

Research Article



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Covid-19 and Inter-State Migrant Workers in Kerala

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Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns devastated the world's population and poor migrant workers were hit the hardest. The lockdown announcement suspended their income as all economic activities were halted. Kerala, one of the favourite destinations of India's domestic migrants, had to deal with their problems. With a holistic and humanitarian approach, the state arranged relief camps and food kits for its guest workers. This study explored the lives of migrant workers in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala, during and after the lockdown. Quantitatively and qualitatively interviewed 50 migrant workers were selected through snowball sampling, subscribing to a mixed method. Statistical analysis of quantitative data and thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed migrant workers' plight. By summarising the quantitative and qualitative results, this study confirmed the financial, physical and psychological struggles that the pandemic imposed on migrant workers.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, internal migration (IM) has outstripped international migration in the past decade (Niva *et al.*, 2022). The 12th policy brief published by the Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) elucidated that IM is an essential and pervasive feature of Indian society and economy (Rajan and Bhagat, 2021). IM includes the intra-district, inter-district and inter-state migration. According to the Census of India in 2011, internal migrants accounted for 450 million, 37% of the total population.

International Organisation for Migrants (IOM) classifies migrant workers into two categories; people on the move for investment and business as economic migrants and those who move for employment as labour migrants (Simon *et al.*, 2015). In India, a significant portion of internal migrants is blue-collar workers (Bhattacharyya and Menon, 2021). Many migrants work in the gig economy, with 21 out of every 1,000 migrants classified as temporary migrants in 2007–08 (Keshri and Bhagat, 2013).

Over a period from 1991 to 2011, IM rates declined in Maharashtra and rose in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, reflecting the growing influence of southern states on India's migration dynamics (Government of India, 2017). Kerala is a state with an influx of migrants from states like Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and West

Bengal. It has a migrant population of about 2.5 million, constituting 10% of the total population (Bava *et al.*, 2021). However, the state lacked foolproof data on migrant workers in Kerala, mainly reflected during the Covid-19 lockdown. Therefore, the Kerala Government decided to mandate 'The Interstate Migrant Workers Welfare Registration' through legislation (Raghunath, 2021).

International Labour Organisation (ILO) reported that Covid-19 had a devastating effect on migrant workers worldwide, particularly those engaged in precarious low-wage sectors (Jones *et al.*, 2021). Migrant workers were often stigmatised and unfairly blamed for spreading the disease (Lau *et al.*, 2020). The pandemic's impact on India's internal migrants has been stark, with the poor and marginalised as the most brutal hit (Kumar and Choudhury, 2021). India went into complete national lockdown from 25th March 2020 to 31st May 2020. With most public transport halted as part of Covid-19 safety precautions, migrants were stranded at their workplaces and felt utterly miserable (Chander *et al.*, 2021). Later, they were allowed by the Central Government to move back to their native land. It led to a mass exodus, a reverse migration of migrant workers who walked from major urban cities to villages without food or money (Singh *et al.*, 2020). Migrants died due to exhaustion, denial of timely medical care, police brutality, road and rail accidents, starvation and suicide (Guha *et al.*, 2021).

Unlike other parts of India, Kerala adopted an inclusive and humane strategy to support migrant workers during the lockdown, referring to them as *guest workers*. The government arranged temporary shelters and free food through community kitchens set up by Local Self Governments, although insufficient supply was reported in many places (Peter *et al.*, 2020). The state had 18,912 camps, the highest number of state-run relief camps during the national lockdown that housed over 3 lakh migrant workers (Arnimesh, 2020). Apart from food and refreshments, the camps provided carrom boards, chess boards for their pass time and free mobile recharge to communicate with their families back home (Arnimesh, 2020).

In addition, Kerala opened call centres and control rooms to offer support to distressed migrant workers during the lockdown. Availing of *Shramik* trains majority of them returned home. Amidst ambiguity regarding the availability of trains, private buses were operated in Kerala for migrants to travel back, although they charged exorbitant fares (Abraham, 2020). Although Keralites empathised with the migrants ambulating home, the various stress the migrant workers faced during the Covid-19 spread are undeniable. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the challenges faced by inter-state migrant workers in Kerala due to Covid-19.

METHODS AND MEASURES

This exploratory study adopted a mixed methodology and collected primary data from selected migrant workers in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala. Participants for the study were selected using snowball sampling from interstate migrant workers who remained in the town during the pandemic or returned to the city after spending the pandemic in their village. Quantitative data were collected from 50 participants by interviewing using a structured questionnaire and qualitative data using in-depth interviews (IDIs). The IDIs were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule to investigate the economic problems, othering and stigmatisation, anxiety and fear and travelling difficulties migrant workers in Kerala faced during the lockdown. It also inquired about their vaccination status. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using the SPSS (Version 26) tool and qualitative data using thematic analysis.

RESULTS

The sociodemographic features of the participants were analysed and tabulated (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Details of the Participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
18–30	17	34
31–40	21	42
41–50	5	10
51–60	6	12
61 and above	1	2
Gender		
Female	7	14
Male	43	86
General	9	18
Caste		
Other backward class	17	34
Scheduled caste	11	22
Scheduled tribe	13	26
Educational qualification		
Illiterate	4	8
Primary	11	22
Upper primary	17	34
SSLC or 10th	14	28
12th	4	8
Not married	13	26
Marital status		
Married	31	62
Unmarried	4	8
Widowed	2	4
Type of family		
Joint	6	12
Nuclear	44	88
Monthly individual income		
Below 5,000	6	12
5,001–10,000	5	10
10,001–25,000	27	54
More than 25,000	12	24
Monthly family income		
Below 5,000	1	2
5,001–10,000	5	10
10,001–25,000	19	38
More than 25,000	25	50
Duration of stay in Kerala		
1–5 years	22	44
5–10 years	14	28
More than 10 years	14	28

It is clear from Table 1 that most participants were male and below 40 years of age. Also, most of them belonged to backward communities and were less educated. The majority were married and lived in nuclear families. Almost half of them had a monthly income between Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 25,000, but half the households earned more than that in a month. Notably, almost half of the participants lived in Kerala for more than 5 years.

Migrant workers from 10 states of India were included in this study. Major contributors were Jharkhand, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu (Figure 1).

The participants migrated to Kerala for different reasons. They agreed with the five possible reasons the questionnaire enlisted, although they described other reasons too (Figure 2).

Compared to their state, better wages, better living conditions and more employment opportunities were the

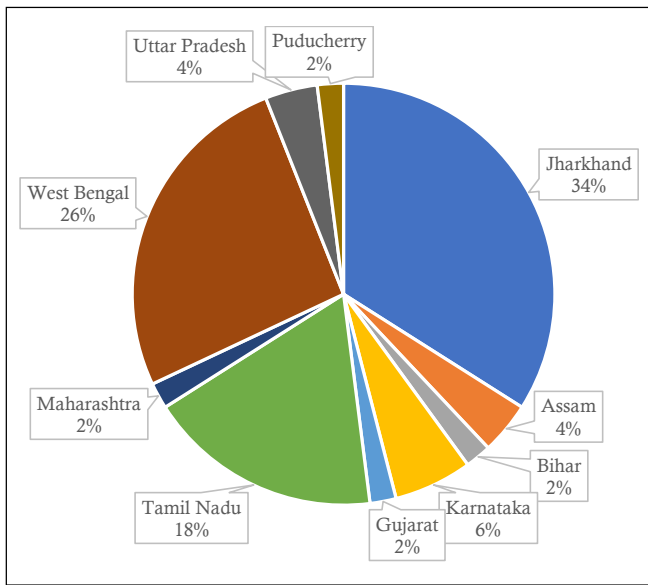


Figure 1. The Native States of the Participants

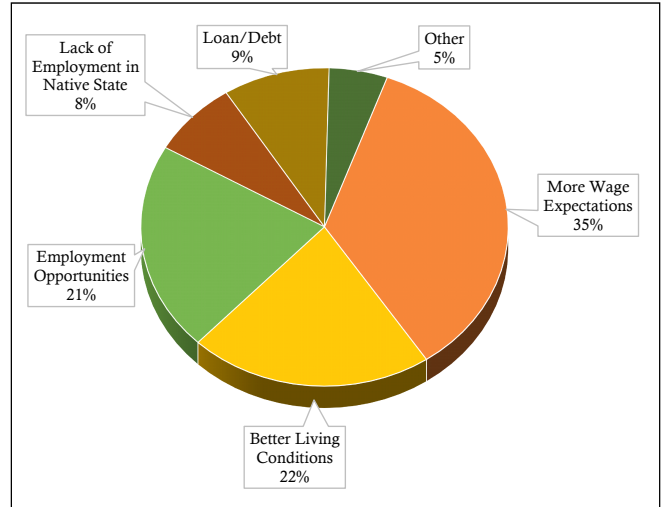


Figure 2. Reason for Migration

most selected options. They also described other reasons for migration to Kerala, such as family members working in Kerala, running away from home as a teenager, lousy climate (drought) in the native and caste discrimination in the native land.

Migrant Workers and Covid-19

Treating lockdown and post-lockdown pandemic periods separately, this study explored the effects of Covid-19 on migrant workers in Kerala. Table 2 shows the factors studied to analyse their lives during the lockdown.

Although none of them, except one, used the settlement camps during the lockdown, a significant number received free food kits from the government. Similarly, three-fifths of them did not find it difficult to get food and groceries during the lockdown.

Table 3 shows the measures of variables studied to understand the life of migrant workers in post-lockdown Kerala.

Table 2. Migrant Workers in Lockdown

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Stay during lockdown	Own accommodation (hostel/rented house)	24	48
	At the place of work	9	18
	Relief camp	1	2
	Travelled to native State	16	32
Difficulty in getting food and groceries during lockdown	No	30	60
	Yes	20	40
Government ration kit	Received	36	72
	Not received	14	28

Table 3. Migrant Workers in the Post-Lockdown Period

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Tested Covid Positive while in Kerala	Yes	20	40
	No	30	60
Change in nature of work after the Covid lockdown	Less hectic	10	20
	More hectic	18	36
	No change	22	44
Change in salary after Covid lockdown	Increased	6	12
	Reduced	15	30
	No change	29	58
Visited natives before the Covid outbreak	More than once a year	24	48
	Never	12	24
	Once a year	14	28
Visited natives after the Covid outbreak	More than once a year	8	16
	Never	27	54
	Once a year	15	30

Among the migrant workers studied, two in five tested positive for Covid-19 in Kerala. However, more than half of them did not visit their native place after the outbreak of Covid. About half of them found no change in their work and wages, but nearly 30% experienced a decrease in pay and an increase in work complexity.

Qualitative Results

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts developed different codes under each theme. Table 4 shows the themes, codes and excerpts.

All the economic activities of the state were suspended during the lockdown. Therefore, migrant workers who are part of the gig economy have lost jobs and wages. Although they received free food kits from the government, they could not afford house rent and travel expenses back home. All the streets were closed during the lockdown, so the street vendors lost the money they spent on buying products to sell. Likewise, the seasonal vendors lost their livelihood as all festivals and celebrations were suspended. Moreover, some migrants did not buy free food kits from the Kerala government, thinking they were entitled to buy rations in their state only. Despite the awareness shared by the media, migrants remained ignorant of the 'One Country One Ration Card' (ONORC) scheme.

The government treated them as *guest workers*, which alienated migrant workers. Locals saw them as aliens, escalating discrimination in quarantine centres. Migrant maids were shunned by households, accused them of

spreading the virus. In effect, a society with prejudice about their vulnerability to crime assumed migrant workers to be virus spreaders. In addition to the stigma, thoughts of their loved ones back home and the death of loved ones made them anxious and sleepless. They were gripped by the fear of contracting the deadly virus.

When Kerala opened its borders, many inter-state migrant workers struggled to find exorbitant fares. A group of daily wage earners who lost their jobs had no money during the lockdown. Those who received financial assistance from their employers returned. In the absence of *Shramik* trains to their place, some had to reach Kochi to get a private bus, adding to their travel expenses. However, they had to stay in quarantine at their place before meeting their family.

Misguiding rumours about Covid vaccination made migrant workers hesitant to get the jab. However, the government mandate for vaccination to travel back to Kerala forced them to receive it and they received their second dose in Kerala. Those who continued in Kerala during the lockdown got both doses from Kerala. The vaccination drives facilitated them getting the jab at their workplace, residence or PHC. They received the certificates through *Akshaya Kendras*.

DISCUSSION

Echoing the findings of existing studies, this research confirmed that migrant daily wage earners were the most affected by the lockdown (Jesline *et al.*, 2021). When social

Table 4. Thematic Analysis Results

Theme	Codes	Excerpts
Economic problems	Loss of job and income	I am employed in a hollow brick manufacturing factory. During the lockdown, we had no work (M1-J-A33). My husband and I make bangles and clay figurines. We get profit during temple festivals, especially events like <i>Attukaal Pongala</i> (a religious festival celebrated in a temple in Thiruvananthapuram), Vishu or Navratri. However, celebrations were not held in temples during the lockdown and we lost our livelihood (F-UP-A41)
	Loss of money	I sell car shades and others sell balloons and mobile holders for cars. During the lockdown, the products we bought piled up in our rooms. We lost a lot of money (F-J-A35).
	House rent defaulting	We were evicted because we couldn't pay the rent (F-J-A35).
	Insufficient food	I did not take the food kit fearing that the ration card at my place would be cancelled (M2-J-A33).
	High travelling charge	I had no money to meet the travel expense. So, I stayed in Kerala during the lockdown (M1-J-A33). When the lockdown came, I could not return home due to money problems (M-UP-A32).
Othering and stigmatisation	Discrimination at the quarantine centre	The Keralites in the quarantine centre treated us like aliens (M2-J-A33).
	Exclusion from household works	I used to work as a housemaid in several houses. During the lockdown, I was asked not to come (F-TN-A41).
	Accused of spreading the virus	People here thought we were the ones spreading the virus (M-UP-A32).
Anxiety and fear	Thoughts on loved ones at home	My wife was pregnant and I didn't know what to do. Every day my wife called me and cried. She was afraid that something would happen to her or the baby or that I wouldn't be able to see our baby (M-UP-A32). My native place had heavy rain and they also had a lockdown. I could not contact my family because the phone network was down there. I lost sleep and hunger (M-M-A30).
	Loss of loved ones	I lost my father to covid. The government cremated him and we were not even allowed to see him for the last time. I was devastated (M-A-A32).
	Fear of infection	I was scared about the virus and what would happen if I got it. I was afraid to go to work (M-M-A30).
Travelling difficulties	High fare	I paid Rs. 10,000 for the bus from Kochi to Murshidabad. My employer was kind enough to pay for my travel (M-WB-A57). I decided to walk as I had no money for travel expenses. But the police stopped us and sent us to settlement camps (M-UP-A28). I had no money to meet the travel expense. So, I stayed in Kerala during the lockdown (M1-J-A33).
	Quarantine at the place of arrival	I had to quarantine in a camp there before meeting my family (M-WB-A57).
Vaccination	Misguiding rumours	At first, I did not want to get vaccinated as many said it had terrible chemicals (F-J-A28).
	Vaccination drives	Health workers came to our residence and gave us our first vaccination dose. We were informed about the date of the second dose. I went to PHC for the second dose (M-M-A30).
	Certification	I got my first dose in my state to return to Kerala. This is where the second dose was taken. But I didn't know about taking the certificate. The hospital staff asked me to go to Akshaya and I got the certificate there (M-WB-A57).

distancing was imposed in the country, migrant workers faced dire problems of insecurity and hunger. The lockdown announcement suddenly stopped their daily income and left them frustrated and unable to meet their needs (Bhagat *et al.*, 2020). The most significant urban crisis seen during the nationwide lockdown was the invisible mental health tsunami among migrant workers (Singh, 2020). Suffering around them, uncertainty about future employment and lack of financial support were potential reasons for developing suicidal tendencies (Mukhra *et al.*, 2020).

During the lockdown, more than disinfecting hands and practising social distancing, migrant workers were concerned about factors such as uncertainty about the duration of the lockdown, eagerness to travel and see family, fear of being abandoned by employers and insecurity about income and employment (Chander *et al.*, 2021). The results of this study emphasised their concern for their family members at home. Also, the covid infection and death of family members devastated the migrant workers in Kerala. A 6-week survey conducted among migrant workers in India in 2020 revealed that 35% went without any meal a day (Jesline *et al.*, 2021). However, the Kerala government's food kits sustained the migrant workers during the lockdown, even though a few did not buy their ration kits due to ignorance. While police brutality against migrant workers was reported from other parts of the country (Santoshini, 2020), Kerala dealt with their issues by adopting a humanitarian strategy (Arnimesh, 2020). Nevertheless, many migrants could not return during the lockdown as they had no money to pay the fares.

The ILO reported that informal workers in India saw their wages drop by 22.6% after the lockdown (Nanda, 2020). This study revealed that 30% of migrant workers in the informal sector in Kerala faced a wage decline. However, as studies recommended, the vaccination drives in Kerala ensured two doses of vaccination for all migrant workers (Jesline *et al.*, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Lockdown was devastating for migrant workers globally and Kerala was no exception. When the daily wage earners suddenly lost their jobs, their lives came to a standstill with no money or food. Thoughts of loved ones back home and fear of contracting the deadly virus wreaked havoc on their mental health. But Kerala opened relief

camp and provided food and psychological support with a humanitarian approach, though it seemed insufficient. Therefore, this study recommends policies to deal with migrant workers during pandemics.

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