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Understanding Labour Mobility from Assam to Kerala: A Case Study of Nagaon District in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Kerala is a cheap destination for thousands of labourers from Assam. The trend is unstoppable. Initially, the needy people from a particular community migrated, and gradually it encompassed one and all, including females as well as underage children, having little expertise in professional work. However, all are adequately serving in different sectors in the Keralite environment, which is far different from Assam. Even the Kerala Government has brought policy changes to accommodate these migrant labourers. In Assam, there is neither a comprehensive study nor any record of labour mobility, particularly to Kerala. The issue of labour mobility in Assam is an unaddressed area, and here an attempt has been made to understand the process of labour mobility and perception from the end of labourers. Even though the nature of labour mobility has changed over the years, the entire route of migration from Nagaon, a district of middle Assam, to the far south state of Kerala is explored here. The research is an empirical study having participatory experiences from the labourers.

1. Introduction

The study is an attempt to comprehend the idea of labour mobility from Assam to Kerala. The high, lucrative wages and favourable working conditions make Kerala a suitable destination for different types of labourers in Kerala. It would be pertinent here to understand the demand and supply chain of labourers as well as the state's response in addressing labour mobility in a well-thought-out manner. The government of Assam is lagging much behind in terms of labour management, and it might have a negative implication in the days to come.

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In Kerala, the labourers have been getting relatively better facilities, self-dignity, security, in addition to monetary and accidental health benefits from the end of the state administration. Even though it is quite easier for them to adjust in the society, as issues like religious animosity, ethnic violence, caste-based politics, etc., are relatively low and almost negligible in comparison to different parts of India. The labour force does not prefer to remain stacked within the state as the volatility within the state of Assam is relatively high in the last couple of decades. Secondly, labourers, having skilled or not, are all treated as guests and even paid according to their ability. In addition to that, the family members are entrusted with ample opportunities in different capacities. Over the years, the nature of labour mobility has changed, but the flow remains intact. The labourers are migrating individually or *en masse*, they belong to different age groups. Even female workers prefer Kerala rather than other places. Furthermore, the labour force working in Kerala has been contributing to the state economy, and it needs an in-depth study on the resource mobilisation of an unorganised working force. The trend is becoming more prudent. Subsequently, a comprehensive study is required for a better understanding of labour mobility. The present research would be an original field-based work encompassing Assam as well as Kerala, with special focus on Nagaon, as it has been contributing the highest number of labourers in recent times.

2. Background of the Study

Kerala is considered as one of the viable destinations for the working force from different pockets of India. The state of Assam is not lagging much behind compared to other states in terms of labour outflow to Kerala. A study conducted in 2013 revealed that migrant labourers in Kerala from Assam are around 17%, which is placed after West Bengal and Bihar, respectively. Nagaon, one of the prominent districts, is supplying a huge number of workers. Hence, it is quite important to dig out the reasons behind the labour migration from Nagaon to Kerala.

There are multiple reasons for migration, but it is essential to understand the migration pattern or the labour mobility of a given society. Another pertinent point is that the migrated labourers have a positive impact on the state economy and subsequently deserve a comprehensive mechanism to regulate the labour mobility of every nook and corner. Usually, labourers are kept under a homogeneous category, but there are differences in terms of capabilities, interest, socio-cultural background, mobility and so on. Hence, it becomes a pertinent area to understand the lives of labourers and particularly the migrant workers. In Assam, over the years, migration remains a volatile issue, has an acute relation with citizenship, identity, settlement, rights, and so on. Although the flow of labourers to Kerala has no direct linkages with no direct linkages with the infiltration problem of Assam, no one can negate the labour mobility due to chronic migration-induced volatility in the state. In such a complex situation, the migration from Assam to Kerala has become a significant area of study. Secondly, it becomes essential to understand the working conditions of migrant workers and their services in Kerala. In a nutshell, the

study tries to dig out the background of a labourer, their contribution, state response towards the labour force, their working condition and pattern of mobility, etc., from the state of Assam.

At present, a huge number of migrant workers from Assam are working in Kerala. It is quite fascinating that skilled as well as unskilled workers, irrespective of their caste, communities, identity, religion, sex etc. are accommodated in Kerala. The basic facilities for migrant workers in Kerala i.e. better wage, social safety, workers dignity, beneficiary schemes from the government end etc., help in shaping it as a viable destination. Hence, the study tries to explore different issues of migrant workers in Kerala from Assam.

3. Objective of the Study

Labour mobility has become an unavoidable part of the economy. It has substantial linkages with society, polity, culture, ethnicity and so on. It is quite a complex issue and requires a comprehensive study for better administration and management from the state perspective. Here, to be precise, the study has brought out some crucial areas related to labour mobility. The major objectives of the study are:

- i.To understand the mobilisation of labour from Nagaon district of Assam to Kerala.
- ii.To unearth the migration route from Nagaon to Kerala.

4. Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

- i.For the sake of development, labour mobilisation is essential, but why the destination of huge chunk of labourers is Kerala and trend is remained intact over the years. Therefore, it is an attempt to find out the background of labour mobilisation from Nagaon to Kerala?
- ii.Undoubtedly, Kerala is a safe destination for Labour force from different states, and of course, Assam has been contributing a huge number of labourers. The migration pattern of labourers is multifaceted, i.e. short-term and long-term, individual or group, young or elderly, male and female, skilled and unskilled, etc., but finally all of them have to return to their native places. It is considered that a Kerala returnee might have more potential, skills and progressive ideas and so on. Hence, it is an attempt to delve into how the Kerala returnee (labour force) has been contributing to the greater mobilisation of society.

5. Review of Literature

Although there is no specific work on Karala-bound Assamese labourers, but Kerala government and many others have studied the labour mobility in Kerala. A comprehensive study was conducted by Mathew (2017) on the human rights issue of migrant construction workers in Kerala, focusing on some vibrant issues like the socio-economic status of migrant construction workers, working and living conditions of migrant construction workers and also exploring the issue of human rights and so on.

Another state-sponsored project of the State Planning Board (Evaluation Division), Government of Kerala, conducted by Parida (2021), was a study on the migrant labourer, the report entitled 'In-Migration, Informal Employment and Urbanisation in Kerala'. It covers the pattern of internal migration, interstate migration, major reasons behind the migration, their earnings, remittances, working and living conditions and its contribution to the urbanisation process. There are so many reports published that sharply focus on migrant labourers. In this regard, James and Mathew (2016), in their Kerala Institute of Labour and Employment-sponsored project, entitled 'Social Integration of Migrant Workers in Kerala: Problems and Prospects', highlighted the attitude of Malayalam people towards migrant people belonging to different communities. The local people are quite positive towards the migrant labourer. Ahmed (2023), a researcher from Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, has initiated research work on migrant workers in Kerala from Assam, and it is titled 'State of Migrant Workers from Assam in Kerala'. Zachariah and Rajan (2009) from the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in their work 'Migration and Development: The Kerala Experience' provide an in-depth analysis of both international migration and internal labour mobility in Kerala. Another work by Rajan (2020) titled 'Governance and Labour Migration: India Migration Report 2010 (1st ed.)' is related to dependency as how the heavy industries are dependent on the migrant labourers from Northern and North Eastern India. Similarly, Saikia (2010) in their work titled 'Migrant Workers in Kerala: A Study on the Socio-Economic Conditions' focuses on living conditions, wages, and social inclusions of migrant workers in Kerala. Accordingly, the write-up 'Construction labour migrants and wage inequality in Kerala' by Parida *et. al.* (2020) highlighted the working conditions of construction labourers. The work of Peter *et. al.* (2020) 'Inclusion of Interstate Migrant Workers in Kerala and Lessons for India' explores the area of social exclusions, i.e. discrimination, lack of access to public services, etc. In the international domain, the report of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2016), 'Perspective of Global Development 2017: International Migration in a Shifting World' highlighted international labour mobility. The report of the ILO (2018) 'Guidelines Concerning Statistics of International Labour Migration' has talked about labour mobility from sending countries and receiving countries. So, on labour mobility, there are numerous academic works and which would be the base in understanding the labour mobility from Assam to Kerala.

6. Theoretical Framework

The migration of labourers from Assam to Kerala is a quite complex issue that requires a comprehensive study to understand through different theoretical frameworks, as it seems the problem is solely related to the economy, but other factors like society, polity, culture, etc. have a substantial influence there.

Considering the nature of migration, it comes to mind that the entire problem can be studied by applying theories like reference group theory, structural dependency theory, classical migration theory, network

theory and so on. The labourers migrating to high-wage regions from low-wage regions like Assam, and this is a kind of compulsion, and these unorganised sectors are fulfilling the vacuum in Kerala, as skilled labourers from Kerala are working in the Middle East, where the maximum wage is paid. Similarly, the flow of migration indicates that any type of labourer is suitable in the economic setting of Kerala. They are welcoming guests, so they are pulling more labourers in recent times. Even though there is a structural dependency, as higher wage labourers are eager to migrate, and in Kerala, the local people are not sufficient to fulfil their demand. Notably point is that the government is concerned about the labourers and has extended all-around facilities as it has a substantial contribution to the state's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Hence, it is clear that lots of theories are essential to galvanise the problem. However, the classical theory's push and pull factors are widely applicable here.

7. Research Gap

Over the years, lots of research has been conducted on the migrant labourers across the country and Kerala in particular. Despite their variety in nature, the migrant labourers have been facing similar kinds of challenges. Subsequently, issues like security of working workplace, gender disparity, security of children, economic security, etc., are the focal point of researchers. Even the migrant labourers from Assam in Kerala have been given importance in most of the studies. However, it deserves more seminal work altogether so that the migration pattern from Assam can be studied in a well-thought-out process. The study is essential to measure the following research gaps:

- i. The major thrusting area is to find out the differences in terms of policy and programme of state governments. The Kerala government has initiated different schemes, policy programmes for labour management, particularly for the guest labourer. Whereas the states like Assam, the labourers are neither managed nor utilised properly and subsequently, for Assam, migrants are a burden and in Kerala, migrants are assets, blessings.
- ii. The situation of Kerala is quite different from Assam, as the Keralite people are working in Gulf countries. Subsequently, a vacuum is created, which is filled by the migrant labourers from different regions of India including Assam. In Assam, sometimes labourers are forced to migrate, working conditions are not secured, scope of labour contribution is quite limited. A diametrically opposite trend is witnessed in labour management between Assam and Kerala.

Assam and Kerala differ in terms of geography, culture, food habits, and so on; however, both states have been sharing distance migrant labourers over the years. The nature of migration is also changing over the years. Age, gender, religion, culture, skill, intention, etc., determine the labour mobility in Kerala.

8. Methodology

The research work deals with the migrant labourers working in Kerala from Nagaon, Assam.

Undoubtedly, there are numerous academic contributions on labour mobility. But, information related to Kerala-bound labourers from Nagaon, Assam, is quite limited and remains untouched. There are lots of reports regarding the labour force in local as well as national newspapers. However, it requires a comprehensive study to understand the crucial issue of recent times. The paper is fully based on the empirical notion of labour mobility and observation, and interviewed the samples with an unstructured questionnaire through a snowball model. Here, 40 households of Kerala-bound migrant labourers of Nagaon District are closely observed. From each household, three Kerala returnees are purposively selected from different locations. Hence, it is an empirical study based on purposive sampling as the entire process is developed through linkage, channelisation, reference point and so on.

9. Migration Route

Migration is an everyday business as people migrate for different reasons and in various ways. There are lots of factors contributing to the migration process, and the situation of Nagaon district is akin to others, but the route from Nagaon to Kerala is more fascinating in understanding labour mobility. Nagaon district is producing the highest number of Kerala-bound migrants from any other district of Assam. These migrated labour communities belong to Hindu, muslim, tribal, non-tribal, male-female and so on. Kerala is a widespread and easy destination for this huge chunk of people, and their target is maximum wage earning, and apparently, they have a substantial contribution to the state economy. However, it is quite difficult to estimate the amount as no such records are available from the government side in Assam. Hojai, an erstwhile region of Nagaon district, also has a similar kind of labour mobility, but the destination is quite different as Hojai-based people prefer the Middle-East, South-East Asia and other countries. Undoubtedly, Hojai-based people are migrating for business or other professions aptly related to business, but their destination is somewhat similar to the native Keralite people. These migrated people are intrigued with class categorisation; the Sylheti people (also known as the Marwari community of Muslims in Assam) are better in terms of economic condition and have linkages with the global market, but the Nagaon-based labourers are engaging in informal work, are stuck in the lower strata of class categorisation. These lower strata people from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Assam are fulfilling the vacuum of the labour market in the absence of Keralite people. So, the demand for the labour force is very high, and subsequently, lots of people on the basis of references have been migrating over the years.

These labourers are inspired by adequate daily wages and which is impossible in their native area. The Kerala returnee usually has better purchasing power, as after one or two years of service, a labourer can buy a motorcycle, TV, Fridge, etc., and it inspires others to render service for higher wages. So, the magnitude of migration is increasing day by day, and people have a positive response in every sphere of life. The Kerala-bound train, bus and flights are a highly demandable route in recent times. The health and hygiene conditions in their transportation, safety and security, role of middleman, etc., are quite

important are as need to be addressed. Notable point is that it is an unstoppable phenomenon, and the trend has been increasing day by day. Definitely, it proves that in Kerala, better facilities are provided in different capacities compared to their native state. People have a positive perception regarding Kerala in terms of wage, social security, dignity, etc., and that is why the trend has been continuing for a long. The state ensures that safety, security, hygienic living conditions, education, etc., are incomparable, and even caste or religion-based animosity is almost zero. People have just one concern over the poor transportation system; getting a berth in a train is a distant dream for these labourers. They usually manage a ticket, not necessarily reserve and then indulge in the temptation to manage a space for sleep, sometimes near the public toilet of a train. Neither male nor female is secure in that very trip, but with a positive notion for getting a better economic, humane condition, people are migrating to Kerala from Assam and Nagaon in particular. Sometimes, these people hire a bus for transportation, usually in festive seasons and which is quite an expensive journey for these low-income workers. Hence, the route is very clear that people are migrating for better livelihood facilities there.

Assam is a land of migrants. The trend is witnessed in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods, even it has a substantial impact on the changing political discourse. Interestingly, the reverse trend of migrants is a recent phenomenon, significant for a variety of reasons. The migration of labourers from Assam to Kerala had started in the late 1990s after the collapse of the plywood industry in Assam. The entire issue has remained unaddressed for a long time. It gained importance after COVID-19 induced a huge exodus from different states of India. The exodus of migrant labourers during the COVID period undoubtedly proved a despicable picture, as thousands of returnees have arrived in Assam through different means. The contemporary incident, the attempt to enact the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) and the subsequent protest in 2019 really make the issue very sensitive for certain communities. Basically, the East Bengal origin Muslim labourers have been facing substantial challenges, and therefore presence in the Assembly as well as Parliamentary elections is considered inevitable, and thousands of migrant labourers came back to their native area to assert their political rights only. In a research paper by Thomas *et. al.* (2021) mentioned that both push and pull factors have been working substantially in stimulating the migrant labourers. As many as 69.16% of people noted that the push factor is working in migration, as the native area, Assam, has failed to provide high wages in comparison to Kerala. Nevertheless, the push and pull factors for higher wages are important, but migrating a particular community to a definite destination unleashes lots of questions, and it needs to be explored in the days to come.

10. Kerala is a Safe Destination for Labourers

There are lots of factors that have been contributing to the migration process from Assam to Kerala. Paying higher wages is the foremost factor stimulating the labourers to migrate. The Kerala returnee

revealed in an informal interview that the standard wage for a mansion and a helper in Assam is Rs. 650-700 and Rs. 400- 450 respectively but in Kerala, labourers are categorised as maximum wage for Carpenter is Rs. 2200, then Rs. 1500-1800, then Rs. 1100-1200, and the lowest is Rs. 650-700. In Assam, fish market is unorganised compare to Kerala, in Kerala the labourers are engaged on contract basis, a person of fish market in Assam, after investing capital can earn average Rs.1000-1200 per day, but in Kerala, from a fish shop or factory one can earn Rs.1500-2000 without investment, even get time for rest and recreation (interview with Kerala returnee). The daily wage earners are also getting double the wage compared to Assam. Therefore, labourers from different walks of life have an easy destination to go to Kerala.

Secondly, the government of Kerala has been providing all-around facilities to these people and even treated as guests, not as labourers. Basically, health, education for their children, a dwelling place, even a bonus, common kitchen are installed by the government. The right to rest, recreation is also ensured by the state.

Another important point is equal treatment for all. In Kerala, insider and outsider politics are applicable to a certain level, but in the economy, market, and labour, no such issues are entertained. Even though there is no animosity or social clashes based on religion, identity, caste, class and so on.

There are lots of institutions working for these guest labourers, their issues are tried to address adequately. Even NGO's VOs are relentlessly working, assisting to mobilise this human capital. There are a few studies already conducted in Kerala, even from the end of administration and different policy programmes have been introduced for the workers from across the nation. The migrant workers have a substantial contribution to the state economy. Therefore, labourers irrespective of their background, are all accommodated in the holistic development of Kerala. Definitely, the state of Assam benefits as a huge number of people are getting absorbed there in. Notable point is that it requires a comprehensive study basically to understand the mobility of the labour force, their safety issue in their work place, impact of migration in social settings, etc. It is the responsibility of governments to manage the workforce for the rapid development of their respective states. Sometimes, such a type of continuous migration creates a vacuum for illegal infiltrators and many others to fill. It poses variety of challenges towards a peaceful environment. Even it indicates the failure of the government in labour management overwhelmingly.

The Kerala Government has provided different facilities i.e. AAWAZ, a Health insurance scheme for the migrant workers was launched in the year 2016, providing different facilities, including accidental benefits. They are also provided the *Apna Ghar* housing scheme so that migrant workers can get affordable, dormitory-style rented houses having cooking facilities. So, the government of Assam can also initiate such a type of welfare scheme for the labour community. From health to their wages, from safety to recreation, the government may initiate different policy programmes in Assam.

11. Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

Labourers are a dominant part of society, whether in Kerala or Assam. For the holistic development of a state, the welfare of these people is inevitable. The present study would help in digging out the ground reality and probable solutions of labour management for either state.

- i. The study is all about the marginalised section of people, irrespective of their social cleavages. It talks about labour mobility, its administration and management and so on. Undoubtedly, these people have been contributing to the exchequer, acquiring innovative ideas, skills and potentiality, and apparently, proper management is quite essential for the greater interest of the state.
- ii. The study tries to dig out all the issues and challenges of migrant workers, which is quite essential for the holistic development of society. The Kerala government has been working on labourers; research work is going on, but from the end of Assam, there are no such comprehensive studies about the labour market.
- iii. There should be a study on gender-based labour force and their safety measures in the state of Kerala as well as Assam. Even it would help in understanding preferential areas or destination, even taste of action of migrant workers.
- iv. All the labourers, irrespective of their credentials, whether organised or unorganised, this study is pertinent for the greater upliftment of society. It would be a reflection or representation of the voice of the marginalised people.

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