

Migrant Labourers in post-covid Kerala: A Phenomenological Perspective

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Abstract

Migration in the context of a state like Kerala brings many unique aspects of socio-economic transformation. The popular emigration trends from Kerala to Gulf countries and other Indian states highlighted the 'push factors' that the society experienced for too long. Today, Kerala is also one of the states accommodating migrants, mainly from north-eastern India. There is a massive workforce in Kerala from states like Assam, Odisha, West Bengal, etc., owing to better wages, security offered by the government, cultural factors and occupational mobility. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the vulnerability of migrants throughout the world. India saw some worst situations where the lockdown forced migrant exodus to the native states from northern regions of India. While the migrants embarked on a tedious journey on foot due to lack of transportation, many new issues surrounding the socio-cultural adjustments of migrants have emerged. According to an article by K.A. Martin published in 'The Hindu', Kerala offers Rs 767 to a daily wage worker, which is way above what states like Gujrat, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha offer. There is no denying the fact that the pandemic shook the employment situation where both the informal and formal sectors suffered. The economic situation drove the migrant labourers back to their workplaces. Kerala had been doing great in terms of providing migrants with essential economic and social security before the pandemic. Still, we must understand the current challenges surrounding a migrant in Kerala.

This paper explores the changing social, economic, and cultural dimensions of migration trends in post-COVID Kerala, focusing on the lives of migrants from northeastern India, for whom a brick industry in Thodapuzha Kerala has been chosen. The study is based on a phenomenological approach. Oral case studies and narrative analysis have been used to develop an understanding of the issue.

Keywords: Migration, Narrative analysis, exodus, pandemic, phenomenological approach

Introduction

Sociologically, migration can be defined as a process in which individuals move from one socio-cultural setting to another; this could be a desire for a better standard of living, marriage, natural or human-created disasters, political crises, etc. According to the survey conducted by the State Planning Board Kerala, the total migration would be between 45 to 50 lakhs in 2025 and between 50 to 60 lakhs in 2030. The estimated number of workers from 2017 to 2018 stood at 31.4 (Parida, Raman & Das.) Migrant workers remit 750 crore rupees annually to their native states (Deccan Herald). Migration leads to positive changes as we witness more cultural integration, growth for the host region and the migrant community, and the exchange of various forms of knowledge. Still, it also gives rise to competing interests and insecurities. The world came to a standstill when COVID-19 entered a pandemic, testing humanity in every possible way. It changed the way migration is seen as a process. There needs to be an understanding that is based on the experiences of the migrants, as they were not only in isolation but also distant from their families. A phenomenological framework is based on subjective descriptions, everyday life experiences, and meaningful accounts of objects and structures. This would help us understand the migrant experience at a deep sociological level. As Kerala has proven itself to be a favoured state for migrants even in times of pandemic, it can offer relevant insights into the issue of migration.

Review of literature

Upreti (1981) observes that we need to examine both from the perspective of migrants and the host what sort of circumstances are favourable and unfavourable as far as migrants are concerned. His analysis of hill migrants from the Kumaon region in Jaipur highlighted that there is re-socialisation for migrants when they shift to new places. Still, at the same time, we find that people tend to keep their traditions alive and accept the culture of the new place they are part of.

Kaul (2005) observes that migration can be biological, voluntary, forced, planned, or unplanned. The case of migrants from the northeast of Kerala shows migration being voluntary and forced-planned.

Duvell & Jordan (2015) conclude that migration tends to intensify inequalities that are not only economic but social as well. The identity of a migrant can change in the sense that they

can represent an entire community that gets stereotyped in a certain way. It is observed that certain ethnicities and nationalities, from the perspective of the host country/region, display suitability for specific occupations. Everyone has the freedom to choose where one wants to live or work, but at the same time, vulnerabilities must be addressed, and rights must be protected.

Brahma & Paul (2018) identify financial crisis, debt, lower wages, and unemployment in the place of origin as making the phenomenon of migration unstoppable. However, migration puts pressure on the population. The study observes that the state government is now taking measures to better accommodate migrants, as their health and other living conditions cannot be termed satisfactory.

Lusome and Bhagat (2020) observed that Assam and Manipur have the maximum outmigration, while the other northeastern states receive migrants. The study finds that work is one of the primary reasons for migration. There is an increase in internal mobility within the northeastern states, and hence, the ethnic communities are finding a need to handle migration better. Of 512 thousand migrants from north-eastern states who returned to their hometown, 390 belonged only to Assam.

Rajan (2020) states that since Kerala started receiving cases faster than the other states in India during the breakout of COVID-19, there was better preparedness on the part of the state. As Kerala is also a state with huge out-migration, sudden pressure during COVID-19 was expected. Kerala had, hence, dual problems to deal with. The arrival of population from Gulf and European nations, as well as the migrants inhabiting Kerala, were taken care of by the government's effective strategies.

Parida, Raman & Das (2021), in the study titled "In-migration, Informal Employment and Urbanisation" in Kerala, have concluded that since 2011, migration from states like West Bengal, Assam, Odisha and Bihar has been at an all-time high with a growth rate of 20 per cent. More seasonal migration from these states is experienced in Kerala. Migrants have become preferable because they regularly work, and employers can pay them less than local labourers. The study also found that the state government provides health insurance schemes to migrants, but only 13% of them are availing of them. The companies are not providing any extra benefits. Because of inter-state migration, structural transformation has speeded up. An increased level of aggregate demand has speeded up the urbanisation process in Kerala.

Raghunath(2021) highlighted that migrant workers in Kerala are remitting 750 crore rupees annually to their native states, even though the wages are discriminatory. Social security schemes for migrants are absent since they are playing a huge role in Kerala's industrial development. The system needs to evolve to address the concerns of migrants.

Martin(2021) has analysed a study conducted by the Kochi-based Centre for Socio-Economic and Environmental Studies according to the growth of eastern migrants in Kerala is due to higher wages, fast-paced urbanisation in Kerala, opportunities for occupational mobility and a safe environment for female migrant workers. Even though there are vast differences in the socio-cultural patterns, the gap is reducing due to migration.

Rajan (2021) observes that the lockdown imposed because of COVID-19 brought to light the unpreparedness of the government in the case of migrant workers across India. There has to be a better system because if internal mobility within India is common, then we must ensure that we take care of the basic needs of migrants. The Central government has introduced the 'One Nation One Ration Card'. This will ensure that food security can be availed in whichever state the migrant works in. There has been less attention to compensate for the loss that migrants experienced because of lack of work owing to the pandemic. There is a strong need for governmental intervention.

Research Gaps

The studies highlight the economic impact of migration. The situation of COVID-19 put financial pressure on the migrants. Still, there is a need to understand the insecurities that can arise in the minds of migrants, as during times of crisis, there is a sudden feeling of homesickness. We need to understand the situation through the lived experience of the migrants. Moreover, the studies need to focus on the social and cultural indicators of adjustments among the migrants in Kerala.

Research Methodology

The research paper is based on primary and secondary tools. The study is entirely qualitative in nature. The case study method has been used to collect primary data, and the collected data has been subjected to narrative analysis. The data has been analysed through the inductive method of narrative analysis. The migrant labourers of A.S. Industries, Idduki, Kerala, have been included in the study. A.S. Industries deals in brick construction.

Reliability and Validity

Prolonged engagement (sufficient time has been devoted to understanding the cultural setting and understanding the subjects) and Triangulation (multiple sources have been used to cross-check for inconsistencies) have been used to establish validity and reliability.

Findings

Based on 15 case studies conducted using narrative analysis as a tool, the following themes have been developed to bring out a phenomenological perspective.

Profile of the Respondents

In the AS industries, Muthalakodam and Idukki, there are 20 migrant workers, of which 15 have been selected for the study. The subjects fall between the age group of 20 and 30. They all belong to Assam as Industries has other units where only one migrant belongs to Odisha. As far as the educational profile is concerned, only one respondent went to college but dropped out in the first year. All the subjects went either up to the primary level or secondary level. So, it can be concluded that only the respondents have completed Higher secondary education. Only eight respondents are married rest, and seven are bachelors, according to the information given by the supervisor. The information was verified at the time of the field study.

Themes

Perception towards 'work' and 'working in Kerala'

The cases that were studied understood work to be a means of meeting materialistic needs. The migrant workers engage in agricultural work when they visit their native place, and when the agricultural season is over, migrants return to Kerala. The social expectations are clear in this sense. As a seasonal occupation, agriculture pushes people in India to look for alternatives. For north-eastern people, migration is the alternative. The subjects don't have too many productive skills. Education definitely does not result in an economic opportunity, as even those who have cleared secondary or higher secondary did not go for any vocational training. Another work the subjects could vouch for was driving. Of all the cases examined, only three knew how to drive. Most of these workers have come to Kerala through acquaintances who are labourers there. When asked if they like working in Kerala and how comfortable it is, the workers say, "*Sab accha hai*" (everything is good). The new migrant

workers don't find the wages satisfactory enough, but they still want to work here. Some workers have been staying for more than ten years now. So, the perception created for work is only in terms of how consistent the flow of income will be. According to the inputs given by the supervisor, the newcomers are given 650 rupees per month, and once they learn the work, as per the experience, the wages are revised. The wages stand between 650-1000 rupees per month. As such, no pressing demands for pay hikes have been witnessed. The industry maintains its criteria, and they don't differentiate between local and migrant labourers. Unfamiliarity with the social setting becomes secondary as one finds acquaintances or at least can relate to fellow workers. Kerala is a destination that will provide them with social security until the time they want.

2. Familiarity with Kerala's socio-cultural setting: Examining Re-socialisation of migrants

The migrant labourers agreed that they didn't understand Malayalam much. Even those who have stayed for 5-6 years say that their language is Assamese, so learning any other language is a little tricky. The language linking the labourers and their 'Malayali' counterparts is Hindi. It is known that Hindi is not widely spoken in southern states, and there is no fluency in the language. Still, here, Hindi is more based on situation and perception, reinforcing that language construction is not rigid. The migrants are comfortable with their mother tongue, and Hindi is comparatively more understandable than Malayalam. The difficulty level is their construction; they have no urge to be perfect in any other language. In that sense, they are assertive about their 'Assamese Identity'. The employers, too, don't show much interest in perfecting any other language. Even though there is a vast linguistic gap, it does not act as a barrier between the employer and the workers. As far as other cultural factors are concerned, the migrants aren't involved much in understanding the food or festivals of Kerala. They prefer their usual diet, but they are quite welcoming when celebrating their festivals. Bihu is celebrated with great vigour, and Keralities have been able to understand the significance of the festival from the perspective of the migrants. They have no plans to get their families here, and their cultural identity is powerful. Migrants reported they don't get their wives or children with them because their families are rigid. There are a lot of apprehensions about Kerala among the people there, and also, the structure is patriarchal in nature, which expects the wives of the migrants to take care of the families. The social need for familial presence is ignored by the migrants not only because of the financial constraints but also because they don't want to disregard their familial decisions. Social relations in the workplace are essential

for emotional stability, and hence, migrant workers keep themselves entertained with music, movies, etc.

Covid 19 pandemic: The Emerging Migrant Ideology about the host state (Kerala)

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, it posed the most definite questions for the migrants. Their families depend, by and large, on the remittances of the work in the construction company. The imposition of the lockdown created fears among all the migrants, which was usual. But there wasn't any situation that could not be managed. They recalled that the lockdown kept them from work, but the company ensured they were fed. Arrangements were made for food, and the severity of the disease was explained. The migrants were living on a sharing basis in the accommodation provided by the company itself. Migrants reported that their employers supported them in maintaining essential hygiene, which was the only way to be safe. The practices were essentially good because nobody got infected in the first wave. At the moment of crisis, the state government announced that it would produce 5 kg of rice per person. Even though the migrants were not covered under any food security scheme in Kerala during the crisis, the state government was protective in providing the essentials.

From the perspective of migrants, the financial crunch was the expected consequence of the pandemic. But they did not lose on the accommodation or anything else. They said they were aware of the situation and hence stayed back. The employer was cooperative, and the work started as usual once the lockdown was lifted. Two migrant workers took flights to visit their families. They could save money from their wages. This is not a usual phenomenon when we talk of unskilled workers. This is an indication of what financial empowerment can do. A capitalistic system widens the class divide, but this can be reduced if employers have better policies for their workers. The workers who went to their native places returned because Kerala offers them financial security, and the environment is less hostile. There are not many conflicts or clashes reported. According to the supervisor, the contact hours between local and migrant labourers are limited because the work is occupied, and locals would go to their homes. As far as the experiences are concerned, the chances of ethnic clashes are less. Both locals and migrants cooperate and are on friendly terms. In the post-COVID era, where people have returned to their place of origin, migration continues to happen despite various insecurities.

Implications of the study

Kerala is a state which can relate to migration of all forms. The state is an example of the positive effects of migration. The impact of the gulf wave on Kerala transformed the economic situation for many. Now, as Kerala has turned into a desired destination for people from some specific regions, questions are emerging regarding social security and assistance. The environment has to be productive in giving migrants identity and helping them connect better with the state culture. The vocabulary of ‘Bengali Bhai’, which could basically be any migrant worker from the eastern part of our country, needs to be corrected because every community has an identity that it celebrates and cherishes, so we need a more integrative cultural framework. Being far from home is difficult; social adjustments could be challenging. This study highlights that insecurities and the need for social recognition are low among migrants. In the pandemic scenario, we should have more of a personal approach, accommodating migrants in a social way as well. The study could provide insight into the changing cultural fabric of Kerala.

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