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A STUDY ON THE DOMESTIC MIGRANT LABOURER’S IN THE UNORGANISED CONSTRUCTION SECTOR WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KALAMASSERY MUNICIPALITY, ERNAKULAM DISTRICT

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Abstract

Kalamassery being the industrial hub of Kochi Metropolitan City located in Ernakulam district in the state of Kerala, India has witnessed rapid increase in activities particularly in the infrastructure and construction sectors. With huge demand for semi-skilled and unskilled labourers in the unorganised construction sector, it serves as a platform for employment to a majority of the migrant workforce. Even though, these migrant labourers play a critical role in the growth of an economy, build resplendent city economies, they fail to get a share of the riches and much worse, struggle for a dignified human existence in the same cities they build. They are inherently vulnerable as they are the victims of worker’s right violation and discrimination based on wage and employment at the hands of brokers, recruiters, employers and migration officials at the place of destination. Thus, this paper is a micro analysis of the domestic migrant labourers (DMLs) in the unorganised construction sector in the Kalamassery Municipality and can be used to understand the demographic profile of the domestic migrant labourers, rationale behind their migration, their working and living conditions, social integration problems etc as a smaller framework on the study of domestic migrants with respect to Kerala as a whole.

Keywords: DMLs, Internal Migration, Informal/Unorganised Sector.

Introduction

The economic reform process, commonly known as ‘LPG’ – Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation that was initiated in India in the early 1990s, not only increased the pace of urbanisation but also promoted the growth of internal migration from mostly rural to urban areas in the country, primary motive being employment. Even though there is increased migration over these years, a large volume of literature on rural-urban migration studied that these migrant labour force move into informal or unorganised sector than in the organised sector. At present the Indian labour market is characterised by predominance of informal employment with a large share of workforce working as self-employed and casual workers.

The worrying trend in the recent times is the adding rate of informal employment indeed in the organised sector.

Kerala, a state that witnessed much of its male population voyage to other states in India and to other countries for several decades in search of employment is now home to a more domestic story of mass migration. Due to higher wages for unskilled labour in the state, ample opportunities for employment and shortage of local labour, (paradoxically despite the high (formal) unemployment rate in the state) there is a massive influx of migrant labour to the state, making it a ‘Gulf’ for these migrants. While there are around two million Keralites working in the Gulf and many in various parts of India and abroad, the state faces labour shortage in its booming construction sector and the traditional agricultural sector. With huge demand for semi-skilled and unskilled labour in the unorganised construction sector, it ultimately provides employment to a majority of the migrant workforce.

The inter-state migrants are the most vulnerable class as they are unable to enjoy many entitlements/benefits from central and state governments at the destination. Lack of chops exacerbates their vulnerabilities, because they are largely interchangeable and are set up to be constantly rotated across work spots and sectors. The urban labour markets treat them with opportunistic incuriosity rooting hard labour but denying introductory weal entitlements and frequently cheating them of hard-earned stipend. Hence, it necessitates an insight into the factors that led them to migrate and also the problems faced by these migrants after migration.

Statement of the Research Problem

Ernakulam being a growing metropolis has been undergoing rigorous infrastructural changes over these years. Construction sector is booming in the district, playing a vital role in the employment generation for both local and migrant labourers. Due to the shortage of local labour, better wages and employment opportunities for semi-skilled and unskilled labour in the rising construction sector in the district, it has led to a massive influx of migrant labourers. Kalamassery municipality, one of the eleven municipalities in the Ernakulam district is considered as the Industrial Hub of Kerala since it is a highly industrialised region with several factories and



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IT companies. In the recent years, this Municipality has witnessed a large number of migrant labourers working, both in the organised and unorganised construction sector and hence, this Municipality has been selected as the universe of the study for an in-depth analysis of the domestic migrant labourers working in the unorganised construction sector.

Objectives

1. To identify the demographic profile of the domestic migrant labourers and the causal factors (push and pull factors) leading to in-migration of these workers.
2. To examine the working conditions of the domestic migrant labourers.
3. To understand the living conditions of the domestic migrant labourers.

Methodology

The present study is undertaken in Kalamassery Municipality in the Ernakulam district for an in-depth analysis. The selection of the area was purposive as the area accounted for a large number of migrants in the informal construction sector. A total of 100 samples of migrant labourers in the informal construction sector were collected. Both primary and secondary data are used to carry out the study. Quantitative data analysis was done using the software - Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Information sourced from the quantitative data was used to substantiate the qualitative data. The present study is both descriptive and analytical in nature. All the primary and secondary data were collected during the period of 2022-2023.

Results and Discussions

Demographic Profile of the DMLs

The survey showed that migrants are from distant states of India - West Bengal, followed by Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand which are the most economically backward states of India. Majority of the migrants belongs to rural areas and hence confirms the fact that, internal migration to the observed area is basically of the pattern- rural to urban. A large proportion of the DMLs fall in the economically active population. Female ratio to male migrants is low and are associational migrants.

The study also revealed that internal migration takes place largely among the socially economic backward classes. Majority of the DMLs has only primary level of education and some are illiterate adding to their chances of getting exploited and affect their bargaining power. Most of the migrant workers are the only breadwinners with more than five members in the family. Only few migrants own both land and house at native place and the land is used for small cultivations for self-sufficiency.

Rationale behind Migration

The rationale behind migration is analysed according to the push and pull model, where push factors are those that force the people to migrate to another place and pull factors that attract the people to migrate into a certain place. From the analysis it is found that majority of the DMLs left their native place because of economic reasons such as low productivity in agriculture, low wages, unemployment, poverty and financial liability etc. Few labourers migrated due to other reasons such as natural calamities.

The main pull factor that attracted the DMLs to migrate to the observed area are the flourishing construction sector and the growing informalisation of employment in this sector. Only minor shares of the migrants are reported to have migrated due to better standard of living and medical facilities.

Therefore, the push and pull factors of migration are complimentary to each other, which means reason to out-migrate is remedied by the corresponding pull at the destination.

Work Profile and the Working Conditions of DMLs

Prior to migration, majority of the workers were engaged in agriculture and casual work which included a few skilled and semi-skilled workers such as masons, carpenters, plumbers etc. After migration large number of migrant labourers in the construction industry is reported to have doing unskilled works. A comparison with the primary occupation before migration shows that, the migrants who were engaged in agriculture and small-scale business and those who were unemployed, due to their lack of skill and experience got absorbed in unskilled works such as carrying loads and digging. And the rest in skilled and semi-skilled works such as brick layering, concrete mixing, carpentry etc.

Contractors have played a significant role in labour migration from long time. But it is not the only significant channel through which labourers migrate. In the observed area, majority of the DMLs migrated to the observed area through friends and relatives and at



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their own will respectively. Most of the DMLs have been staying in the observed area for a short period of time - below 1 year and have difficulty in finding new jobs in the sector. Whereas, the migrants living for more than a year in the observed area has been working in different construction sites over the years and has helped them in getting new works through the same contractors or agents for whom they had worked earlier. However, it needs to be noted that this is not the total duration of their stay in the observed area because a migrant labourer picked at random might have worked in other districts or municipalities in Kerala.

A comparison between wages received before and after migration showed that majority of the DMLs received higher wages at the destination. This justifies the fact that higher wages are indeed a dominant pull factor for labour migration. However, cases of wage discrimination were also reported. Majority of the DMLs who worked overtime often did not receive any overtime allowances.

In the informal construction sector due to the instability of work and lack of contract between the employer and the workers, most of the DMLs do not get work for a full month. This makes the migrants move from one area to another or from one industry to another in search of jobs, during the period in which most of them remain unemployed which is popularly referred to as the “search unemployment period”, which may prevail lesser than a month or as long as 3 months or above.

Regarding the facilities provided to the workers at work site, most of the DMLs reported that there are no proper safety facilities, resting places and sanitation facilities. It was also observed that, none of the migrants in the construction sector under study were insured. This is a major drawback especially in cases when the migrants are met by serious accidents that cost more than their monthly average salary.

Thus, even though the DMLs earn much higher wages in the informal construction than in their native place, they work in precarious and unprotected conditions. They are exploited by their employers in terms of wages, overtime allowance and facilities provided to them. Therefore, even though they contribute largely in the infrastructural development of the state, they are not covered under any social security measures.

Living Conditions of DMLs in the Living City

The houses or rooms of the migrants are located in shanty slum areas of the city. Majority of the migrant workers lives in shared rented houses or near the work site with bare basic amenities. Most of the DMLs have unhealthy habits such as chewing tobacco, paan parag and consumption of alcohol and cigarettes. However, it was found that, drinking and smoking are restricted to only male workers. Due to the tiring and hard manual labour in the construction sites, most of the DMLs reported to having body pain and pain in leg/hand. Incidence of headache and back pain are also high. Seven percent of the workers reported having severe back pain due to carrying loads etc. Majority of the migrant workers availed government hospitals for treatment. Due to the lack of ration cards, they are unable to avail free or subsidised treatments provided for people belonging to BPL families. Therefore, it is clear that the living conditions of DMLs are pathetic and mostly unhygienic.

Expenditure and Saving Pattern of the DMLs

The study revealed that, majority of the DMLs have saving habits either in bank or in the form of cash in hand. The data on monthly average household income of the DMLs after migration has showed an exciting fact that, about half of the migrants are getting an income of Rs.10, 000-15,000 per month. This shows how far the construction sector has helped them in earning better income.

Even though, the monthly average household income of the DMLs seems to be good, a good proportion of this money comprises of remittances made by the migrants. Since majority of the migrants left their family back at home, remittance plays an important role.

Problems Faced by the DMLs in the Living City

Some of the common problems faced by the migrant workers in the city are briefed below.

- **Lack of access to entitlements they enjoyed before migration: The lack of ration cards at the place of destination** results in the loss of access to entitlements and social services. **This is one major problem reported by majority of the DMLs. They stated that they are unable to avail subsidised food and kerosene, access to public services such as subsidised hospital treatments etc.**
- **Problems related to housing and accommodation:** Majority of the migrants live in shanty slum areas. The basic amenities procured by these workers are also very poor. This further perpetuates their vulnerability.
- **Limited access to formal financial services:** Lack of permissible proofs of identity and residence and in addition the attitude from the part of officials in not accepting the documentation provided by the migrants, often make the DMLs fail to satisfy the



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Know Your Customer (KYC) norms as stipulated by the Indian banking regulations and hence are unable to open bank accounts in cities which have implications on the savings and remittance behaviours of migrant workers. In such cases, they lack suitable options for safe-keeping of their money and send remittances mostly through informal ways.

- **Exploitation from the part of contractors:** Lack of written contracts, enforceable agreements regarding wages or other benefits, and commitments regarding regular provision of work in the informal construction sector, these DMLs are completely dependent on the middlemen for information and end up working in low-end, low-value, hard and risky manual labour and are constantly subject to exploitation with regards to manipulation in wage rates and work records, non-payment or withholding of wages etc along with little or no opportunity for legal recourse.
- **Limitation to Access Education:** Migrants who had migrated along with their family reported difficulty in enrolling their children in the local schools nearby. Secondly, medium of language also posed difficulty in learning.
- **Problem of social integration and lack of protection and problem of political exclusion:** The inability to speak local language often keeps the migrant workers isolated from the surrounding community. This makes it more difficult for them to find out about the local wage, rights and support systems available to them. This increased their chances of getting abused and exploited. The attitude of the local people towards the DMLs and the unfounded apprehensions about them makes these DMLs feel aliens at the destination.

Conclusion

Over the years, internal migration has been increasing in India. It helps shape the economic, social, and political life of sending and receiving regions. Internal migration is triggered primarily by employment and marriage. While marriage is a common motorist of internal migration especially among women, a significant share of internal movements is driven by long-distance and male-dominated labour migration. Lack of job opportunities in the sending areas that is compromised by the receiving areas is an inherent aspect of growing internal labour migration. This is further augmented by urbanisation and the informalisation of jobs.

In recent years, many studies have shown that the growth of informal sector or the growing informalisation of jobs in the formal sector has been serving as the largest employment generator especially for the semi-skilled and unskilled workers. But the predominance of the informal sector has led to a situation where the benefits of economic growth are enjoyed by a few with a growing proportion of the population living as working poor.

Kerala, a state that was once known to be famous for emigration and out-migration, has now become one of the largest net-in migrating states and is considered to be the “Gulf” for migrants from all over India. According to different sources, construction sector pools the highest share of inter-state migrants in Kerala with sixty percent employment.

Even though migration has somewhat proved to be economically beneficial to the inter-state migrants, their human rights are not guaranteed by the host state and are grossly violated. In spite of earning better livelihood than their native place, they are facing deprivation and discrimination in the social and economic spheres in their destination. They are often the victims of labour market.

Since the benefit of economic gains from migration are highly crowded out by the disadvantages from miserable working and living conditions, it necessitates the enforcement of laws designed to protect the rights of these migrants. And also, the indiscriminate inflow of migrants has to be curbed as it not only affects the employability of local labourers but also puts pressure on governance as well as civic amenities.

Suggestions

In the light of problems faced by the inter-state migrants in the destination, following suggestions are made to help improve their condition in the in-migrating state.

- The study revealed that the living condition of the DMLs in the camps/dwellings needs to be improved. Issues like usage of proper cooking fuel, availability of drinking water, proper waste disposal mechanism, availability of toilets etc need to be ensured in their camps/dwellings. The Local Self Government Department (LSGD) should regularly monitor the camps/dwellings of DMLs in their area.
- Mandatory registration of DMLs with Government departments by their respective employers must be ensured so that the migrant labourers can avail various social security programmes implemented by the government at the place of destination.
- Periodical inspection must be undertaken at all work sites to ensure availability and proper usage of safety equipment's.
- For ensuring better quality of life, Department of Labour need to monitor and assure minimum daily wage to the DMLs. Also, periodic random surveys must be conducted among the migrant labourers regarding their wages and work conditions.
- The programmes like ‘Changathi’ need to be properly implemented in all sectors to improve the education of the DMLs.



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