

# FORCED MIGRATION

PROBLEMS, CHALLENGES AND THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES



Editors

**Sigamoney Shakespeare**

**Indukuri John Mohan Razu**

## A Case Study

### Migrant Workers Suffer Humiliation in Kerala

*Martin Puthussery*

#### **Introduction**

“Migrant workers in Kerala experienced a high level of humiliation and were vulnerable to mental health problems,” were the revelations of the research titled “Exclusion and vulnerability of in-bound migrant workers in Kerala.” According to the study, migrant workers in Kerala were treated with much suspicion and mistrust on account of differences in language and culture. They faced xenophobia, harassment and various other kinds of exclusion and vulnerability. They were more susceptible to mental health problems such as, depression, anxiety and stress. The study found exclusion and vulnerability having significant psychological impacts on the lives of the inter-state labour migrants in Kerala. The study also found that the cultural factors maximum contributed to the exclusion and vulnerability of the migrant workers. The study concluded that as a consequence of the exclusion and vulnerability, migrant workers suffered from humiliation and the experiences of humiliation were affecting their psychosocial well-being and mental health.

The study was based on the researcher’s field experiences while working with migrants in Kerala since 2011. The research was done through an explorative design interviewing 300 migrant workers from northern and eastern Indian States of India, working in Ernakulam, Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram

districts. The study also presented relevant case narratives triangulating qualitative descriptions with quantitative analysis.

### **1. Background of the Study**

All over the world, migrant workers face work-based exploitation and are denied access to public resources at their destinations. They are excluded by the local citizens and are prone to discrimination, exploitation and abuse. They face gender discrimination, inhuman working conditions, linguistic barriers and cultural exclusion. Laws and regulations often exclude them. According to UNESCO and UNICEF (2012), exclusion and vulnerabilities faced by internal migrants in India include, lack of political representation, inadequate housing and lack of formal residency rights; low pay, insecure or hazardous work; limited access to state-provided services such, as health and education; discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, class or gender; and extreme vulnerability of women and children migrants to trafficking and sex exploitation.

In-bound labour migrants in South Indian states are catapulted into a state of cultural shock. They grapple with alien languages, different cultures, races, climate, food habits, work cultures, etc. These factors at the destinations assume an adverse form and trigger alienation, exclusion and various vulnerabilities despite the same nationality. Exclusion and vulnerabilities of in-bound labour migrants in South India include, work-based exploitation, denial of access to common resources, gender discrimination, inhuman working conditions, cultural alienation and linguistic barriers. As a result, in-bound migrant workers in South India are affected by stress, depression, loneliness and addiction.

In-bound migrant workers in Kerala face multiple problems. They find employment but not rights in Kerala. At times, they are treated with much suspicion and mistrust on account of differences in language and culture. They also face xenophobia, harassment and various other kinds of exclusion and vulnerability. They are very vulnerable to exploitative conditions at worksites including, discriminatory wages, long working hours, cheating by contractors regarding wages, and lack of safety measures. In fact, these exclusions and vulnerabilities have direct impact on the lives of the migrant workers. They face various levels of alienation, loneliness, fear, emotional deprivation, stress, anxiety and depression.

### **2. Migration Profile**

According to the study, mostly young people migrated from north and north eastern states to Kerala in search of livelihoods. The study found that most of the migrant workers in Kerala belonged to the category of dispossessed farmers and agricultural labourers. 60 per cent of the respondents were engaged in agriculture-related employment such as, 'one's own land cultivation', 'share crop cultivation' and 'agricultural labour' in their native villages. In Kerala, there was a large concentration of migrant workers from Murzhidabad district of

West Bengal, Nagaon district of Assam and from Nayagarh district of Odisha. The findings showed a very high per cent predominance of religious minorities and tribals among the migrant workers in Kerala. Migrants suffered due to the language barrier to find work on their own and to travel freely in Kerala. They were mostly excluded from the government schemes, the public distribution system and voting rights in Kerala.

The inter-state labour migration from north and north eastern states to Kerala was mostly individual migration and not family migration. The main cause of their migration was basically economic and not social. Low wages and lack of work in their native states were the major reasons for their migration to Kerala. Higher wages and better availability of works in Kerala were the pull factors.

### **3. Exclusion and Vulnerability of the Inter-State Labour Migrants in Kerala**

Deprivations, denial of access to entitlements, work-based susceptibility and situational susceptibility had a strong positive correlation with exclusion and vulnerability. These factors contributed highly to the exclusion and vulnerability of the inter-state labour migrants from north and north eastern states in Kerala. Most of them faced a high level of exclusion and vulnerability as well as a high level of deprivations in Kerala. The study concluded that as the age of the migrant worker increased, the exclusion and vulnerability also increased.

Social, economic, cultural, political and linguistic exclusion and vulnerability contributed heavily to the total exclusion and vulnerability of the inter-state labour migrants from north and north eastern states in Kerala. The cultural exclusion and vulnerability had the highest contribution to the total exclusion and vulnerability. The local community had a lot of apprehensions about the migrant workers and were not treated as equals. They were called 'anya-samsthana thozhilalikal', meaning 'alien' state workers. As a result, these workers faced almost total insularity from the local population and they were not integrated into Kerala society.

### **4. Psychological Impacts on the Inter-State Labour Migrants**

Exclusion and vulnerability had significant psychological impact on the lives of the inter-state labour migrants from north and north eastern states in Kerala. Most of them faced psychological problems. For instance, most of them underwent a high level of humiliation as a result of their experience of exclusion and vulnerability in Kerala. The study concluded that as a consequence of the exclusion and vulnerability, migrant workers in Kerala suffered from humiliation, alienation, agoraphobia and submissiveness.

The correlation coefficient of the consequence on humiliation among migrant workers in Kerala in relation to extent of exclusion and vulnerability, stood at .468 and was the highest correlation among the four psychological variables studied in this research. The study also found that the migrant workers in Kerala experience very high level of submissiveness as a result of their exclusion

and vulnerability. 82 per cent of the respondents reported that they faced a high level of exclusion and vulnerability as well as a high level of submissiveness as a psychological consequence. The findings showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between extent of exclusion and vulnerability and alienation at 99 per cent confidence level. The study found that the migrant workers in Kerala experience high level of alienation as a consequence of their exclusion and vulnerability.

### 5. A Case Narrative

Muktar Ali is a 44-year old migrant worker from Murzhidabad district of West Bengal. He lived with his wife, two sons and a daughter. He used to sell bangles during festivals in nearby town to look after his family. He took a loan of Rs. 50,000 from a nationalized Bank to build his house. But he was unable to repay the loan with the earnings from selling bangles. So, he came to work in Kerala. He was working for seven months in a small factory in Perumbavoor in Ernakulam district of Kerala. One day while operating a machine, his right palm got cut by the machine. After a month's treatment in a private hospital, his right hand, without palm, got healed. He filed a case in the State Labour Department for the workmen compensation on losing the right palm while working. However, the employer did not give any compensation to support him and his family. This forced handicapped Ali to sell lottery tickets among the migrants in Perumbavoor town, the largest migrants' hub in Kerala. Thus, through selling lottery tickets, Muktar Ali is hoping to meet the needs of his family and repay the Bank loan.

### 6. Recommendations of the Research

#### a. Protection of the rights of inter-state migrant workers

The study recommends the Kerala state government to take adequate steps to facilitate protection of the inter-state migrant workers ranging from violation of rights, wage theft and xenophobia within the state. The existing legal protection measures should be made available to the migrant workers, in cases of accidents, deaths, etc. The State government should facilitate policy initiatives to provide social security net and inclusion to interstate migrant workers. There must be a provision for timely assistance and compensation in cases of accidents and deaths of inter-state migrant workers in Kerala.

#### b. Sensitization of the police and the personnel in the public institutions in dealing with migrants

According to the study, the police and the personnel in the public institutions have a strong prejudice against the migrants and so often migrants are branded as criminals and possible threat to the society. The police often deals with them very rudely. There is a deliberate attempt to neither accept their contributions nor to have a positive outlook

towards the migrants. Thus, this study recommends sensitization of the police and the personnel in the public institutions in dealing with migrants.

- c. **Setting up of migrant resource centres and migrant help-desks**  
The Government of India, either on its own or in partnership with voluntary organisations, can set up migrant resource centres and migrant help-desks with personnel, proficient in different languages. These centres could be equipped to deal with labour-related complaints such as, wage theft and emergency issues. Legal clinics can be established which would provide legal aid and counselling to the migrant workers.
- d. **Portability of basic services and entitlements of the migrant workers**  
The Government of India can initiate and implement a policy for inter-state migrant workers to access services such as, PDS, public health care, ICDS services, voting rights, housing schemes and insurance schemes all over India. Thus, migrant workers and their families can procure subsidised food provisions, public health facilities, mid-day meal, benefits under ICDS and the other social security entitlements at their destinations in India.
- e. **Accepting the inter-state migrant workers as fellow citizens of India by local residents**  
The study recommends accepting the inter-state migrant workers as equal citizens of India and as one of the contributors to the development and the economy of Kerala. Thus, it is important to promote a positive discourse to avoid prejudices and negative portrayal of these migrant workers.
- f. **Including mental health problems of migrants in Social Work curriculum and practices**  
The Social Work Colleges in India can include the mental health problems faced by the internal migrants in India in their respective Social Work curriculum and practices. There is a strong need for training of social workers to help migrants with mental health problems. The Social Work Colleges may set up counselling centres for the migrants to ensure their psycho-social wellbeing.