

# FROM MIGRATION TO INTEGRATION: THE JOURNEY OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN KERALA

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## Abstract

*Culture continues to be a constantly evolving and dynamic. With the continuous interactions between people at all levels and between different cultures, the notions of culture of a particular target group keeps changing. The development of a cultural notion is dynamic and will continue to be so, and it can only be comprehended over a longer period of time.*

*Migration is a social fact that cannot be attributed specifically to one point in time. For a variety of reasons, people have crossed boundaries. Some individuals relocate in quest of better career prospects. Others relocate to avoid violent conflict, hardship, hunger, fear, persecution, or abuses of human rights. Others do it in reaction to the unfavourable consequences of environmental issues like natural catastrophes, climate change, or other environmental problems. Many people relocate for a mix of these causes. However, there is an unavoidable relationship between a number of social, economic, political, cultural, and ecological elements that forms the foundation of migration with each journey that is performed by a person or a group of people. It is hard to generalise a consistent theory or a cause due to the very dynamic character it exhibits. Migration, which is sometimes thought of in terms of uniformity, is a phenomenon that differs from person to person. The effects of migration impact the economy, society, and state, however minimal they may be.*

*Migration to a place with a different culture generally involves a difficult journey. Blending into the host society is often a practical choice for migrants. An individual or group habituates to the customs and values of another culture while keeping its own unique culture via the process of acculturation.*

*In the background of the Indian society, the variety of languages, dialects, beliefs, traditions, and festivals continues to play a crucial role in the acculturation of immigrants. Migrants have a choice: they may either adapt to the dominant group's culture, reject it in order to preserve their own, or merge into a hybrid group (Berry, 1980). According to Üstüner (2017), three key factors shape the consumer lives of poor migrants, including (1) migration strips migrants of their naturalised cultural moorings from their previous local identities and forces them to deal with a mass-produced alien culture; (2) their minority ideology clashes with the dominant culture and is actively marginalized by it; and (3) they are forced to cope with the dominant consumer ideology.*

*India, which is rich in several diverse forms of culture, continues to serve as a social hub for people from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The paper attempts in reviewing the migration to Kerala, in the background of the factors that pull the workers from other parts of the country and their responses and ability to negotiate - both at workplace and in the society, which are crucial for their social inclusion.*

**Keywords:** Migration, Migrant Workers, Kerala, Culture, Social Inclusion.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Decoding the Mysteries of Migration to Kerala

The rising numbers of migrant workers in Kerala, particularly from the northern and eastern parts of India, remained a puzzle because of the stark differences in the socio-political and economic aspects in Kerala. The biggest hindrance in the assimilation till date remains the language, which remains a task to conquer in even after a few years. The trend initiated from the 1970s occurred as a result of the development crisis of the state which manifested in the long stagnation in the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy and it paved the need for out-migration from the state. The same was witnessed on a large scale, especially to the Middle East. Since then, the factor that had the greatest impact on Kerala's economy especially on the labour market, consumption, savings, investment, poverty, income distribution and economic growth has been the migration to Gulf and migrant remittances (Prakash, 2002).

The type of development Kerala society has undergone made a large vacuum in availability of "unorganized labor" in the state. The increasing availability of transportation and communication facilities along with the comparatively higher standards of living and income attracted a large number of migrant laborers into the state.


Even though the initial outflow of labour during this period was offset with the inflow of Tamil migrants, during the past few decades with the growth of the state's economy, there was an increase in the demand for cheaper and easily available unskilled labour, which resulted in people thronging the state for better opportunities for labour, from the other parts of the country. The situation is `migrant workers from the other states have started to replace the Tamil migrants. A large majority of these workers are unskilled or semi-skilled workers engaged in a range of sectors and services. It is indeed ironical to note that the Malayalis migrate to the Middle East for both skilled as well as unskilled work. Thus, there has been a general perception of the state that these unskilled migrant workers consider it as their 'Gulf'. There is a close association of the migrants with the daily affairs of a common Malayali makes them very much a part of spaces shared of the Kerala society. This continues to be a reality accepted by the State and the society.

A study commissioned by the Department of Labour and Skills, Government of Kerala, estimated that there were over 2.5 million inter-state migrant workers in the state in 2013. The net annual addition per year according to this study conducted by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, was 1, 82,000 migrants.

## 2. Culture, Migration and Identities

With the distinct differences in the cultures of the society in Kerala and that of the other states, particularly Bihar, West Bengal and Assam, the transition is that of cultural shock than that of cultural shift. While the latter is a transition that continues to be with differences that do not affect or impact the state of being of the migrants drastically, the former is a drastic change in the socio-political and cultural environment, often rendering the migrants defenseless and voiceless.

Ogadimma (2017) delves in to the difficulties that initiate and continue with the migration as a process. The socio-economic push factors along with the risk of natural disasters may divest them of their identities. The difference in the cultures amount to a shock that takes time to seep within and get acclimatized to. The absolute lack of a voice and the consequent vulnerabilities to abuse and exploitation at work dehumanizes the workers of their existence. It plays a crucial role in migrants developing strategies to cope with the change in the environment from their home-state. It is the parasitic attitudes of the employers to feed on the existing vulnerabilities of the migrant workers that necessitates protection at the workplace as well as socially. Zikic et al. (2016) discuss the issues of identity crisis and identity growth. The migrant, often in the minority group of the workplace, finds difficulty in asserting their own spaces and voices which are unlike the native workers. The identity crisis often arises with identity compartmentalization and an identity struggle that often remains a weak force against the dominant structural force of the workplace and the native society. What emanates from this remains an identity that may seem instrumental but remains inherently weak due to its temporary nature that accompanies it. The cultural shift necessitates the migrants to be resilient to the new environment. There are customized functional identities that remain instrumental in their




future-state or goal-oriented tasks that have a potential in transforming their own individual identities and spaces at workplace (Zikic et al., 2016). The ability to assert and negotiate the rights and concerns of the migrant workers is an important facet in their entitlement to a dignified life. Meardi et al. (2012) mentions the situation of new migrants as with uncertainty and which is one of maximum risk and minimum 'voice'. He mentions the two core issues as the social sustainability of such segmentation, in particular with regard to occupational health and safety; and the role organized labour can have, in particular in organizing such workers. It is not merely about being vocal of the issues but also how empowered are they to negotiate a solution that is not imposed but with active participation of the workers. Ascertaining what is best for oneself can be best determined by the individual her/himself. It is with the idea of individual autonomy over one's body and lives that would help to decide that the best that s/he would need.

While the identities form the core of human existence, dignity continues to be something that everyone is entitled to irrespective of the financial, social, political and cultural yardsticks that are often norms and constructs of the society. It continues to be an undeniable protection to each individual by the virtue of their existence from any intrusion of any nature from other individuals, society and to an extent State. Lucas (2015) discusses workplace dignity extensively. He adopts a unique approach in determining the contours of the employer-employee relationship, in contrast with what is seen as the generalist approach to dignity as a concept. The author looks into three components of workplace dignity. Inherent dignity is an individual's entitlement by their existence as humans whereas Earned dignity is based on the worker's competence and his ability in developing a space that entails respect for his skills and abilities. These recognize the contributions to the employer and the establishment, often seen through productivity and economic contributions. Remediated dignity is based on the degree of the action or inaction with respect to the remedial action to an injury or risk the concerned person suffers. It can be understood as the interaction of the other actors with the worker, often unravelling the hidden inequalities and differentiations existing in the workplace. This continues to be beyond the control of the actor. Individual responses remain of subjective nature. It either differs in the manner or the intensity or to the extent the intention that goes beyond the physical act. Also, it is not guaranteed that the remediated dignity will be realized by a worker who may be the best at his workplace. It is often through the interactions and the ability in networking with the co-workers that determine the remediated dignity. However, it does not contradict that there is a basic undeniable and inseparable dignity to human existence that each individual deserves. Dignity cannot be construed in a strict manner. It continues to be perceived in a subjective manner and with individual perception.

Surabhi et al. (2007) delve into the lives of Tamil migrant workers in Kochi. The significance of the study can be understood by their objective to understand the socio-cultural practices that the migrants undertake in Kerala, to cope with the change in the societal structure. They often remain confined to settlements to maintain their social networks and ensure their cultural identities remain protected. An additional reason was the unwillingness to rent out places to migrants due to a pre-conceived notion of them being criminals. It is not only a direct attack on their identities but also trickles down in the behaviour of the natives in their interactions with migrants in public spaces.

The discrimination, active or passive, evident or subtle continues to degrade the value of human existence. This continues with the individual perception based on the socio-economic factors, thereby reducing an individual to something that is quantifiable. However, the potential and extent to create a positive change in the society remains something that is immeasurable, and the potential remains subject to the environment each individual is subjected to.

Stronger commitments to the existing organizational structures and a deeper realization of the issues that pertain to migrants and workers would contribute to a society that is receptive and accommodative to the issues and concerns of migrant workers. Decentralized structures and a bottom-up approach contribute further in this respect. While a separate trade union continues to be an easy facilitation into these aspects, the segregation would only create deeper divide between the migrants and the local society.




Another aspect that forms the migrant identities in the new place is the interactions with the other migrants from the same state or different. It is often the collective of 'migrants' that is addressed by the host society or the host state, and not individually or in groups based on the home-state. Jhiang et al. (2016) discusses the barriers to the collective mobilization of migrant workers. The first barrier identified is employment conditions that hinder their access to spaces that facilitate exchange of knowledge, ideas and experiences. The second barrier is the framings of the migrant workers, which is internalized with an approach of being at a disadvantageous position and thus a self-imposed title of being exploited and voiceless. The third barrier identified is the very issue of the sustainability of any such mobilization, which questions the longevity and durability of any such possible association. The authors thereafter propose some solutions through social processes like safe spaces for development of them as a collective, development of critical understanding in the backdrop of their awareness of their civil and political rights and interventions by unions and NGOs in building a system with participative democracy and developing leadership skills.

### 3. Understanding the Challenges to Social Inclusion and Integration

The concept of social inclusion and social integration can only be understood in the backdrop of the existence of the socio-cultural barriers that is developed by the locals to the migrants. The same continues to exist and persist to ensure their lack of autonomy and authority.

Venkiteswaran (2017) mentions 'about the propensity of the average Malayalee to look sideways or tangentially', a denial of their rights as humans. The segregation of migrant workers continues to only reflect the attitudes of the locals in their distrust and hatred. He mentions the denial of their humanity only brings forth the hideous mentality of existing cultural practices towards migrants. Surabhi et al.(2007) recollects how even the police warned the residents to take additional precautions if they were renting their premises to migrants. The role of state machinery in actively creating an image of the migrants as criminals creates a significant dent to the way the people perceive migrants. Marino (2012) on the other hand brings out the role of xenophobic political discourses which conveniently trickle to individual perceptions and behaviour, contributing to their social discrimination. It is with measures targeted at capacity building in the existing structures and mechanisms in the backdrop of equality of all workers that would act as a catalyst in ensuring the inclusiveness by the society at large. Maheshwari (2016) looks at the case of the Kerala government's move to launch an insurance policy that remains a desperate attempt to monitor the migrant population. The policy that incentivizes the voluntary enrollment of the migrants in availing the benefits of the scheme. She argues that this is a potentially wrong move as it fails in fulfilling the ends and also creates an attitude of resistance towards the migrants by the local community. This distorted political will results in leading to a possible systematic discrimination initiated by the State's ineffective policies, aggravating the already existing social attitudes that are discriminatory in nature. Kontunen et al (2014) looks into the aspect of the policies and framework that better addresses the medical concerns of the migrant workers in ensuring their inclusion into the host society. It involves active State part in coming up with policies that avoid disparities that differentiate the natives and the migrants. It also involves removal of impediments and barriers that hinder the access to health services. The author looks into some best practices that assist in furtherance of the State plan for ensuring an environment that is better receptive, focused and targeted to the needs and circumstances of the migrants. The primary step must be to understand the health status of the workers through monitoring their lives at workplace and those at place of stay. Migrant-sensitive policies would help further the uniform applicability of the same, which should also be devised in a manner that it is associated with the housing or immigration policies. This would ensure that the same continues to be availed by all, minimizing the structural barriers like physical accessibility.

Kurian et al. (2013) reasons the same for the fact that the remuneration received is much higher than what they would receive in their native places for performing a similar work. Prasad-Aleyamma (2017) looks at wages embodying the hidden cultural practices that migrants are subjected to with an inherent spatial differentiation. Wages remain an important reflection of the social relations and the existing practices of the host society. The subtle discrimination that exists continues to be cautiously practiced and conveniently carried forward. The author looks into the various manners



and methods of wage payments and is understood within the background of the existing socio-cultural practices in Kerala. While the non-payment of wages accompanied with under-payment of the wages is reflective of the discriminatory attitudes of the contractors. The wage discrimination is a manifestation that is primarily based on the unequal existence and setting of a migrant worker in the host society. It is also driven by passive actors such as trade unions that function to soothe the local workers' issues and concerns, thereby building a barrier to migrant workers' access to workplace and spatial justice in Kerala. Wage discrimination only represents the segmentation and categorization of the labour that accompanies with a differential access to their rights and workplace dignity.

Boccagni (2017) looks into the migrant identities understood through their aspirations. It is under-appreciated and must be looked to understand to realize a policy that is inclusive and sensitive to their concerns. Their aspirations are those which relate to occupation and also personal. The personal one may include that pertaining to familial, future plans, security etc. Occupational aspirations include job security, career growth, financial stability that form an integral aspect in forming their purpose of stay and longevity of the same in remaining in the new migrated place. The reason to keep worker's aspiration as a priority is the fact that their contributions through labour remain not only confined to the economic development, but to the development of a society that remains more accommodative and resilient to the concerns and issues of new people. It is not that the aspirations of the migrants remain rigid. It evolves with the changing circumstances and scenarios that modify their needs and future goals. Mick (2011) on the other hand discusses the hierarchies and categorization the Peruvian society practices against the migrant workers. The discourse strategies adopted by the migrants that are mainly undertaken to overcome the internalization of social inferiority. The same ranges from ignoring such hierarchies and borders, to that with social cohesion that bridges the existing borderlines. These extremes encompasses the other possible discourses like silence, blaming, assimilation and singularization, which may or may not come with an assisted understanding of being victimized by the local society. The coping strategies also include the process of subjugation and subjectification that devolves the understanding of inferiority from a society at macro-level to an individual perception at micro-level. This is discursive and cannot be generalized to the uniform general act or a notion of what is perceived and construed as discriminatory to form the basis for the inferiority (Mick, 2011).

#### **4. Empirical Survey**

##### **4.1 Survey of the Migrant Workers in Kerala and Findings**

The current study is based on exploratory qualitative research method. While the research relies on migrant workers' interviews and experiences, it also attempts to understand the existing socio-cultural practices in the Kerala society through the interaction with the labour department officials, contractors and subject experts. The current study relies on 22 individual interviews and 6 group interviews of migrant workers working in different capacities in different occupations in Ernakulam and Kottayam. The respondents belonged to different states. Majority of them were from Bengal (50%) and Assam (39.1%), while the rest belonged to Bihar (1), Jharkhand (1), Odisha (1), Tamil Nadu (1), Uttar-Pradesh (1).

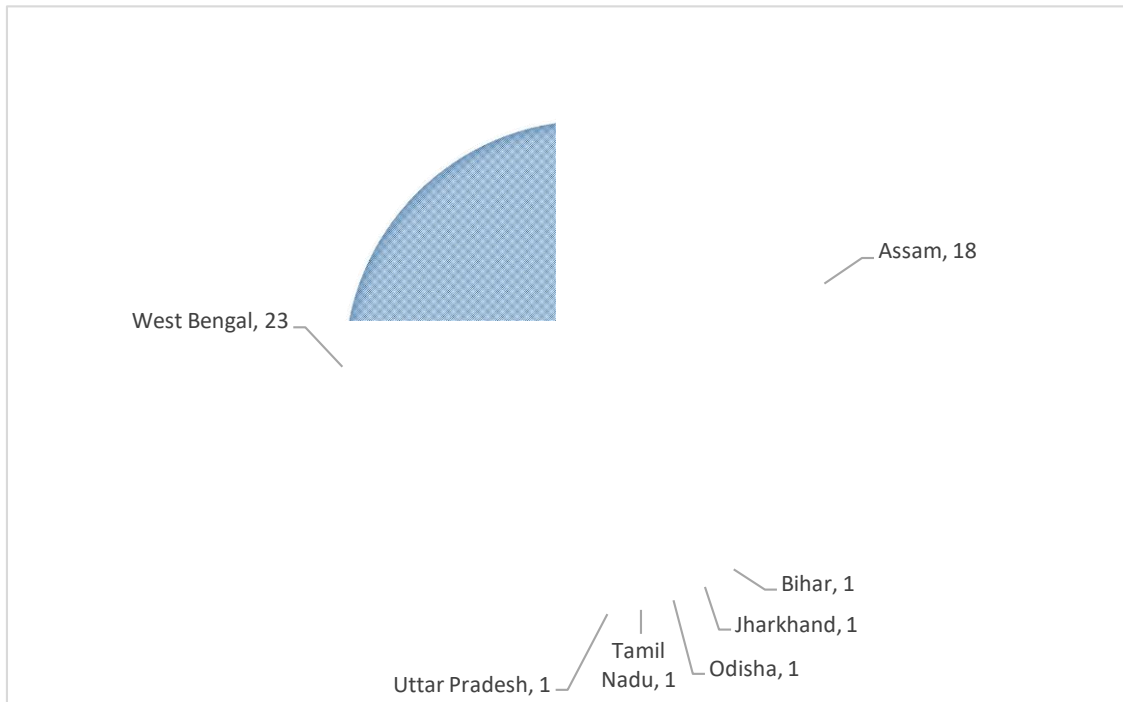


Figure 1: Participants and their place of origin

The duration of their migration ranged from 5 months to 20 years. Most common duration was in the range of 2 - 4 years (22.7%), followed by 4 - 6 years (18.1%). Others were below 6 months (13.6%), 6 - 8 years (9.1%), 8 - 10 years (9.1%) and 10 - 12 years (9.1%). 1 respondent each belonged to 6 months - 2 years, 12 years to 14 years, 14 - 16 years and 18 - 20 years. All the respondents were males.

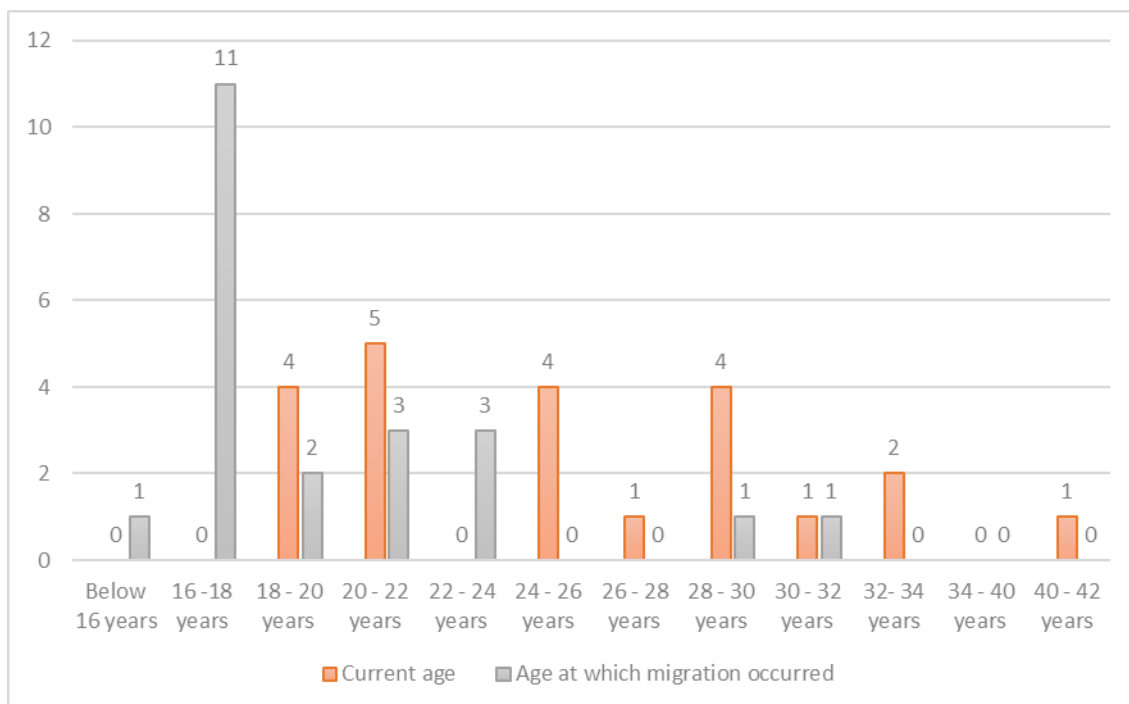


Figure 2: Current age of the participants and age at the time of migration

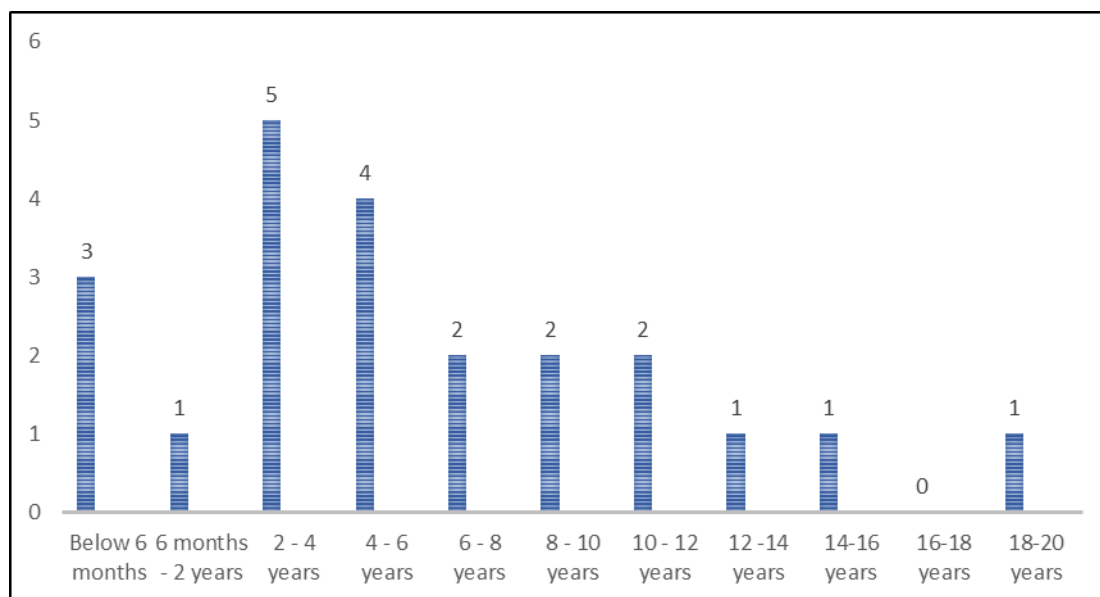


Figure 3: Number of years in Kerala by the participants

Higher wages and better employment opportunities and prospects were the major reasons for the workers to migrate. The wages of the participants from the individual interviews ranged from Rs. 9000/- per month to as high as Rs. 24,000/- per month. The wages received were mainly on a weekly basis, while others like those working in hotels took their wages on a monthly basis and also as and when the need arises. Those working in the factories maintained a booklet which accounted for the number of hours they worked in the respective workplaces. The same remained more of a personal copy, than an official copy by the employer. The majority, i.e. 6 participants received wages in the range of Rs. 15,000 - 17,000 (approximately Rs. 600 per day to Rs. 650 per day), followed by 5 participants in the range of Rs. 12,000 - 15,000 (approximately Rs. 500 per day to Rs. 600 per day).

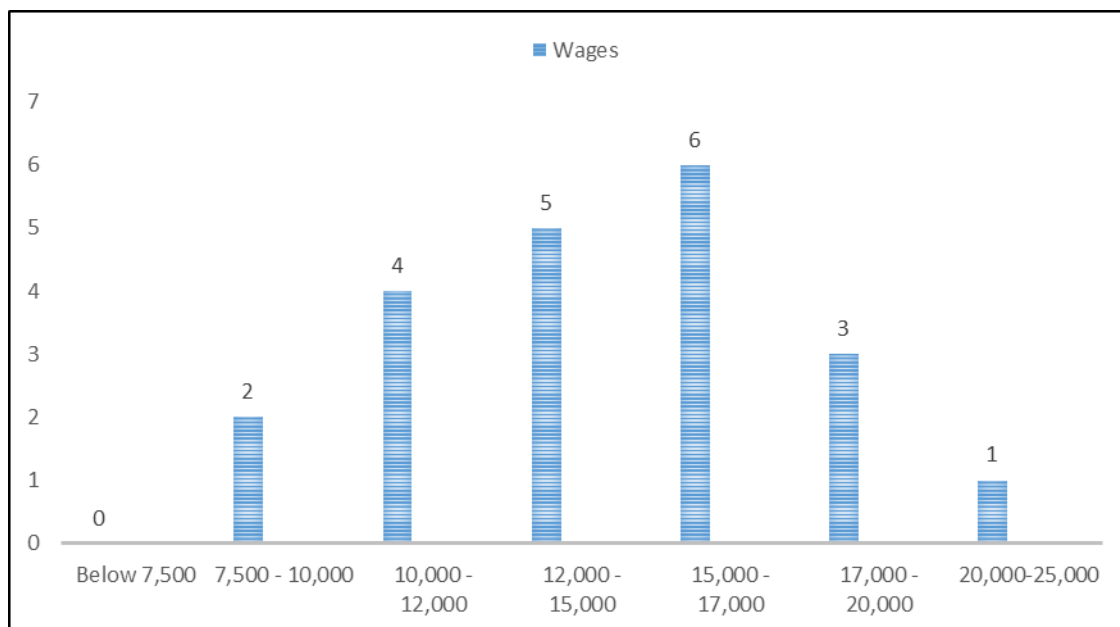



Figure 4: Wages of Migrant Worker participants

The lowest wages received was by an 18 year-old (Assamese who has been in Kerala for the past 4 months, working as a helper in a grocery store. He received Rs. 300 per day. The highest wages received was a 29 year old Tamilian who has been in Kerala for the past 11 years, who ironed clothes in an establishment. The same can be attributed with the limited negotiating ability with a 18 year old



worker and a greater extent of negotiating ability with a Tamilian worker, who may also be familiar with the native language.

One of the migrants who had previously migrated to other states in India mentioned *“In Delhi. In Bihar. There is some or other issues in all paces. Here it is more peaceful”*. He further mentions *“Kerala is peaceful. Theft, Goondaism and other things are lesser. You go to work and come back to room, no one pesters. If it was somewhere else, someone hit us or beat us”*. A more stable society and little or no xenophobia contributed to their migration to Kerala.

It is pertinent to understand the issues and concerns of the migrant workers at their workplace. The interactions formed at the workplace are reflective of the existing perceptions and behaviour of the host society to the migrants. While aspects are looked with a legal perspective, the understanding is broadly socio-legal. Although the State decides legislations and policies that determine the legal entitlement, it is often quite different with the social realities existing in the society. The realization of rights continues to be with in reference to another individual or against the state. While the rights may continue being in place, individuals may only enjoy those when they continue to understand, perceive and recognize them.

While the proofs and contacts continue to be a concept alien to the informal sector in India, it is pertinent to understand them with a view to understand its relational subjectivities in hampering their lives. None of the respondents mentioned of a written contract or document that proved them being employed under a specific contractor or in an establishment. The same continues with that pertaining to the promised wages while hiring. One of the respondents on asked of any contract replied *“No. It is orally. Not in writing”*. Another respondent on being asked if he has any proof of being employed in the establishment he worked mentioned *“I have a pass. That is for the entry. So that is a proof of me working there”*. The lack of proof or any evidence also strips them of their identity and contribution to the concerned employer or establishment. One of the respondents mentioned *“It is based on trust”*, which again continued to be intangible and continues to be something that remains between two individuals. This also impacts several of their rights. Their identities and existence remain primarily affected in case of any emergency or crisis that may possibly occur in their lives in Kerala. They continue remaining *ghost workers- visible, yet invisible*.

Workers engaged in establishments of formal nature and sectors like construction had restricted working hours. Their working hours ranged from 8 - 9.5 hours a day. However, some employed in hotels, butcher shops, grocery stores mentioned of long working hours, sometimes based on the demand of the customers. An 18 year old respondent, who looked underage working in a shop mentioned *“the work starts 10 am and ends till around 9 pm”*. He also mentioned *“If the shop is closed on Sundays, then I don’t have to work”*, thereby putting the worker entirely under the benevolence of the employer. In this particular case, the respondent was being paid only Rs. 300 per day, while another respondent working a vegetable shop working from 8.30 am to 9 pm earned Rs. 500 per day. The difference could be correlated with the number of years of them being in Kerala. While the former was only in Kerala from the past 4 months, the latter had been in Kerala for the past 4 years. The added vulnerability and the ease in exploitation of the recent entrants was mentioned by Dr. Benoy Peter, Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID). Little to no knowledge of Kerala as a state and society, and the language gap could be the root cause of recent entrants being gullible to the exploitative practices of the employers.

Two respondents recollected their experiences where one was employed in an established business dealing in meat and the other in a hotel, worked for 15 - 17 hours per day. One of the respondents recollected how with working in a butcher shop for long hours resulted his hands being severely hurt and wounded. An employer in Ernakulam mentioned how migrant workers were an asset. He mentioned *“If the local workers can lift suppose 2 loads at a go up the stairs, migrant worker can take up to 5”*. It is the desire to thrive and earn a livelihood that often scuffles their voices by themselves.

While the working hours may only reflect the perception of labour as a commodity at large, the wage discrimination practised with the migrant workers as against the local workers are an example of some of the practices of the host society to the migrants. Wage discrimination remains a



reality that continues infesting the roots of the ethos of equality and justice. Wage discrimination was practiced very conveniently, often with reasons that seem logical yet remains inherently violation of rights. All of them agreed to the fact. Yet their responses and reasons were different. One of respondents mentioned that a local Malayali mason would earn Rs. 1200 while a migrant worker would earn Rs. 600 per day. Another respondent mention *“So they will get 300 more... We will get that much less...”*. Another respondent mentioned the difference to be Rs.100 - 200 per day.

The issue was the assumed normalcy with which the workers accepted the disparity in the wages. One of them mentioned *“Thinking about it is of no benefit to us”*. Their ability to question these practices also remains subdued by themselves. A respondent mentioned *“why to think? They are of here and hence demand more. I didn’t ask anything”*. However, one of the interesting responses was *“200 - 300 for Bengalis, Odisha and others like us, get same. Tamilians get more than us”*. The hierarchical structure was something that was a matter that was unique. Dr. Peter mentioned:

*“The employers choose a workforce that is subservient, available for longer periods and content with lower facilities. Language acts as a means of oppression, created with the barrier it creates in comprehending it. It is a strategy of the employers in selective recruitment so that a loyal, cheap workforce is available for 24 hours. The Malayali worker gets the highest, a worker from Tamil Nadu the next are the workers from the other parts of the country. Language in the case of Tamilians acts a tool to negotiate better. The recent entrants, women, workers belonging to tribal/backward communities and people not familiar with the place are the most vulnerable sections.”*

A respondent also mentioned that the decision for the same is partly with the ability with which the local workers negotiate. He reasons it As *“The owner will say that when I give 500 to all others, why should I give you extra 300?..the Malayali worker wouldn’t agree and leave. The owner will then agree for 800. So it is 800 for them and for us 500”*.

Exploitation of the workers is looked in the background of long working hours, inhumane conditions and withholding of wages by some employers/contractors. Aashikul Rehman, a butcher in Karimugal recollected his experience working in a meat business and mentioned *“I worked for 6 months there, he did not give 6000 - 7000 rupees”*. He further talks of the long working hours and the fact that he kept their wages with himself. He recollected:

*“There was a lot of work there. Normally here it is 12 - 13 hours, there it used to go upto 16 - 17 hours. The work continues at night as well... When there is work for 10 people, the work is given to 5 of them and asked to finish that. If workers come to join, he doesn’t hire them.”*

He mentioned that they talked to him of leaving but the employer did try to beat them and force them continue working.

*“We have problems in our hands. If you make us work like this to this extent, this is bound to happen. So at the time of leaving, he came to beat us.”*

They were forced to run away in the middle of the night fearing for their lives and bodily integrity. He along with another co-worker fled from the place. He further mentioned:

*“If I was continuing there, I would have been dying. If I am caught then also I am dead. Leaving that work only made me to look for other jobs. There is no fear in our lives. If there is life, we will have to work and survive. And if we die, it is a little better. If we die, there won’t be any more problems. We have thought like that only.”*

He additionally mentioned *“Yes, all the persons were from outside. They weren’t localites. All from outside Kerala”* and thus bringing to the fact of them being gullible because of them being migrants. Another respondent mentioned *“I was working with a company earlier. There was one contractor there.... He initially employed me for 5 days and did not pay. So he came later and offered us more work and took me there. I worked there for 3 days. So my 11,200 rupees is still left”*.

The researcher did come across two more migrant workers who were not paid their due wages. With time, they had given up hope.

A respondent also mentioned of the presence of agents at the time of employment also added to the exploitative practice. He mentioned *“There was commission deducted from the wages. Daily. When we came at the start, we were given 400 rupees. From that 50 - 100 rupees is deducted”*.

A respondent from Odisha mentioned *“in Kerala, some people who are contractor and employer are haraami (bastards). They make us do work and do not give our money (wages)”*. He further mentioned that on asking for their dues, the employer would threaten us and tell us to go back home. He further said *“Yes, we protested. He said to get lost and get back to your home or else he'll file a case”*. The same remains pending and the respondent let go of his wages that were due. However, the employers fail to understand the aspect and role of wages in the lives of the workers.

One of the respondent mentions *“So they were people who get their wages only daily will they able to survive themselves”*.

There was no discrimination between separate restrooms for local workers and migrant workers or for employers and migrant workers. However, a respondent mentioned *“There are two toilets. One is for the workers. But for the owner of the company, there is another toilet. So he comes with the key, opens and uses it and locks it thereafter”*. In some cases, the contractors and employers used the same in case of emergency. The alternative to that being using at their own houses, which in those cases were situated near the workplace.

An interesting observation while collecting data was the bifurcation of toilets based on the states to which the workers belonged. On questioning the logic behind the same, the respondent replied

*“It must be bifurcated (asserted strongly). Those people will keep it open and it stinks..saala they will dirty it.. so then we won't know if it was a Bihari or someone else who dirtied it. Assamese or Bengali or Odiya did it?..”*

The same was managed in an interesting manner. *“There is not one key..there are 2 keys. So we tie one where we work. So whoever needs to use it, will take it”*. The segregation of the toilets reflects the divide based on the state of origin existing within the migrant workers themselves. It also shows the hidden discriminative practices that emanates by borders of their own home-states, something that is a manmade feature. Borders have carefully seeped to individual identities that form their individual perceptions to other migrant workers.

Shelter remains a basic necessity for human existence. The social network facilitates the migrants to find a shelter that continues to be based on the familial relationships and connections based on commonalities through same village or state. One of the respondents said *“When I came to Kerala from my village, there were others from my village also. They said there is this work and there is room”*. Thus, there was an ease in finding a shelter in Kerala for the new migrants.

Food was mainly being managed by the respondents themselves. Two respondents, one of whom worked in a hotel had his meals from the place of work. The other respondent mentioned that the employers provided with the necessary groceries for the workers. A respondent belonging to Odisha mentioned the process of preparing food: *“Odisha people together. People from Bengal together. And Tamilians together”*. Another respondent mentioned *“We are Hindus. They have to prepare meat and all. It is better that they prepare separately”*. The bifurcation remained confined to the borders or on the communal basis. It is interesting how they continue be a section for the society in Kerala, yet continue to be divided based on certain social constructs and norms.

Situations that account for crisis and emergency continue to be an indispensable part of any human existence. However, the livelihood that may sustain only to meet their daily needs may put the migrant worker in a dilemma as to what action must be taken. Five respondents mentioned of their attempt to borrow money from the employer himself. A respondent mentioned that he had asked for advance from his employer during emergency situation and the amount was limited to 1000 - 2000 rupees. Another respondent mentioned how the employer discouraged the over-reliance on borrowing money, as it would only put him in the loop of debt. One of the respondents mentioned *“In Kerala none of the companies would give loans to outsiders”*. However, those who agree to give an advance, deduct the same on a weekly basis or monthly basis, depending on the manner of payment of wages. One of them explained the process *“He used to deduct little each month. So if I am supposed to get 10,000 as wages in a month, if he takes back the entire amount, how will our house survive back*

home? So I said that you give me 8000 and take back 2000 from my wages. Like this, if he cuts for 5 months, the debt is completed”.

An easy and convenient source are the co-workers who either stay with them or work under the same employer/contractor. The newly formed social relations act as an aid in the workers’ ability to cope with the emergency. Three respondents mentioned that if nothing happens, they rely on borrowing from people back in their village. One of the responses were “*We pray to God and ask for his help.. I try to get some money and send it back home. Or else I talk to people back in the village and ask my friends to give 2000 - 3000 to my family*”. However, the same continues to be against surety and interest. One of the respondents mentioned “*We had to give interest. Around 3 - 4%*”. Another respondent mentioned,

*“So I tell the problems to a person, if he doesn’t have, I ask the second person. So the second person may ask something valuable against it. So it can be the land that we have or something valuable like ornaments. Something of value is given. Something has to be done to go ahead.”*

A respondent mentioned “*It is a lot of difficulties, money is sent from home. I came outside to work, so taking money from home to survive here doesn’t make sense*”.

The loops of vicious debt cycle continue to subject them to a possible deprivation of living standards and dignity.

The majority of respondents mentioned no discrimination being faced from their co-workers or employers/contractors. A respondent mentioned how they could have food with their employers when they went outside for having food. Three respondents however agreed to the element of discrimination as being a practice that is done by the virtue of them being from another state. A respondent mentioned “*Yes without any reason. These things happen everywhere. So when it happens here, we have to adjust only*”. Another person refrained from talking of the same. He said “*We prefer a peaceful life in a foreign state, than to talk of the issues and problems they have face on a day-to-day basis*”. Another respondent mentioned poverty and lack of financial resources as a reason. He mentioned “*Here also it happens sometime. But we are poor, so we can’t do anything*”. The reason of the assumed normalcy or implicit acceptance to these practices is the assumed position of themselves being intruders into the Kerala society. While one of them mentioned “*See we are paradesi (migrants) people*”, the other respondent mentioned “*We did try asking why the difference. They said that we are outsiders and they are from here. So if they don’t have work how will things work? If I don’t give them, there will be problem*”.

#### 4.2 Discussion

The research may have its limitation with the limited time frame to grasp a larger picture of the issues of migrant workers, but it does reflect and provides a glimpse of the strategies the migrants adopt in their attempt in earning a livelihood.

Unequal wages were mentioned to be a form of discriminative practices (Kurian et al., 2013; Prasad-Aleyamma, 2017). While the existing literature depicts more of the forms of discrimination and how it impacted the lives of the workers, the current study brings forth the element of ‘assumed normalcy’ as concomitant with the migratory process. The same is looked through a lens of the assumed benevolence in the host society accommodating them in the background of presumption of them being intruders in the hosts’ spaces and economy.

While in cases of international migration, the strategies adopted are assimilation, retaining or distancing from both (Üstüner, 2017), the current study highlights mistrust and discrimination by the host society, despite migration being internal. Elements of distrust and fear of a culturally distinct society formed their identities being ghost workers. The loss of social network that they enjoyed back in their villages was also found to be a reason. The study also highlights that national borders being only a nominal factor in added vulnerabilities to migrants. Respondents in Kerala, due to the cultural shock due to the wide gap in the socio-cultural environment considered ‘Kerala’ as foreign, an aspect that is not consistent with the host location being within the boundaries of the same country. This raises a pertinent question as to why the gap if international conventions in non-inclusion of internal

migration with the understanding of State to protect its own nationals, yet it being of little priority. This has resulted in a big void in the purpose of global responsibility in upholding human existence and ethos.

Exploitation is looked in the background of working hours and workload. The current research brings forth the exploitative practices become more in magnitude with lack of proper documentation of being employed or a contract for the wages, thereby conveniently used in withholding the wages or access to justice systems that rely on evidence. Bonded or forced labour becomes a normalcy as a result.

Identity crisis and identity growth have been identified as issues for the migrant (Zikic et al., 2016) and the current research contributes to this literature, finding cases of cultural gap that could be bridged with adaptability to the host language. Language builds an economic hierarchy, forming the basis of a social ladder. The study also brings out the role of language in asserting themselves, which also affects their interests at workplace and the general justice in the society. Accessing justice continues to be the individual-driven approaches in ensuring that the ends of justice are met.

## 5. Conclusion

Migration though undertaken under a motive does not divest them of their inherent core dignified existence by the virtue of their existence. A respondent mentioned *“There is no value to life working there. If there is life, we will have to work and survive”*. Another respondent on being asked if dignity was a core element in existence mentioned *“yes and if it is not there, then one must not stay there. (reiterates) If there is no izzat (dignity), then he must not continue there”*. It is also the issue of having an employment of one’s interest that also contributes to dignity. A respondent mentioned his dissatisfaction *“I got work in a butcher shop. But for Muslims like us, cutting hen is not good”*. He further mentions *“In cutting chickens, there is nothing. Earn in the day and finish up by night. There is nothing beyond that. It starts daily and finishes the same day. Our lives are already insignificant now”*. Another respondent mentions *“If we are able to read and write, and are physically fit, we can go outside”*. Lack of education remains a factor that the respondents found impacting their degree of freedom in opting for an occupation that they sought for. A respondent mentioned *“Even for a decent work, you need to know how to read and write. If you are working in a shop, a customer comes with the entire list of things he wants to buy and says get them, I can’t even read the list. So that age to read and write has gone away”*.

Illiteracy confined them to occupations that were more labour-intrinsic and not skill based. A respondent mentioned,

*“No one gets money while taking birth. But if I take birth in a rich person’s house, I will have facilities, education everything. Me in the other case, with short stature, short hands was born in a poor family. I became poor after coming to the world. I wasn’t poor before, but only after coming to the world. But you became rich after taking birth in a rich person’ house.”*

It is the emphasis of a basic human dignity that every human deserves by the virtue of their existence. Kerala continues to be perceived as a state that provides employment but fails to attract many for longer period. A respondent mentions the difference in Kerala and his home-state *“That is our land (state). There I have my wife and children. So that is why”*. Another reason a respondent mentioned was the connotation of themselves as a commodity *“They need men for work so that is why we have come here”*. Majority of the respondents viewed their lives in Kerala only to a period restricted to where they earned a source of livelihood. However, one of the respondent did mention his eagerness to continue in Kerala beyond that. Dr. Peter mentions how the existing trend of migration is beneficial for the workers as well. He says *“They come into a scenario where they can sit with anyone in a hotel. Unlike at their native places where caste discrimination is rampant. The same being culturally imbibed would eventually fade out with their interactions in the Kerala society”*.

There are some migrant workers who in their attempt to cope with the alien social, political and cultural conditions develop practices that tend to overcome and even deconstruct these

categorizations. It is, however, visible only over a longer time frame and is seldom reflected with respect to a single individual or within a short time frame. The categorizations remain something already present and often internalized in the host society and breaking it off is a slow and cautious process. Interactions form an integral element in the possible extent of assimilation that the migrant can possibly achieve to understand their ability in forming a part of the host society with the idea of integrating in the existing framework.

The role of social networks form the new protective framework even at the host society which aid and supports them during emergency situations. It also is the foundation on which the existing perceptions of the Kerala society and individuals are formed. However, what remains unchanged and unaffected with the changing socio-political and cultural ground realities is the basic dignity to all entitled by the virtue of their existence. The dignity and rights of the workers continues to be a gamble that often has the State, society and individuals as the participants. It is perceived to be a benevolence or recognition emanating from the dominant section of the society, which in the case of migrant workers are the host society. Apart from their economic benefits, their contribution translates and trickles to other spheres of life. Their presence adds value to the existing socio-cultural system. It is only with the proactive will of the state that not only looks into providing incentives or protection to the migrants but seeks to provide a congenial environment that harnesses their own potentials, aiding the realization of their goal. While the welfare state must look beyond these factors and must ensure that the individualities and identities are not compelled to be modified in order to better suit the environment of the host society. However, there is a need to realize that migrants contribute far greater to the society and it is not limited to the economic benefits that continues to be perceived. Their contribution to the developmental strides in the society needs to be acknowledged. Their presence continues to be a value-addition to the economic, social and cultural development of the society.

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