

## Labour Migration in Kerala: A Study on Working Conditions of Unskilled Labourers

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper focuses on the working environment, which is the core of employment relationship, faced by the migrant unskilled labourers who work in the industrial units of Kerala State. In spite of their vital role in the economic growth of the state, especially the secondary sector, these labourers are put to work in unhealthy working conditions. Often they are made to work for more than the stipulated time, not paid for the overtime work, not provided with safe work environment. These labourers and their families face health issues due hazardous work and improper medical care. Such labourers are employed as temporary workers with no other benefits and discriminated during the routine work and at the time of payment of wages. The alarming fact is that majority of them are not there in any of the official records of the city. Though dissatisfied with the workplace, they prefer to stay in the state itself as work opportunities are more as compared to their native places. There is a dire need to preserve the interests of these unskilled labour migrants to protect the social and economic well being of the state as a whole. If this is left unattended it can cause severe threat to all development activities of the state.

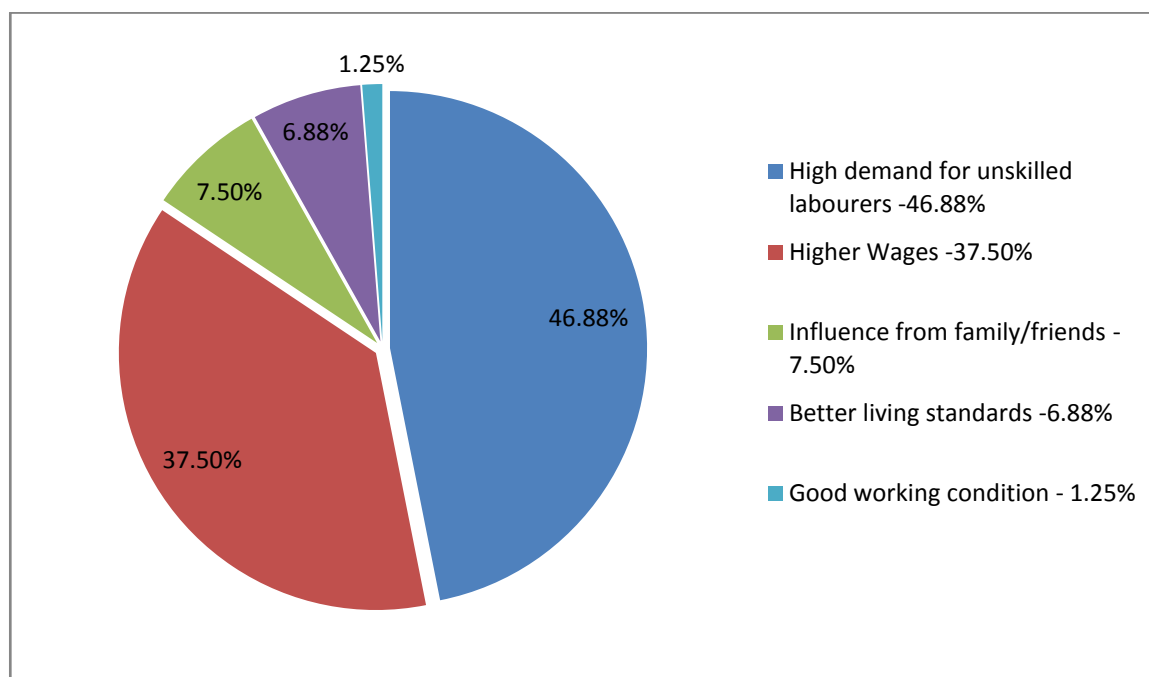
**Key Words:** Labour Migration, Kerala Economy, Working Environment, Unskilled Workers in Kerala

### **Introduction**

Today, migrant labourers have become an integral part of Kerala's economy. Majority of them found Kerala as an attractive destination because of higher wages and better living conditions when compared with their home state. These migrant labourers in Kerala mainly come from different parts of West Bengal, Tripura, Assam, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. The flow of migrants to the state is controlled primarily by labour contractors. This, in many cases, lead to the evolution of a system that promotes exploitation of these migrant labourers. However, over the years, migrant labourers have become an integral part of the industrial arena of Kerala especially in the construction sector and hotel industry. It can be rightly said that Kerala cannot do without migrant labourers and in all parts of the state, they dominate the workforce. This poses many questions like: While most of them get better living conditions, are they in better condition than their homeland? Conversely, Is Kerala under a threat from them?

This research is conducted to understand the working conditions of these migrant unskilled labourers in Kerala state. The researcher also looks in to the factors that attracted these labourers in to the state. Study is exploratory in nature and data was collected mainly from Kochi, the industrial capital of the state. Data consists of 160 migrant labourers selected at random. These labourers were mainly in construction, hotel industry or engage in local works like cleaning. Data was collected through various interview schedules because majority of them could not read or write in English or in the regional language.

**Factors favouring unskilled labour migration in Kerala**



Source: Primary data

**Figure 1**

**Reasons for choosing Kerala by Migrant Unskilled Labourers**

As per the above data (Fig. 1) main factors which attracted unskilled labourers to Kerala is the huge demand coming from the state especially from the industrial sector. Higher wages paid to these labourers when compared with their homeland is also a major factor attracting these migrants. In construction sector, they are paid at least Rs.400/- a day. A local worker charges Rs.800-900 a day in the normal case. In hotel industry the pay varies from 500/- a day to even 1000/- depending on the task.

**Data Analysis and Results**

**1. Profile of the Migrant Labourers**

**Table 1**

**Nature of Work Undertaken**

Particulars	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Migrants from Construction Sector	61	38
Migrants from Hotel industry	32	20
Migrants going as local workers	55	34
Others	12	07
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary data

Majority of the labourers included in the study were from construction sector. Local workers were mainly engaged in household activities and cleaning activities like waste

disposal. Others included those who go for different types of works as per the demand in the market.

**Table 2**  
**Gender wise classification**

<b>Particulars</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	40	25
Female	120	75
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary data

Female respondents mainly came from Tamil Nadu and male respondents were mainly from West Bengal and Maharashtra.

## **2. Analysis of Working Condition**

**Table 3**  
**Working Hours**

<b>Hours of Work</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Less than 8 hours	0	0
8 hours	8	05
8-10 hours	56	35
Above 10 hours	96	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary data

We can infer from the table (table 3) that majority of the workers are working for more than 10 hours a day without any reluctance. This is the main factor which makes migrant labourers attractive in the local markets of Kerala. They are ready to come for work by 7 a.m. and normally leave the site by 7 p.m.

**Table 4****Satisfaction on Quality of Work**

Particulars	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Bad	Very Bad	Percentage
Wages related to the work done	Nil	65	30	5	Nil	100
Safe and Secure working environment	Nil	22	60	11	7	100
Leave Facility	Nil	Nil	56	39	5	100
Medical Facilities	Nil	34	54	2	10	100
Grievance Mechanism	Nil	Nil	40	50	10	100
Support from local authority	Nil	Nil	23	65	12	100

Source: Primary data

It can be observed (table 4) that majority of the respondents are satisfied by the working conditions provided in the state especially in case of wages and working environment. However, they often go for work even if they are sick due to the fear of being replaced by another worker. Majority of the respondents reported about the absence of proper medical facilities in the work place. They were also unhappy with the grievance mechanism. Often it was said that they had no voice as the entire rules were dictated by the employers and the middlemen acting as labour contractors.

### **3. Awareness of Labour Laws**

**Table 5****Awareness of labour laws**

Particulars	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	14	9
No	146	91
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary data

This is an alarming fact that majority of the respondents had no idea regarding the labour laws prevailing in the state and there was no initiative taken by their employers to make them aware of the labour laws. This scenario is taken as an added advantage by many of the employers as they do not face any threat in the way of asking for more wages or better working conditions by these workers.

### **Conclusion**

The movement of people in search of better economic conditions and a more secure environment is as old as human history. Such movements not only affect the lives of the migrants but also lead to significant economic and social transformation in the destination of the migrants. Development and migration can go hand in hand if it is well planned. Kerala

being one of the most attractive states for the migrant labourers is recently facing lot of security threats due to over flowing of migrant labourers. This situation is made more threatening as majority of these labourers do not appear in any of the official records of the state.

The present study was conducted to know the reasons favouring migrant unskilled labourers in to the state. The research also analysed the working conditions available to these labourers in the state. The results of the study conclude that the employers have no complaints about the dedication to work and output of these migrant labourers when compared to local workers doing similar jobs. It is being said that the migrant labourers are easy to manage and work continuously without breaks. They also put in longer hours and are ready to do overtime with no extra pay.

It is very common especially in construction sector that normal working day of these labourers extends to 14 hours a day. Even though labourers are satisfied with the amount of wages they are paid for their work, in many cases it is due to the poor job market and extreme poverty in their homeland. Many respondents reported that they came to Kerala due to lack of opportunities in their home state and moreover agriculture has become uneconomical and also less openings in industrial or services sector. It is also said that the wages in Kerala is more than double they get in their homeland.

Everyone is aware that these unskilled migrant labourers have become absolutely essential for the State's economy but on the other hand a severe threat to security, health etc. Unless Kerala society and government address these issues effectively it is bound to throw up social problems and tensions of various kinds. These labourers have to be accommodated properly abiding all labour laws in the state which is the only effective way of managing them. The authorities need to ensure that these migrant labourers enter state with proper official records as in many cases it is observed that convicts of many cases in different states live and work here with no official records. The government will also have to ensure that these workers are being provided by their employers with proper working conditions and all safety measures including medical facilities.

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