any other agencies and even some health insurances because they do not have Below Poverty Line (BPL)

¹ Deshingkar, P. and Anderson, S. (2004). Voluntary Internal Migration: An Update. London: Overseas Development Institute.

² de Haans, A. and Rogaly, B. (2002). Introduction: Migrant Workers and their Role in Rural Change. Journal of Development Studies, 37(5). 1-47.

³ S. Anand (1986) Migrant construction workers: a case study of Tamil workers in Kerala. Centre for Development Studies. 1-12.

⁴ Bustamante Jorge A. (2011), Extreme Vulnerability of Migrants: The Cases of the United States and Mexico", Migraciones Internacionales, Vol. 6, N0. 1.

⁵ D. Narayana, C. S. Venkiteswaran, M. P. Joseph (2013) Domestic migrant labour in Kerala. Report submitted to Labour and Rehabilitation Department. Government of Kerala.

or ration card in the destination place.”⁶The state, which is still known as a remittance economy where migration from Kerala directly or indirectly impacts every household in the state, is also known for measures taken for the welfare of interstate migrant workers it receives.⁷

1.5 Statement of problem

This research study intends to portray the problems faced by ‘guest workers’ in host state in regard with their housing, access to health and education. Further the researcher examines the welfare schemes which are provided to interstate migrants for their housing, education and health care.

1.6 Research methodology

The present study conducted through doctrinal research to understand the social security of interstate migrants in Kerala. In addition, analysis of the laws pertaining to migrant labour and review of the available documents, newspaper reports and other publications were undertaken. The source of data will be both primary and secondary.

1.7 Research objectives

- a) To trace the historical background of migration from other States to Kerala.
- b) To analyze the underlying factors responsible for the huge influx of migrants to Kerala.
- c) To explore the health care facilities provided by the host state to the interstate migrants.
- d) To examine the housing facilities provided by the State of Kerala to guest workers.
- e) To examine the educational schemes which are provided to better and basic education to interstate migrants and their dependents (who are staying in Kerala with migrants).
- f) To assess the living conditions of migrant workers.

⁶ N.V. Kumar. (2011) Vulnerability of migrants and responsiveness of the state: The case of unskilled migrant workers in Kerala. *Socio-economic & Environmental Studies*. Nov; 1-31.

⁷ Planning Commission (2008) Kerala Development Report. New Delhi: Academic Foundation.

2. ISM WORKERS IN KERALA

Migration in India is primarily of two types: (a) Long-term migration, resulting in the relocation of an individual or household and (b) short term or seasonal and circular migration, which is a peculiar feature of Indian labour migration which involves back and forth movement of between the source and destination. As pointed out by Srivastava & Sasikumar (2003), migration in India is predominantly short distance with around 60 percent of migrants changing their residence within the district of enumeration and over 20 percent within the state of enumeration, while the rest moves across the state boundaries.⁸ Furthermore, studies⁹ have pointed that seasonal and circular migration is widespread especially among the socio-economically deprived groups such as the Scheduled Castes(SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs), who are asset-poor and face resource and livelihood deficits.

The State has witnessed the high inflow of Interstate Migrant (ISM) workers from other States of India, particularly from West Bengal, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Orissa over the last two decades. A significant gap in the Kerala workforce has been created because of higher levels of education and the emigration of Kerala peoples to foreign countries. So these gaps in workforce give opportunities to ISM workers and have become a crucial and integral part of the Kerala economy. We can see these ISM workers in multiple sectors such as plywood industry, agriculture, construction, hospitality, etc. The Kerala State offers the best wages for workers in the unorganized sector in the country, manifold compared to most other states.¹⁰

The basic conditions of most of these ISM workers are very poor with limited access to health care, clean drinking water, basic sanitation facilities and education. Due to the lack of facilities they live in cramped temporary housing and their cooking, bathing, etc often takes place in the open. Most of the migrant workers are staying in small rooms which are highly congested. A single room is usually shared by 5 to 6 persons and in some cases more individuals are accommodated. The poor living conditions of the ISM workers have raised concerns of the

⁸ Srivastava, R. and Sasikumar, S. (2003). An Overview of Migration in India, its Impacts and Key Issues. Regional Conference on Migration, Development and Pro-Poor in Asia. Dhaka: Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit.

⁹ Deshingkar, P. and Anderson, S. (2004). Voluntary Internal Migration: An Update. London: Overseas Development Institute.

¹⁰ Bureau Labour (2020) Wage Rates in Rural India: March 2020. Chandigarh: Labour Bureau.

spread of diseases within their groups and also among the local populations.

3. INTERSTATE MIGRANT WORKERS WELFARE SCHEME (ISMWWS, 2010)

In 1979, the central government enacted the Interstate Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Services) (ISMW) Act, which provides for the social security of interstate migrant workers in India. Kerala is the first Indian State to enact a social security scheme for migrant workers.¹¹ In 2010, Kerala has launched an Interstate Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme (ISMWWS, 2010) which has a number of provisions for the welfare of the migrant workers. The two major initiatives have been introduced by the State are Aawaz Insurance Scheme 2016 and Apna Ghar Housing for the welfare of migrant workers.

Under the Interstate Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme, 2010 a separate fund was created for the benefit of ISM workers under Kerala Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board (KBOCWFB). Any ISM worker can enroll into the scheme within the age group of 18-60 after the completion of one month from his or her arrival in the State by paying a renewable annual membership fee of Rs. 30. The scheme mandates every employer in the state who engages interstate migrant workers to ensure that such workers are registered under the scheme. Table 1 summarises the benefits under the scheme.

Table 1: Salient features of Interstate Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme (ISMWWS, 2010)

Sl. No	Benefits	Compensation
1.	Compensation to family upon death of the worker	Rs. 2 lakhs for those enrolled and Rs. 25,000 for those not enrolled.
2.	Treatment benefit	Rs. 25,000 for members for fatal diseases that requires 5 or more days (with or without hospitalisation)

¹¹ Srivastava, R. (2020) Integrating Migration and Development Policy in India: A Case Study of Three Indian States. Centre for Employment Studies. New Delhi: Institute for Human Development. Working Paper Series 03.

3.	Relief benefit	Rs. 10000 temporary disability (work-related accidents)
4.	Terminal benefit	Rs. 25,000 to Rs. 50,000 for those who exit from labour market after a minimum of 5 year enrolment under the scheme.
5.	Body repatriation	Maximum of Rs. 50,000 for migrant worker who die in Kerala, irrespective of enrolment
6.	Education Scholarships	Rs.1000 to Rs.3000 per annum for the ISM workers children
7.	Maternity Benefit	Rs. 15000

Source: Labour Commissionerate (GOK 2019b)¹²; Welfare to Rights: Implementation of Select Legislations: A Review. Administrative Reforms Commission (GOK 2018)

3.1 Apna Ghar Project – Housing Scheme

The Apna Ghar Project was introduced by the Department of Labour and Skills (DOLS), Kerala in 2019 to provide safe and hygienic accommodation to interstate migrant (ISM) workers on rental basis.¹³ The Schemes under the Apna Ghar Project are proposed to be implemented in areas across Kerala with a shortage of suitable accommodation facilities for ISM workers. The Apna Ghar Projects by Bhavanam Foundation Kerala completed one scheme called the ‘Apna Ghar Project- Palakkad Scheme’. The hostel which is situated at KINFRA Integrated Industrial and Textile Park, Kanjikode, Palakkad provides shared residential rooms, bathrooms, toilets, kitchen, mess area etc. And it has started operations from March 2019. A bed can be availed

¹² Government of Kerala. 2019b. GO Number 4/2019: Notification Dated 18 January 2019. Kerala Gazette (Extra Ordinary). 8(15): 1–5. <http://lc.kerala.gov.in/images/pdf/gos/migrantwrkrswlfrescheme.PDF>.

¹³ <https://bfl.kerala.gov.in/apna-ghar-projects/>.

by migrant workers at a rent of Rs. 1000 per month.¹⁴ There are two new projects are ongoing at Kozhikode and Ernakulam (Kalamassery) for implementing the 'Apna Ghar Project'.

3.2 Awaz Health Insurance Scheme – Access to Healthcare

The government of Kerala has launched Awaz Health Insurance Scheme provides healthcare service to migrant workers. It is a health insurance policy specifically for migrant workmen who work within Kerala. Under this scheme, all the insured migrant workers shall be entitled to a free medical treatment of INR 25,000 at all government hospitals across Kerala. There are also certain empanelled private hospitals that will provide medical treatment to these injured workers. Awaz Health Insurance scheme also includes coverage for workers against accidents. A migrant worker can get enrolled for free under Aawaz and avail a health insurance cover of Rs. 25,000 and an accidental insurance cover of Rs. 2 lakhs.¹⁵ Link Workers has been introduced by Dept. of Health and Family Welfare through National Health Mission (NHM) in 2020. The Link Workers are appointed to enhance access to healthcare for migrant families. Capable ISM workers were recruited and trained to provide health information and connect the guest workers to services in their own language.

3.3 Inclusive Education

In Kerala State, the Department of Education is providing free education for children of migrant workers under Sarwa Shiksha Abhiyan. The State has been engaged in promotion of education for children of ISM workers. Educational volunteers who speak the native languages of the ISM children have been appointed by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in selected schools. The State Literacy Mission also plays a very important role in inclusive education for ISM workers. From 2017 onwards, State Literacy Mission implements a programme to to teach the workers Hindi and Malayalam (native language of Kerala).

4. CONCLUSION

The influx of interstate migrant workers into Kerala has become a defining aspect of the state's

¹⁴ Desai, Renu. (2019) The Apna Ghar Projects by Bhavanam Foundation Kerala and the Questions It Raises for Migrant Workers' Housing in Indian Cities. In Here Hope Has No Address: Proceeding of the Workshop on Housing for Migrant Workers. Ahmadabad: Prayas Centre for Labour Research and Action.

¹⁵ Government of Kerala. 2020. Circular Number: 8/2020 (Malayalam) dated 18/03/2020. Thiruvananthapuram: Office of the Labour Commissioner.

socio-economic fabric. In this research study, the researcher identified the reasons for the large influx of migrants to the Kerala State from other Indian States. Further the researcher portrayed the problems faced by 'guest workers' in host state in regard with their housing, access to health and education. The researcher mostly concentrated on the welfare schemes introduced by the Kerala State for eradicating the vulnerability of ISM workers in host state. The State gave attention on the vulnerability of the guest workers and introduced the welfare schemes for their housing, education and health care. These migrants play an essential role in sustaining various labor-intensive sectors such as construction, hospitality, manufacturing, and agriculture. Despite their undeniable contribution to Kerala's development, interstate migrants remain one of the most vulnerable sections of society, often subjected to precarious working conditions, social exclusion, and limited access to basic rights and welfare services.

This study aimed to evaluate the scope, implementation, and effectiveness of welfare schemes introduced by the Government of Kerala for the benefit of interstate migrants. Key initiatives like the Aawaz Health Insurance Scheme, Apna Ghar Housing Scheme, and the Interstate Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme reflect a progressive and welfare-oriented approach by the state. These programs are designed to offer healthcare, safe housing, insurance coverage, and other support mechanisms to ensure a basic quality of life for migrant workers. While Kerala stands out in comparison to many other Indian states in terms of its migrant welfare policies, this study has revealed several critical gaps in practice. One of the foremost issues is the low level of awareness among migrants about the schemes available to them. Despite the existence of beneficial programs, many workers remain uninformed due to language barriers, lack of outreach, or fear of bureaucratic procedures. Moreover, documentation and identity verification requirements often hinder access, especially for migrants who move frequently or lack official residence proof in the state.

Another notable challenge is the gap between policy formulation and on-ground implementation. In several cases, the schemes remain underutilized due to insufficient coordination among departments, limited manpower for outreach, and inadequate follow-up mechanisms. The role of employers in facilitating access to welfare benefits also remains inconsistent, with many informal sector workers being left out of formal registration systems. However, the study also highlights several best practices that could serve as models for replication. Kerala's commitment to inclusive governance, its relatively high investment in health and education, and its engagement with civil society organizations provide a strong

foundation for the enhancement of migrant welfare. The state's recognition of migrants as 'guest workers' rather than outsiders sets a positive tone for further integration and rights-based approaches.

Going forward, several recommendations emerge from this research. Strengthening awareness campaigns in the native languages of migrant workers, simplifying registration processes, enhancing interstate collaboration for seamless benefit transfer, and institutionalizing the role of local self-governments in migrant welfare are crucial steps. Furthermore, involving migrant communities in decision-making processes and monitoring can ensure that policies are more responsive and grounded in reality.

In conclusion, while Kerala has taken commendable steps toward securing the welfare of interstate migrants, sustained effort, inclusive planning, and collaborative governance are essential for overcoming the existing barriers. The journey toward ensuring dignity, safety, and equal opportunity for migrant workers must be seen not just as a policy goal, but as a moral and social imperative for a truly equitable and humane society.