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REPLACEMENT MIGRATION AND THE GROWING ROLE OF INTERSTATE MIGRANT WORKERS IN KERALA'S LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract

This study was conducted with the objective of analysing the role and impact of inter-state migrant workers in the social and economic development of Kerala. Over the last three decades, the job market in Kerala witnessing significant changes. Foreign migration, higher education and changing work tastes have reduced the participation of native workers in the workforce, and to fill this gap, inter-state workers from states like Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, Jharkhand and UP have started arriving in Kerala. This phenomenon, known as "Replacement Migration" has created a major change in the structure of the workplace, the work model, and the method of hiring.

Key words: Guest workers, Kerala, Malayalees, Replacement Migration

INTRODUCTION

The nature of migration in Kerala is very unique. On the one hand, the young generation of Kerala is migrating to the Gulf and other European countries to build a better future, while on the other hand, workers from different states of India are migrating to Kerala to earn their livelihood. The mass migration of Malayalees to other countries has increased the presence of inter-state workers in the employment sector in Kerala. These changes in the job market in Kerala are due to factors such as educational advancement, foreign migration, and high hiring expectations.

Many definitions have been made by social scientists, researchers, and scientists that migration is the movement of individuals from their places to their destinations (Singh & Agarwal, 1998). Moreover, it is the movement from a place of less opportunities to higher opportunities. Replacement Migration is the process by which workers from other regions migrate to an area to compensate for the lack of labour availability caused by depopulation, ageing, labour shortages and migration.

Kerala attracted workers from other states of India just as Malayalees were attracted by the high salaries and job prospects in countries like the Gulf. Higher wages, stable employment opportunities and better living conditions compared to their native place are the reason for attracting inter-state workers to Kerala. Migrant workers from West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Odisha, UP and Tamil Nadu are active in Kerala. While their presence was more in the construction sector in the early days, today their presence can be seen in most sectors such as agriculture, industry, hotel sector, transport, fishing, trade etc.

The Kerala government describes migrant workers who come to the state in search of work as “guest workers” and has implemented several welfare schemes for them. AAWAZ- free medical and accident insurance, Athidhi Portal, Apna Ghar, Alay housing project, Shramik Bandhu facilitation centres, Changathi language learning programmes, Roshni/ Jyothi educational programmes are some of them.

They play an important role in the development of Kerala. They have an active presence in the successful completion of development projects such as roads, bridges, buildings and industrial establishments. They help in increasing productivity and sustaining economic growth by ensuring availability of labour. Recent estimates indicate that the migrant worker population in Kerala ranges from 2.8 million to 3.4 million (KILE 2020 & KSPB 2021)

The major change in the job market in Kerala is due to the fact that inter- state workers have become the main workforce in areas where native workers are absent. Their willingness to do any hard work at comparatively low wages has led to their presence in the job sector in Kerala. At the same time, the increasing share of inter- state workers has given rise to discussion on issues such as labour competition, changes in wages, and employment prospects of indigenous workers. However, most studies suggest that they do not completely replace native workers. On the contrary, they are filling the shortage of workers in areas where there is a shortage of employment.

These workers make up the majority of Kerala’s labour force by

- Ensuring availability of workers
- Support for development projects
- Increased productivity and economic growth
- It helps in meeting the challenges arising out of shortage of domestic workers

Therefore, inter-state labour is not a temporary phenomenon in the state’s labour market; rather, it has become one of the major labour forces sustaining Kerala’s economic structure.

CONCLUSION

With the growing interest of Kerala’s youth in foreign countries, Kerala has gained a place among the workers of many Indian states. the role of the inter- state workers is indispensable in the development process of Kerala. Most of the migrant workers who come to Kerala for work are mainly North Indians from West Bengal, Bihar, And Assam and the Tamils.

In the run- up to the 2026 Assembly election in West Bengal, Assam and Odisha, there has been a massive temporary exodus from Kerala. This has affected the job market in the state. This mass exodus to vote was reported to have halted up to 70% of construction and industrial activity in the state.

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