



Interstate Labourers in Kerala: Socio-Economic Linkages in Idukki District

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Abstract

Migration, as an important livelihood strategy across India, has become a significant economic factor also in Kerala State. It witnesses a large inflow of migrant workers from different parts of the country. The scarcity of unskilled/semiskilled workers in the State, the higher employment opportunities with fair salary and non-discriminatory attitudinal and behavioural patterns amplify this internal or interstate relocation to Kerala. This study on inter-state migration in Idukki sheds light on the various issues concerning migration, mobility, and sustenance. It examines the migration dynamics from multiple perspectives including demographic, economic and socio-political aspects.

Keywords: Interstate migration, internal migrants, labour migration, unskilled workers, labour inflow

Introduction

The studies on the migrant labourers in Kerala covers mostly the socio-economic consequences of its people migrating to other parts of the world and that exemplifies the lack of attention given to the issues pertinent to the internal migrants to Kerala. A study conducted in 2013 revealed the details of almost 25 lakh interstate migrant labourers in Kerala and a fresh study is yet to initiate by the government. The present paper focuses on the conflux of life-conditions and the working environment, which is the core of the intended arrival and the consequent employment relationship, faced by the migrant workers, especially unskilled labourers who work in the various units, such as construction, plantation, plywood, textile, seafood, mining & quarrying, iron & steel, and footwear sectors of Kerala State. Consequently, this study examines the life situation, the characteristics and economic conditions, of the migrant workers in Kerala as well as reasons for migration, all living conditions with occupational pattern including wage and income, challenges and opportunities, etc.

The Aim of the Study

The main aim of this study is to analyse the characteristics and socio-economic conditions of migrant workers in Idukki district of Kerala and thus to critically explore their contributions in economic growth and sustainable development of both the host or destination state (Kerala) and the different respective states of their origin. It distinguishes the characteristics of short-term seasonal migration and those of long-term migration in relation to employment and labour trends of Kerala state.

Major Objectives of the Study

- a) To analyse the characteristics and socio-economic conditions of migrant workers in Idukki district of Kerala.

- b) To explore the sources and reasons of migration to Kerala and to scrutinize the flow of remittances and its impact on local economy.
- c) To identify the possible policies and schemes for the welfare of labour migrants and thus reduce the vulnerabilities of migrants reflecting on efficacy and social integration.
- d) To evaluate the relationship between the patterns of migration and development examining socio-cultural, demographic and economic variables.

Literature Review

Migration is viewed as an important livelihood strategy for poor people across the world hoping to acquire or accumulate the household wealth that brings a positive change in their life situation. The concept and process of migration consist in demographic, socio-cultural, political and economic factors in the area of both departure and destination and a set of intervening opportunities and obstacles (Piguet 2018; Lee 1966). In that sense the theorization of migration will provide a complete spectrum of explanation and imbibed nuances of migration. It is a normal tendency to flow from low-wage areas to high-wage areas. Apart from the individual worker and the economic incentives, the theory of New Economics of Labour Migration looks for wider social entities such as household to explain the migration flows (Masseey 2015; Jennissen 2007). The aversion of insufficient income risk leads to this type of migration.

Labour Migrants

The special characteristics of modernization such as industrialization and market economies and the consequent occupational and labour changes created a path towards a new movement called labour migration. The colonial systems also demanded and induced the forced movement of people to the labour market (Colson 2003). A labour migrant moves towards other locations within the home country or outside it to pursue work. A brief statistical data on top migrant labours received states in India revealed by the Chief Labour Commissioner under the ministry of labour and employment is given below in Table 1.

Table 1: State wise migrant labours; Source: Chief Labour Commissioner, Government of India - <https://clc.gov.in/clc/node/647>.

State	Migrant Workers
Chhattisgarh	10.86 lakh
Kerala	2.87 lakh
Maharashtra	2.01 lakh
Tamil Nadu	1.93 lakh
Telangana	1.84 lakh

The driving force for these people to migrate is the lack of economic livelihood and income inequality in the home country. These issues are largely related to further factors such as poor infrastructure, agricultural land degradation, water scarcity and, increasingly, climate or weather related disasters, etc. (Leighton 2012; Leighton, Shen, & Warner 2011). Hence, to find decent and better paying jobs is the primary motive for them to move. In the same manner, the demographic and economic inequalities and the socio-cultural vulnerabilities lead to the increased migration. These migrant workers are called foreign workers or guest workers. There has been a substantial flow of people to and from India in search of better work. These people contribute to growth and development of both the country of destination by way of their labour and the country of origin by the remittances.

Internal Migration

It is evidently estimated that three out of every ten Indians are internal migrants (Srivastava 2012). It happens when people move between locations within national states. So, it can also be called as inter-state migration or domestic migration (IOM 2019). It occurs as part of educational travel, economic improvements, disaster consequences or civil disturbance. The direction of internal migration has currently changed to de-concentration from big cities or urban concerns to small towns and rural settlements (Rees 2001). In India, as per the census of 2011, there are 450 million internal migrants with an increase of 45% than that of 309 million in 2001. See Figure 1 for the detailed exposition.

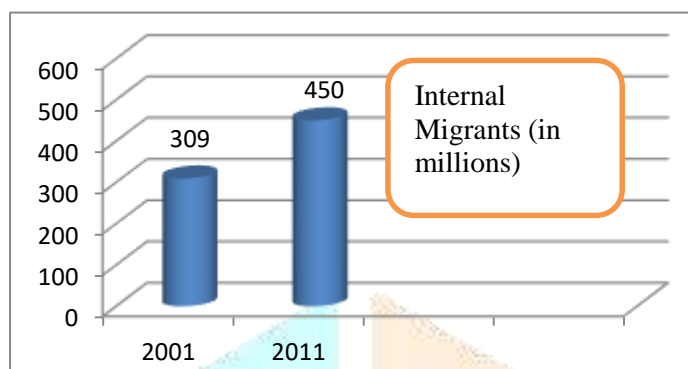


Figure 1: Number of Internal Migrants in India between 2001 and 2011; Data source: Census of India

According to a research conducted by Prof. S. Irudaya Rajan from the Centre for Development Studies, Kerala, as of 2020 India has an estimated 600 million migrants, i.e., roughly half of the Indian population is living outside the birth-place (Misra 2021). However, the majority of internal migration is within one district itself, not crisscrossing between Indian states. According to this study, an estimated 400 million migrate within the district of origin. Around 140 million moves from the district of origin to another but within the state and only 60 million migrate to another state (Misra 2021). This covers only the 10% of all internal migrants.

Migration and Development

The desire for a decent livelihood lies behind the strong connection between migration and development. Labour migration enables achieving economic growth and enhances development outcomes first for migrant and families, and thus for the society. Researchers argue for the strong linkage between migration and development in any region or country and highlight the constructive and life affirming potential of migration for development (DeWind & Holdaway 2008). Migration thus generates benefits toward deep-rooted development in any given situation. The manifested economic choices are important feature fostering development in any country.

However, researchers also reveal that not every aspect of migration is beneficial for developing countries. Insufficiency of required human capital is an example for this type of issue arising in tune with migration (DeWind & Holdaway 2008). Under-development with all its consequences like poverty, unemployment, etc. is a driving force of migration. Similarly, the income variation between developed and developing countries becomes a strong backup and expected incentive for large migration (Czaika & de Haas 2011) and hence migration affects development and development in turn also affects migration.

Factors Influencing Internal Migration

Internal migration is a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence within a region or state. Though the economic motives can be generally placed at the forefront of all discussions on the factors influencing the internal migration, there is a high need to recognize its various nuances that becomes an internal motivation to migrate. The predominance of economic motive in the migration is well researched

by Everett S. Lee (Lee 1966). Major factors influencing the act of migration, according to Lee, are associated with (1) the area of origin, (2) the area of destination, (3) intervening obstacles, and (4) personal factors. The push (unfavourable factors in the country of origin) and pull (attraction in another area) factors identified by Lee are given below in the Table 2.

Push Factors	Pull Factors
Not enough jobs, Few opportunities	Job opportunities, Industry
Inadequate environmental conditions - Natural disasters, Desertification, Famine or drought, Pollution	Attractive climates, Better living conditions
Inadequate conditions - Political fear or persecution, Slavery or forced labour	Enjoyment, Education, Security
Poor medical care, Loss of wealth, Death threats	Better medical care
Desire for more political or religious freedom	The feeling of having more political or religious freedom
Poor housing, Landlord/tenant issues, workplace bullying	Family links, fair workplace practices
Disease, Discrimination, War	Health, Hygiene, Peaceful life situations

Table 2- The Push & Pull Factors of Migration; Source: Lee 1966

A cluster of massive and prevailing economic and social imbalances and lack of opportunities among the states of India leads to the internal migration in Kerala. As per the data collated by local bodies on April 8, 2020, the State has a migrant worker population of 3,98,051. This includes the 1,08,031 workers located in urban local bodies and 2,90,020 persons in 39,057 camps in rural areas (Nair 2020).

Research Analysis

Interstate migration is fast increasing in almost everywhere and in some cases is far greater than the international migration (Deshingkar & Grimm 2005). It is evidently reported that in India, internal migration happens millions in numbers while international migration is only a fraction of this vast number (Srivastava & Sasikumar, 2003). Understanding people's mobility is a necessary condition of sustainable development and poverty alleviation regionally, this study pays special attention to the situation of interstate migrant labourers in Idukki district using analytical qualitative and multidisciplinary approaches as these are better at capturing temporary movements in regional level.

Migration Profile of Idukki

Being the second-largest district of Kerala, Idukki lies amid the Western Ghats of Kerala and consists at present five Taluks namely, Thodupuzha, Peerumade, Udumbanchola, Idukki, and Devikulam. Among these Taluks, Peerumadu and Devikulam are known for the tea plantations while Udumbanchola is popular for cardamom plantations. Munnar and Thekkady are the nationally and internationally recognized tourist hot spots in the district. Plantations (Agriculture) and hospitality (Tourism) sectors mark the distinctiveness of its local economic standards (Peter & Narendran 2017). Idukki is also known as the spices garden of Kerala.

With regard to the culture, it is currently experienced that in Idukki a mixed culture is formed since it consists of migrated people from other parts of Kerala and the native tribal folks. The presence of a large number of tribal populations in Idukki District marks its special cultural identity. Major portion of migrant labours are employed in plantation sector (major crops are tea, cardamom, rubber and coffee) and in hotel/tourism industries. Unlike many sectors in other districts where single male migrants dominate

theworkforce, the plantation sector in Idukki has predominantly migrant families (Peter & Narendran 2017).

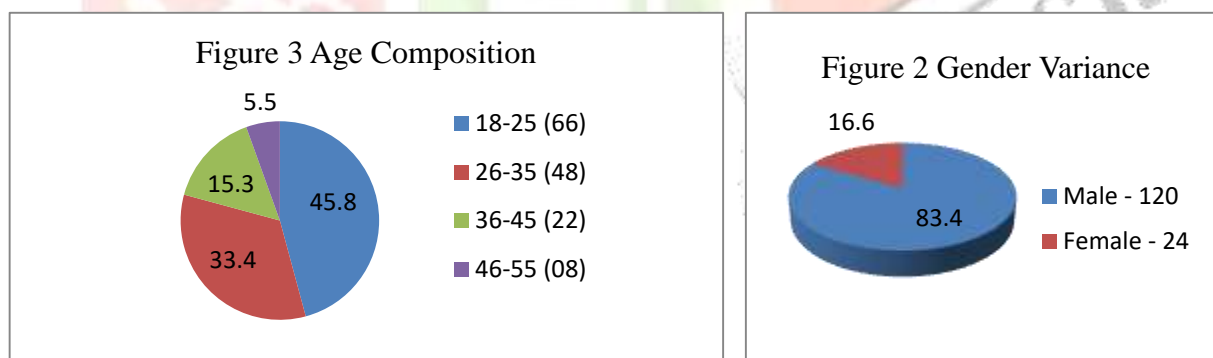
Research Methodology

It is an exploratory or formulative research to understand the nuances of current situation of interstate migration and its economic and socio-cultural effects on both migrants and the inhabitants. It also follows the methodology of theoretical analysis (literature reviews). A qualitative research methodology is employed in an empirical study in view of getting a comprehensive understanding of the real-time experience of interstate migrants who are in the field. The data collected and used in the study is based on a primary survey directed among the migrant workers in the Idukki district of Kerala, India. This study has been conducted from April 1, 2021 to April 30, 2021. A total of 144 migrant workers have been interviewed by using a structured, semi-structured and open ended questionnaire and collected their particulars including their demographic details, reasons for migration, occupational risks, living conditions, etc.

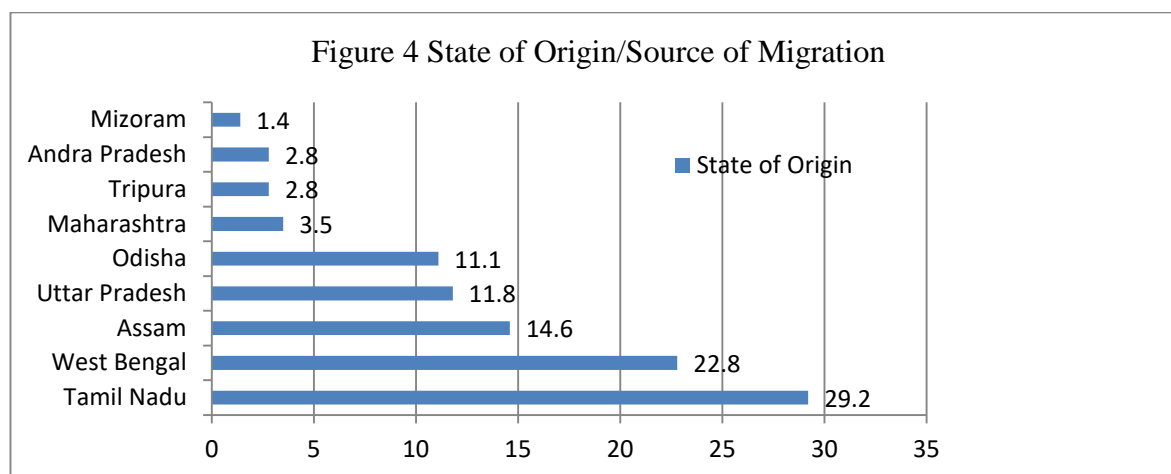
Analysis and Interpretation

A descriptive analysis is carried out throughout this paper. The socio-cultural and economic conditions of the migrants along with the demographic characteristics are at the forefront of this analysis. The sample is comprised of 144 relatively young male (120) and female (24) migrant workers. The tabulation of gender variance is given in Figure 2.

The sample consists of relatively young migrant labours with the average age of 28.88. The average age of migrant workers is higher in Idukki district as it has more Tamil workers who are in the plantation field for several years. The age composition of migrants is given in Figure 3. About 45.8 percent of migrants belong to the category of below 25 years and another 33.4 percent are between 26-35 years of age.



With regard to the sources of migration to Kerala and especially to Idukki district, Figure 4 provides the details about the native state (state of origin) of the sample migrants of our study. Migrants from Tamil Nadu, the neighbouring state to Kerala, constitute the major part of migrant labours (29.2%) of the sample, while another 22.8% of sample migrants of Idukki are from West Bengal. Assam (14.6), Utter Pradesh (11.8), and Odisha (11.1) are other states from where migrant labours find their work/living in Idukki district. Few other states such as Maharashtra (3.5), Tripura (2.8), Andhra Pradesh (2.8), and Mizoram (1.4) also become the source of migrant labours in Idukki.



The reason behind large amount of labour migration to Kerala and especially to Idukki district varies as per the response of the sample migrants used in the study. Along with this economic and employment related reasons, other factors such as studies, marriage, movement of parents/earning member, natural calamities, political disparage etc. also become other reasons for this migration. Table 3 illustrates the various major reasons for migration to Kerala.

Reasons of Migration	Frequency	Percent
Better employment opportunities	126	87.5
Higher wages	112	77.8
High demand for unskilled labours	88	61.2
Better living standards	80	55.6
Fair working conditions	69	47.9
Influence from family/friends	44	30.6
Poor financial status of the family	42	29.2
Purchase of land/house construction	27	18.8
Repayment of family debt	16	11.2
Feeling of security	5	3.5
Education (other family members)	3	2.1

Table 3: Reasons for Migration; Source: Primary Source

The main factors which attracted labourers from different states to Kerala is the huge employment demand coming from the state especially from the industrial, construction and plantation sectors. About 87.5% interstate migrants conveyed the reason of their migration as better employment opportunities in Kerala. As an answer to the specific reasons for migrating to Kerala, about 77.8% migrants reported that they migrated to Kerala specifically because of higher wage rate in Kerala.

Along with this, 61.2% migrants reported the high demand especially for the unskilled labours causes large scale internal migration to Kerala. Another 55.6% reported better living standards while 47.9% shared fair working condition in Kerala. With the influence of other family members or friends who have already been in Kerala as migrant workers, about 30.6% labours came to Kerala for making their living. Another 29.2% reported as meeting household expenditure due to the poor financial status of the family and 18.8% reported as accumulation of savings to purchase land for the construction of house and still further 11.2% look for the repayment of family debt along with daily management of the family.

It is to be noted that, majority of sample migrants responded very faithfully to a multiple response question about the issues and challenges they face during their life and work in Kerala. Table 4 explains the problems and concerns shared by the sample migrants.

Problems	Frequency	Percentage
Language barriers	98	68.1
Torturing from local workers	43	29.9
Worksite quarrels with locals	28	19.4
Frequent house shifting	65	45.1
High food & lodging expenses	48	33.3
Discrepancies in salary offered	36	25.0
No information on availed services	81	56.3
Health & hygiene factors	69	47.9
Discontinuation of education	36	25.0
Marginalizing mentality	28	19.5

Table 4: Issues & Challenges of Migrant Workers; Source: Primary Source

The most important problem shared by the migrant workers (68.1%) in Idukki, except the Tamil migrant labourers, is the language barrier at the initial stage. The frequent quarrel with the local people (19.4%) in the living place and at the workplace and the torturing of the local workers (29.9%) make them difficult and anxious about their life and work. Frequent house shifting (45.1%) as per the shifting of work site and the increasing or high expenses for food and lodging (33.3) also become a great challenge for these workers. Discrepancies in salary offered were reported by some of the respondents (25.0%). A notable of the sample migrants (47.9%) reported about the poor health and hygiene factors as their concern. A substantial group of sample members (56.3%) also conveyed their concern of lack of information and intimation about accessing the available public services and other assistance offered for the migrant workers in Idukki and in Kerala.

Finding and Suggestions

It is perceived that this movement of people in search of better economic conditions and life standards with more secure living environment is an age old historical fact. Migration causes and brings demographic change in a regional and national level. It has been observed that migration is characterized by enormous economic, social and cultural diversity spanning socio-economic and demographic variables including caste, landholding size, age, sex, education, family size and composition, activity, occupational patterns, livelihood deficits, consumption levels and marital status, etc. (Srivastava 2012). A relatively younger bunch of unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers, with different educational level and diverse socio-economic background, mostly from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu and far-flung states of West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Tripura, Andhra Pradesh, and Mizoram constituted the sample migrants in our study.

We have identified poor economic conditions and wish for better living standards along with several other overlapping factors as the reasons of internal migration. People are in search of employment or better career opportunities so that they can meet household expenditure, pay the debts, buy some land and construct a safe house and can even accumulate some savings for the future generation and their education. Few identified factors letting the migrant labours especially the unskilled workers stay back in Kerala are comprised of factors such as: high wages even in the unskilled sector, non-discriminatory attitude, total migrant-friendly atmosphere prevalent in the state, and the government level proactive steps to ensure the welfare of all guest workers.

The nature of employment in Idukki District of Kerala, where this study has taken pace, is predominantly comprised of two sectors of construction and plantations. However, few others work here by making some kind of informal contract with contractors/employers locally and are employed in various menial works such as construction helper, bricks maker, casual labourer, carpenter, truckhelper, painting

workers, domestic helpers, etc. This situation is very threatening to the hosting state as majority of these labourers do not appear in any of the official records of the state.

With regard to the reasons favouring increased labour migration especially of unskilled labourers in to the Kerala state, it is explored that the employers have very less complaints about the dedication to work and output of these migrant labourers when compared to the local workers doing similar jobs in same time and for same or even more wages. Apart from this appraisal, it is also noticed that these interstate migrant labourers or otherwise called the guest workers in Kerala, are easy to manage and they work continuously with few break time outs. They also put in longer hours and are ready to do overtime with no or a small extra pay. These labours are satisfied with the amount of wages they are paid for their work, as these payment is much higher than what they usually draw or in many cases more than double they get in their native place.

The interstate labour migrants enjoy better rights and have greater access to health, education, and housing. Evidence suggests that internal migration can play an important role in poverty reduction and economic development in regional level and hence it should be encouraged. A larger proportion of the earnings and the consequent remittances are used for meeting household expenditure, education of dependent or buying land and building house, etc. For the desire to live in a better home and employment opportunities are the main causes behind people migrating to another place.

With the large inflow of migrants, the healthcare and education services can become largely strained along with other socio-cultural and economic barriers leading to housing shortages, etc. Likewise, it increases demands for housing and result in residential insecurity and marginalisation for immigrant groups. It also leads to homelessness, crowding, and squatting. Hence, there arises a possibility of a particular form of state-imposed marginality. Apart from this, the problem of increasing absenteeism, inconsistency in job, skill levels, going back to native place in an unplanned manner, affordability and health and hygiene factors, etc. become a significant concern of the authority. The cultural differences of migrant labourers from other states in comparison with the local people may lead to apparent racial tensions. Discontinuation of education of the children of migrant workers is a major factor that any discussion on internal migration should undertake.

It is found that the interstate migrants often need to work long working hours with sometimes poor working conditions. They may be forced to opt for pitiable living conditions as there lacks regular enforced laws dealing with them. They are deprived of the access to basic amenities and face social isolation and marginalization. Those migrant labourers who are employed in the unorganised sector have more vulnerability as they are often ignored by regulatory frameworks of local governments and they also receive very little support from civil society. It is researched that migration provides subsistence – maintenance and sustenance – to the workers and their families, but, if not cared well, it also exposes them to a tough and vulnerable existence, in which working and living conditions are poor and very minimum.

At this point of time, as a state which substantially benefits from its labour migrants, Kerala acknowledges their divergent contributions, and what required most urgently are the internal labour policies that promote the ways to maximize the potential benefits of migration to the society as a whole. For, though it is perceived that the labour migrants have become an essential contributor of State's economy, they also may become threat to security, health and other socio-cultural aspects of the State. Hence, State government has to address the factor of interstate labour migration and the consequent social problems and tensions occurring adjacent to their arrival and sustenance.

The State has to ensure better support for migrants in all the way possible in accessing essential services especially those related to adequate shelter, health, education, water, food, insurance and fair wages. For this, State has to improve the understanding of migration pattern with a deep study over the

matter by using more appropriate methods of data collection and analysis. Policies that promote social inclusion and increase social security are expected by the migrants and that should include poor-friendly development policies. State should also bring and lighten the procedures of labour laws considering needs and wants of both the State and migrants. It is much appreciated that the Kerala State has an exclusive department for the welfare of nearly three million non-Keralites labour migrants in the name of Department of Non-Keralites Affairs (NORKA) directly under the Chief Minister.

Though there are existing labour laws aiming to improve both the working and living conditions of migrant workers as well as to help prevent the exploitations, these laws and regulations seem to remain highly ineffective when it comes to the deep reality of real situations of labour migration. According to the researchers, this situation may continue to prevail due to the lack of support from civil society (Sreedharan & Murale 2018). Hence, the legislation, if enacted, should give attention to the elements of social inclusion of migrant workers, which enable them to live with dignity and honour. Thus, the enactment and enforcement of labour laws and precepts in favour of interstate labour migrants should be implemented with a prime concern.

Conclusion

The Kerala state has now emerged as a major and attractive destination state of internal or interstate migration. This trend is the result of its increasing employment opportunities especially for unskilled labours and other various labour market characteristics. This state is very proud to hold most pro-active migration policies along with its practiced welfare schemes and regulatory frameworks. Most of the migrant labours who are working even in the unorganized sectors have expressed their readiness and willingness to continue in this state. This study focuses on the needs, vulnerabilities and potentials of interstate migrants in Kerala. Migrants can contribute to the development of the migrated territory if they are permitted to access services and to integrate into the local situation and society as a whole as well as their possibility to stay connected with their land or communities of origin.

As migrants become fundamental to the socio-economic fabric of the State, the development strategies and labour policies of the host territories should focus on the needs and wants of migrant workers so that the patterns will better enable them to support their families and communities at home. The discrimination and the denial of basic services of life should not be encouraged. Kerala state has enacted social security schemes for migrant workers (Peter et al. 2020). Similarly, ensuring social security, equal treatment, freedom of association, equal access to judicial remedies, health and education of the family of migrant enables decent working conditions and wages and reduced exploitation and human rights abuse, and finally holds the dignity of each human being. The incorporation of equitable and inclusive policies in both state and national level will contribute for the constructive and productive life of migrant workers, who are the dynamic function of the society.

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