

Transformation of ‘Migrant Labourers’ to ‘Guest Workers’ in Kerala: A Situational Analysis with Special Reference to the Kanjikode Iron Industries

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Abstract

The inflow of migrant labourers from Bihar to Kerala has been increasing day-by-day, especially to the construction fields across the State. The Kanjikode iron industrial area in the Palakkad district in Kerala is one of these sought after areas where migrant labourers build their lives. Migrant labourers from Bihar are one of the significant labour groups in the Kanjikode iron industries. A situational analysis of migrant labourers from Bihar with specific reference to the Kanjikode iron industries was done in 2008. The intent was to analyse their living and working conditions, to study the health and social problems faced by the migrant labourers, to assess their opinions regarding protection of rights, and also to examine the availability of benefits. In 2019, a another situational analysis was done with the same set of objectives to understand the level of improvements, and how far they are being treated as our ‘Guest Workers’ here in Kerala. The research design used for this study was descriptive. The non-probability sampling procedure and the convenient sampling method were adopted for both studies. The study noted significant improvements in their working and living conditions, opinions on the protection of rights, and in the availability of social security benefits. The emergence of ‘Apna Ghar’, a residential project for migrant labourers at Kanjikode, stands as a testimony to Kerala’s welcoming attitude.

Keywords

migrant labourers, Bihar, Kerala, industry, working and living conditions, rights

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Introduction

Migration is the geographical movement of people across a specified boundary to establish a new permanent or semi-permanent residence (Das and Saha, 2012). The reasons for migration are employment, business, education, family movement, marriage, and natural calamities. Migration is not a recent phenomenon; people have moved across borders due to economic and political reasons for centuries. Considering the volume of both internal and international migration, the Indian population is relatively immobile. Most movements occur locally; 60 per cent of internal migration is rural-rural on an intra-district level, consisting primarily of women moving with their husbands after marriage (Singh, 1992). The rural-urban migration of males seeking economic gain is one another category of migration (Singh, 1992). Ravenstein's law of migration explained that migrants move from low economic opportunities to areas of high opportunity (Grigg, 1977). Distance regulated the choice of destination, more precisely in the sense that the migrants from rural regions first move to nearby towns, and then to large cities. Each stream of rural-urban migration, although the former tends to dominate the latter as the urban residents are less migratory than the rural migration, accelerates with improvements, and rapid expansion of trade and industry (Grigg, 1977). Most of the time the migration involved entire societies that carried their culture with them. Nevertheless, in modern times, migration has become an individual or a family enterprise rather than an organised movement.

Migrant workers are usually employed in unorganised sectors and are subject to exploitation. Lack of provision for minimum wages and working hours, poor working and living conditions, lack of basic services, and benefits, and informal employer-employee relationships are some examples. Saikia (2015) found that even though the migrant workers' income level in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala has improved, their living conditions were deplorable. They lived in low rental houses or at worksites with one room shared by many in unhygienic conditions. In addition to these contingencies they also have to make several adjustments - adjusting to a new pattern of life, a new and complex social group, and work. As per the available latest data on migration, the 2011 Census of India stated that 450.6 million migrants in 2011 (38% of the population) compared to the 310.5 million migrants in 2001, which was 31 per cent of the community (Census of India, 2011). When the total population grew by 18 per cent, the number of migrants increased by 45 per cent between 2001 and 2011. It

is significant to note that 99 per cent of the total migration in 2011 was internal, and immigrants comprised 1 per cent (Iyer, 2020).

Lack of re-employment rights, little systematic access to job seeking, and not organised in unions are some of the significant challenges of migrant labourers in India. Labour contractors, in addition to bringing them together, move them, dispense their pay, search for more employees, and negotiate wages and working conditions (Salve, 2009). Compared with other workers, the wages, working conditions, and standard of life of migrant workers tend to be very low. Migrant labourers are forced to work longer hours than other working groups. Sreerekha (2016) studied the overtime work of migrant workers in the Tirupur garment industry. The work shifts are scheduled on a 12-hour basis. After reducing the break times, the actual work time was about 10.5 hours. These workers were not paid for the extra hours of work. Sreerekha suggests that the minimum basic wage per day for all workers should be based on 8 hours per day. Due to the absence of overtime wage rates, workers are underpaid for overtime by about 20 per cent. Lack of adequate housing and access to health care, low standards of living, abuses of the right to work and rights at work, denial of freedom of association, and restrictions on exploitation are some elements involved in the story of exploitation, discrimination, and detention of migrant workers in a globalising, liberalising, and corporate economy where labour rights, laws and standards which guarantee migrants these fundamental rights have been ignored.

This paper presents the findings of the study of a situational analysis of migrant labourers. The objectives are to analyse their living and working conditions, social problems faced, opinions on the protection of their rights, and the availability of benefits. The study was first done in 2008 and a new one was done after a decade in 2019 with the same objectives among the migrant labourers from Bihar working in the Kanjikode iron industries of the Palakkad district.

Migrant Labourers in Kerala

Migration is both a cause and a consequence of various social, cultural, and economic constraints experienced by the people in society. Kerala is becoming dependent on migration for employment and is witnessing an unprecedented inflow of migrant labourers from other States like Bihar, Odisha, Bengal, and Tamil Nadu. Every year, the migrant worker population in Kerala increases by 235,000 people. According to the Gulati

Institute, 14 per cent of migrant workers in Kerala are from Uttar Pradesh, 17 per cent from Assam, 20 per cent from West Bengal, 18 per cent from Bihar, 6 per cent from Odisha, and the rest are from other States (Rejimon, 2017). More than 100,000 people residing in Kochi's Perumbavoor are migrants. If all these migrant workers decided to go home, the construction work in Kerala would be shut down. Hotels will be shut as they are the main waiters.

Kerala offers the best wage rates in the country in the unorganised sector which is almost double the national average in many categories. Some of the significant pull factors which are responsible for migration to Kerala include Kerala's peaceful environment, less discrimination, and the non-availability of native labourers in Kerala when compared to other States. Push factors like low wages, limited, and irregular employment opportunities, failed crops, family debts, flood and drought in their native States have pushed them to depart from their native places.

Migrant workers are comparatively well accepted in Kerala. Many of their children are now studying in various educational institutions in Kerala. The success story of Payal Kumari, daughter of a migrant worker from the Sheikpura district in Bihar is an inspiring story among the 'life-cycle' of migrants in Kerala. She secured the first rank in the final year examinations at the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala. She gained first position in the BA Archaeology and History examinations conducted by the Mahatma Gandhi University in March, 2020. Her father Pramod Kumar Singh is now working in a hardware shop at Ernakulam. He left his native place Gosaimadhi village in Bihar with his family, and migrated to Kerala. He worked hard to ensure that his children were provided with proper education (Agrawal, 2020).

Region specific teaching curriculum based on their language is being adopted in Kerala under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. The establishment of schools for the children of migrant workers, special programmes to teach reading and writing skills in Malayalam and Hindi for the migrants through the State Literacy Mission in many districts, initiatives such as 'Hamari Malayalam' textbooks, and 'Changathi' are some of the unique educational programmes initiated by the Kerala State for the migrant workers. The establishment of the Indian Institute of Infrastructure and Construction in Kollam, the Government of Kerala's consideration in the development of a Skill Development Institute for Migrant Workers, the Centers of Kerala Academy of Skills Excellence in other districts, and the introduction of

health cards are some of the welfare schemes that Kerala is initiating for her Guest Workers.

In 2010, the Kerala Migrant Workers' Welfare Scheme was set up, and thereby Kerala became the first State in India to introduce a social security scheme for the migrant workers to provide benefits for the job-seekers from outside Kerala. Biometric details of the migrant labourers in Ernakulam and Thiruvananthapuram, the two major cities in Kerala, have been captured, and identity cards are issued after the audits of migrant workers have been done by the police. Many reports suggest the inclusion of the migrant labourers under the *Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana*. Some of the challenges that they are facing include low quality and illegal housing, lack of bathrooms and kitchen facilities in such living conditions, long work days of around 10 hours, lack of knowledge about their rights, and the often informal nature of contract with the employers.

As per the observation of the Government of Kerala's Department of Labour and Skills, the housing and living conditions of most of these Inter State Migrant workers is very poor with limited access to even clean drinking water and basic sanitation facilities. Cooking and bathing often takes place in the open due to lack of facilities in cramped temporary housing. The increasing housing rent has also made it difficult for small businesses to provide good accommodation for the migrant workers employed by them. The *Apna Ghar* project in Kanjikode, Palakkad district was envisaged to provide safe and hygienic hostel accommodation to inter-state migrant workers on a rental basis. The project was completed at a total cost of Rs. 80.5 million by the Kerala Government, and it was supported by a public sector non-profit company named the *Bhavanam Foundation* owned by the State. It is a four-storied building built in three blocks, with 64 rooms, 32 kitchens, 96 bathrooms, 8 dining halls, and cloth drying areas. One room is expected to accommodate as many as 10 workers with bunker bed facilities. This means that a total of 640 workers will find their "home away from home" in this building (Ajayan, 2017).

With the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants in various States of India panicked, and were trying to reach their native places. The unpredicted inflow of labourers in many other States and countries has raised various issues related to health, welfare, and social acceptability which in turn resulted in violations of their human rights. The situation in Kerala was different. The Government of Kerala has showcased a role

model to the world on how to secure her 'Guest Workers' by providing all the needed amenities.

The Study

Bihar is one of the most illiterate and under developed States in India. Poverty and unemployment are the main problems. The inflow of migrant labourers from Bihar to Kerala is increasing day-by-day especially in the construction field and iron industries. Kanjikode is one such significant industrial area in the Palakkad district. There are about 17 major iron and steel industries in the New Industrial Area of Kanjikode which comes under the Puthussery Grama Panchayat. All the manual workers in these industries are migrant labourers from Bihar, Odhisha and West Bengal. Migrant labourers from Bihar are one of the major groups working in the Kanjikode iron industries. The work in iron industries is hard, and it creates health problems among the workers. To augment the steelmaking capacity, a corresponding increase in hot metal production is inevitable. Hence a highly automated blast furnace is necessary, and it is dangerous. A situational analysis of migrant labourers in 2008 was done with the objectives of analysing their living and working conditions, social and health problems, opinions on the protection of human rights, and the availability of benefits. After a decade, in 2019 we examined how far they are being treated as our 'Guest Workers' here in Kerala by analysing these same objectives.

Objectives

1. To study the socio-demographic profile of the migrant workers working in the Kanjikode Iron Industries.
2. To analyse the working, and living conditions of the migrant workers.
3. To understand the social and health problems of the migrant workers.
4. To study the opinions of migrant workers on the protection of human rights.
5. To analyse the availability of benefits of the migrant workers working in the Kanjikode Iron Industries.

Methodology

The design used for this study is descriptive. In this study a non-probability

sampling procedure was used, and the convenient sampling method was adopted for both studies. The samples were selected deliberately on the availability of the respondents in the iron industries of Kanjikode, Kerala. The sample size was 60 each, and the tools used were interview schedules. The data was analysed with the aid of statistical techniques like percentage and weighted average. The core of the study consists of the male migrant labourers from Bihar who are working in the Kanjikode iron industries.

Findings and Discussions

Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

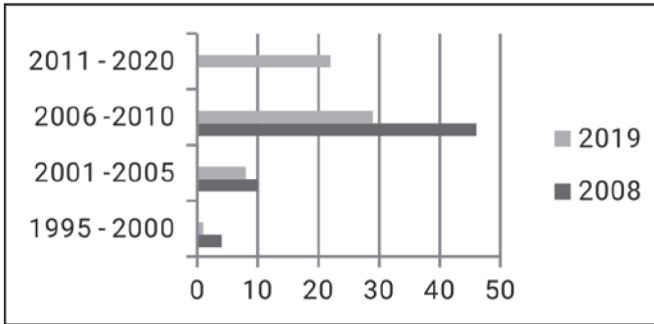
In both studies, around 60 per cent of the respondents were in the age group of 25 to 35 years, and more than 95 per cent were Hindus. The majority of the respondents in both studies were from the Patna and Muzaffarpur districts of Bihar, and more than 55 per cent were married. Among this, only 16.6 per cent of the respondents in the study conducted in 2008 were living with their family here in Kanjikode, and all the respondents in the 2019 study were living alone at Apna Ghar without their families. Table 1 depicts the educational qualification of the respondents.

Table. 1: Educational qualification of the respondents

Education	2008		2019	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Illiterate	7	11.7	3	5
Lower Primary	18	30.0	3	5
Upper Primary	21	35.0	25	42
High School	10	16.67	46	77
PDC/Plus Two	3	5.0	19	32
Graduation	1	1.6.0	4	7
Total	60	100	60	100

In 2008, the majority of the respondents' (35%) educational status was upper primary only. In 2019, it increased to 77 per cent, and the number of graduates (7%) also increased. It shows the improvement in the educational status of the migrants from Bihar. At the same time, in 2019 there were 5 per cent illiterates among the respondents.

Figure 1: Year of migration to Kanjikode



Both studies found that the majority of the respondents migrated to Kerala between 2006 and 2010 (Figure 1).

Table. 2: Languages known to the respondents

Languages	2008		2019	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Hindi	60	100.0	60	100.0
Urdu	45	75.0	53	88.3
Bhojpuri	15	25.0	26	43.3
Malayalam	13	22.0	43	72.0
Tamil	8	13.3	38	63.3
Maithili	24	40.0	18	30.0
Bajjika	15	25.0	17	28.3
Magahi	0	0	10	17.0
Sadri	0	0	15	25.0
English	7	12.0	23	38.3

It is noteworthy that 72 per cent of the respondents in the 2019 study knew Malayalam but it was only 22 per cent in 2008. Likewise, number of respondents' knowledge of English also improved to 38.3 per cent compared to 12 per cent in 2008 (Table 2).

Working and Living Condition of the Respondents

It is understood that the majority of the respondents had migrated and they were placed in the Kanjikode iron industries through agents. In 2008, 46.6 per cent and in 2019, 82 per cent had migrated and been placed. The reasons for choosing work in the iron industries included a comparatively good salary (22% - 2008; 16% - 2019), job opportunity (24% - 2008; 36% -

2019), chances for promotion (25% - 2008; 6% - 2019), poverty in native place (20% - 2008; 6% - 2019), and working experience (10% - 2008; 36% - 2019). The majority of the respondents in 2008 (51%) and 2019 (67%) stated that work in the iron industries is so much harder than any other work. The study examined the nature of their work, duration of work, shift systems, the availability of leave, overtime, accommodation, toilet, canteen, and other facilities at work and living places, the availability of cell phones, their habits, hobbies, occupational health hazards, accidents occurred, the availability of first aid, insurance, medical treatment and health cards. It is found that the nature of appointment of the majority of the respondents in both studies was contractual (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Nature of appointment of the respondents

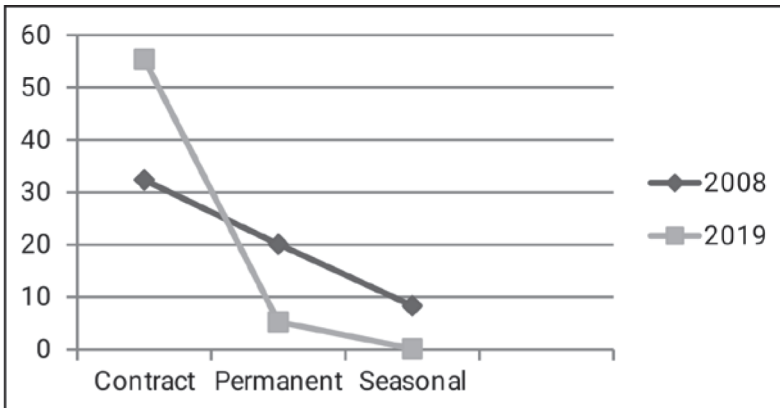


Table 3: Working conditions of the respondents

Variables	2008		2019	
	No.	Yes Per cent	No.	Yes Per cent
Previous working experience in the same field	20	33.3	36	60.0
Skilled worker	24	40.0	28	46.7
Promptness in wage/salary	21	35.0	45	75.0
Payment pattern				
Daily	0	0	0	0
Weekly	8	13.3	32	53.3
Monthly	52	86.6	28	46.7
Shift system in work				
	37	61.6	60	100
Availability of leave				
Leave with salary/wage	21	33.0	25	42.0

Leave without salary/wage	39	65.0	35	58.3
Overtime work	29	48.3	18	30.0
Safe and secure working environment	23	38.3	48	80.0
Satisfied with the toilet facilities at work place	45	75.0	60	100.0
Satisfied with the canteen facility at work place	45	75.0	51	85.0
Accidents occurred at work place	27	45.0	19	32.0
Availability of insurance	14	23.3	43	72.0
Availability of health card	16	26.6	48	80.0
Satisfied with the Grievance Mechanism	12	20.0	38	63.3
Availability of first aid	53	35.0	60	100.0
Duration of work				
8 hours	20	33.3	44	73.3
12 hours	33	55.0	16	26.6
14 hours	7	11.6	0	0
Proximity to industry and illness	50	83.3	59	98.3
Body pain	22	36.6	43	71.6
Skin diseases	8	13.3	0	0
Respiratory problems	12	20.0	4	6.6
Sunstrokes	8	13.3	12	20.0

Table 4: Living conditions of the respondents

Accommodation variables	2008		2019	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Company Quarters	28	46.6	0	0
With family in rented houses	6	10.0	0	0
With friends in rented houses	26	43.3	0	0
Apna Ghar	0	0	60	100.0
Facility in living place				
Satisfied with the toilet facility	36	60.0	60	100.0
Satisfied with the hygiene and sanitation	28	47.0	60	100.0
Satisfied with the facilities at kitchen	34	57.0	60	100.0
Satisfied with the entertainment facilities (TV, Radio, etc.)	36	60.0	60	100.0
Availability of Mobile Phones	36	60.0	60	100.0
Reason for not accepting company's accommodation				
For more comfort	0	0	60	100.0
Poor living condition in company's accommodation	16	27.0	0	0
Unhealthy Habits				
Alcoholism + Smoking	5	83.0	14	23.3
Alcoholism + Using panmasala	20	33.3	16	27.0
Smoking + Using panmasala	19	32.0	12	20.0
Awareness on HIV/AIDS	21	35.0	53	88.3
Awareness on STIs	21	35.0	46	77.0

The above tables (3 and 4) depict that the majority of the migrant workers are employed on a contract basis, and their working and living conditions

have improved in many aspects while compared to the 2008 study. The emergence of the Apana Ghar project made a significant impact on the living conditions of the migrant workers in Palakkad. The significance of mobile phones in their lives also contributes to the differences that have happened between decades.

There are many schemes and projects that have been developed for migrant workers in Kerala since 2010. The researcher has observed the differences in their working and living conditions while collecting data in 2008 and 2019. The data collection in 2008 was done from their work sites and their living places. The change in such unhygienic living conditions to the well maintained Apana Ghar residential blocks depicts this huge difference. The Apana Ghar was opened for the first time for the flood victims in Kerala in 2018 before its formal inauguration on 23 February 2019. Currently it is open to migrants even during this COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, 71.7 per cent of the respondents mentioned that they are suffering from body pain. The following tables show that the majority of the respondents have health cards and other benefits. Likewise, the awareness of HIV/AIDS, and STIs also improved when compared to the study done in 2008. The role of 'Targeted Intervention Projects' of the Kerala State AIDS Control Society also provides awareness, behavioural change communication programmes, counselling, screening, and testing for STIs and HIV at regular intervals.

Figure 3: Major social stigmas faced by the migrant labourers

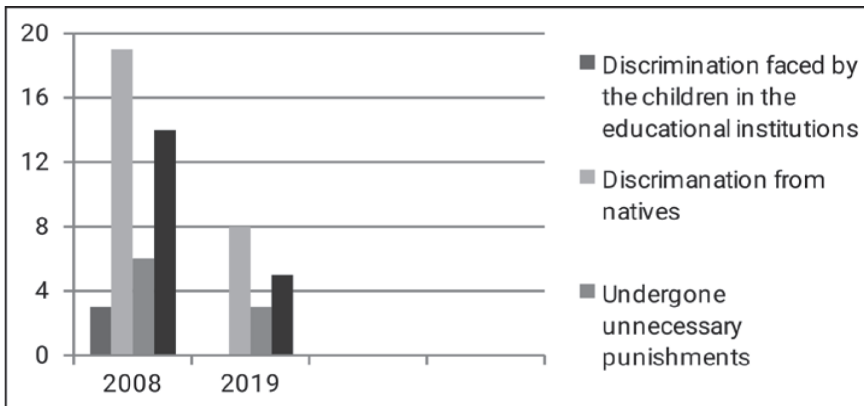


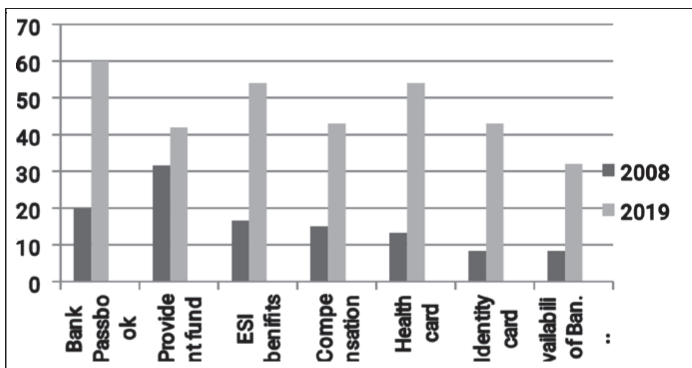
Figure 3 depicts that discrimination faced by migrant workers in Kerala is reducing when compared to previous years. This shows the acceptance of migrant labourers as guest workers in Kerala.

Table 5: Opinions on protection of their rights

Opinions on protection of rights	2008		2019	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
The right to work and receive wages in their job	51	85.0	60	100
Freedom from discrimination	41	68.3	50	83.3
Equality before law	46	76.6	55	91.7
Equal pay for equal work	48	80.0	54	90.0
Right to return home	54	90.0	60	100.0
Right to safe working conditions, and a clean & safe working environment	43	71.6	60	100.0
Fixed working time	44	73.3	50	83.3
Freedom to form associations and to join trade unions	17	28.3	26	43.3
Membership of any trade union	11	18.3	16	26.7

Migrant labourers' opinions on the protection of their rights have become more progressive when compared to the previous study, although their membership of trade unions, their opinions on having the freedom to form associations and to join trade unions have not improved much even in 2019. Trade unions play a vital role in the protection and promotion of worker's rights, although they did not reflect in the same intensity with regard to the problems of migrant workers (Table 5).

Figure 4: Opinions on the availability of benefits



It is remarkable to note this significant improvement in their opinions on the availability of various benefits. When compared to 2008, the majority of the respondents' opinions on the availability of benefits such as a Bank Passbook, Employees's State Insurance, Compensation, Health Card, Identity Card, and Bank Loan have improved in 2019.

The emergence of the Kerala Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme, 2011, the Strengthen and Harmonise Research and Action on Migration in the Indian Context (SHRAMIC) which is an initiative supported by the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, and the Allied Trust, the emergence of various projects and programmes for migrant workers, and the role of NGOs are some of the contributing factors for these improvements.

Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it is obvious that the emergence of various schemes helped to improve the working and living conditions of the migrant workers in the Kanjikode area. Very few studies have been conducted among the guest workers from Bihar. We could analyse the levels of improvement in their opinions of living and working conditions, protection of rights, and the availability of benefits. Some of their problems are also explored in this study. The number of permanent labourers found among them is very low. The government should continue all these schemes, and it is necessary to implement more since guest workers have become an inevitable factor in the economy. Government can seek assistance from organisations like the International Labour Organisation for organising regional workshops, and other capacity building programmes. The interactions and discussions of the representatives of the government, employers, migrant workers' associations, trade unions, recruiting agencies, and other stakeholders in such workshops will help to find solutions for the various problems, and to ensure the labour standards for migrant workers in our country. The government could also focus more on the migrant commission, labour friendly laws, more social security measures, and skills mapping to make Kerala an even better place for 'guest workers' to work and live. The projects like Apna Ghar should be implemented in all districts, and such buildings should be established for the migrants to live in with their families. The web portals like SHRAM will help the researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to learn and interpret the various problems of migrant workers.

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