Volume I

Migration Governance, Vulnerability, and Social Protection

Editor's Note –

Table of Contents

1. **Unseen, Unheard and Unaccounted: Internal Migrants' Lives in Bondage and Economic Vulnerability**
   Rakesh Ranjan Kumar; Anjana Rajagopalan

2. **Teaching the Children of 'Guest Workers': Navigating Migrant Capabilities and Aspirations in Kerala's Schooling System**
   Ganga S.

3. **Disaster and Vulnerability of Inter-State Migrant Labour: A Study of the Kerala Flood of 2018**
   Jenikrishna M. U.; Neelmani Jayswal

4. **Rights of Inter-State Migrants During Pandemic and Post-Pandemic: Examining Migration Governance in India**
   Sadananda Sahoo; Feroz Khan

5. **Essential Labour, Peripheral Citizens: Guest Workers and the Limits of Welfare Federalism in Kerala**
   S. Irudaya Rajan; Prerana Srimaal, Navas M. Khadar

6. **Reverse Migration in Kerala: An Analysis of Post-COVID-19 Situation**
   Risana C. P.; Sreelekha R. G

Editor's Note

Internal migration has evolved over the past three decades from a demographic phenomenon to a structural component of national economic growth, reshaping regional labour markets, urbanisation and social policy. Nevertheless, migration remains a puzzling issue in the public debate despite its enormity. Migrant workers are still vital to the economy's growth, but they remain on the outskirts of policy, citizenship and social acceptance. This issue brings together contributions that reconsider this paradox through the lens of the 'Kerala Model', and provides new insights into the interplay of labour precarity, social exclusion and educational aspirations in one of the most lauded development contexts in India.

Kerala migration is an instance of the deep inequities ingrained in the uneven trajectory of India's growth. Migration has become a livelihood imperative, not an individual choice, for the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, Assam and West Bengal, which have suffered from persistent agrarian distress, limited industrialisation, decline in rural livelihoods and regional disparities in employment opportunities.

Kerala's demographic shift—an ageing population, low birth rates, and significant international migration—has led to a workforce shortage across construction, manufacturing, hospitality, agriculture, and services. Interstate migration involves both labour movement and human resource reallocation among demographically and economically diverse regions. Kerala has been frequently praised as a progressive destination for migrant workers. Welfare packages, health insurance, housing programmes and educational interventions have been adopted by successive governments, which separate the state from many other parts of India. At the heart of this narrative is the adoption of the word *athithi thozhilalikal* ("guest workers") meant to

replace the more stigmatised label of "migrant labourers." The language of hospitality is an attempt to project dignity and inclusiveness in public policy. Nevertheless, the papers in this volume ask readers to question the assumptions implicit in this nomenclature.

It would be a grave contradiction to refer to migrants from other states as guests. Despite its conditional and fleeting nature, hospitality is characterised by empathy. The borders between "hosts" and "outsiders" are gradually re-established through this tacit division between migrants and permanent members of the political community. Language has a significant impact on institutional activity, which is why such symbolic disparities are important. It is more likely that access to welfare, political participation, and social belonging will be a matter of discretion rather than a matter of right if citizens are regarded as guests rather than as equal constitutional members of society. By demonstrating how discourses of temporary accommodation mediate citizenship, Kerala reveals that progressive rhetoric alone is insufficient to overcome deeper patterns of exclusion.

It was during times of crisis that this disparity became even more noticeable. The vulnerabilities related to social invisibility were brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the 2018 floods in Kerala. It was highly challenging for a large number of migrant workers to have access to medical care, transportation, emergency information, rescue attempts, and relief supplies due to the presence of language hurdles, dispersed social networks, and a lack of institutional outreach. These occurrences revealed how public health and disaster preparedness initiatives are often oriented toward more permanent populations, with little thought given to the requirements of an extremely mobile workforce. As a result, crises function as stress tests that show the deficiencies of prior models of inclusion.

The labour market experiences discussed in this issue add to the complexity of Kerala's developmental narrative. Migrant workers are crucial to supporting economic growth, but many still experience issues such as stagnant wages, long working hours, dangerous work environments, informal recruitment techniques and little social protection. These situations are similar to new kinds of labour precarity that go beyond classic conceptions of informal work. Migrants are often embedded in systems with asymmetric bargaining power, limited upward mobility and lasting reliance on intermediaries, rather than simply filling labour shortages. These realities underscore the need for labour governance that is not merely about job creation but also about job quality, dignity and justice.

However, this collection also challenges narratives that view migrant communities only in terms of vulnerability. One of the major contributions to modern studies involves the shifting expectations of settled migrant families. Migration is becoming an intergenerational enterprise in which educational mobility plays a vital role. The increasing demand for English-medium public education among interstate migrant households demonstrates goals that go beyond immediate economic survival. For many parents, English fluency is an emblem of access to wider labour markets, higher education, social acceptance and opportunities not available within the occupational trajectories that have defined their own lives. Education is thus a transformational capacity by which families aim to break the cycle of manual labour and socio-economic marginalisation.

Moreover, these academic goals call into question the notion that internal migration is a transitory phenomenon. When deciding where to settle down for the long haul, how to integrate into the community, and whether to move in the future, families often consider their children's educational opportunities. This transforms public schools into much more than just places to learn; they become vital community gathering places where issues

of equality, inclusion, and citizenship are debated daily. Inclusive migration governance must prioritise equitable access to high-quality education, not a side issue but a fundamental human right.

The studies in this issue, taken together, suggest a wider reassessment of the Kerala Model itself. Once famous for its achievements in literacy, health and social development, Kerala now faces new questions of migration, diversity and inclusive citizenship in an increasingly interconnected economy. The goal is no longer only to attract labour but to develop institutional frameworks that can accommodate demographic transformation while maintaining constitutional values of equality and fairness. This points to a shift away from benevolence-based frameworks toward rights-based approaches, accountability, and universal social protection.

The policy implications are not just for Kerala. As India moves forward with its vision of *Viksit Bharat*, interstate migrants will continue to be vital to the development of infrastructure, urban expansion, manufacturing, logistics, and service sectors across the country. Sustainable development will not be realised if individuals who build cities, roads, industries and public infrastructure remain statistically undercounted, socially marginalised and institutionally disenfranchised. Universal portability of social protection, effective implementation of labour rights, equitable access to health care and education, reliable migration data systems, and inclusive urban governance are no longer peripheral concerns, but essential elements for equitable national development.

This special issue contributes to a growing body of studies that tries to move interstate migrants from the fringes to the heart of development discourse. Collectively, the essays bring together perspectives on labour, citizenship, education, governance and social justice to show that migration is not only an economic phenomenon but also a deep social transformation shaping

India's democratic future. They are reminders that genuine inclusion cannot be founded on the language of hospitality alone. Instead, it should be based on the recognition that interstate migrants are not transient visitors within the nation, but equal citizens whose dignity, rights and ambitions are vital to India's growth trajectory.

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