

## TRENDS IN LABOUR MIGRATION TO KERALA ECONOMY (FROM 1971 TO 2021)

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### Abstract

Migration is a ubiquitous demographic phenomenon that results in population redistribution. It is traced back to the dawn of human history. The world Development Report 2023 estimates that more than 300 million people now live outside their birthplace. This large-scale migration either permanently or for a short duration is essentially the manifestation of the urge to search for better working conditions and the need for an improved economic life. Kerala's entrepreneurial backbone, its service economy, is now largely powered by migrants. The growth of internal migration to Kerala has been dramatic in the last few years; the migrant numbers here have swelled to over 7 per cent of the population. The present paper represents trends in labour migration to Kerala's economy. The paper is based on secondary data from the national and international organizations' publications and existing literature used for the present study.

**Key words:-** Migration Trend, Kerala, Migrant Workers, Labour, Internal Migration.

Each exodus is a triumph of the human spirit and courage. Because migration is an economic response to the gap in income other things being equal, the wider the gap in income, the stronger the pressure to migrate. Migration has become an

important livelihood strategy for many poor groups across the world. Migration can take place over short or long distances and it can be a one-way permanent movement or temporary. Some people chose to migrate while others may be forced to move. While international

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migration has received more attention in recent times, internal migration is far more notable in terms of the number of people involved, the quantum of remittances, and the poverty reduction potential of these. Internal migration is important almost everywhere and in some countries is far greater than international migration.

In India too, internal migration numbers run into millions while international migration is only a fraction of this. International migration from Kerala to Gulf, Europe, Oceania, and North American regions (during post-2000) increased massively during the last five decades. Among the states of India, Kerala also stands at the top in terms of international remittance receipts. This massive inflow of remittances not only resulted in a substantial reduction in the incidence of poverty in Kerala but also helped to improve both education and health outcomes in Kerala. It can be stated that the rising standard of living is the immediate or short-term outcome of remittance receipts, while the improvement in education and health outcomes are its long-term impacts. Large-scale emigration improved the Standard of living but it harms the domestic low-skilled labour supply in Kerala. Shortage of young labour due to emigration and the rising share of the elderly population (ageing problem) together have squeezed the supply of low-skilled workers in Kerala considerably.

On the other hand, increased private investment (due to the inflow of remittances) in housing and construction, and the growth of labour-intensive industries together have increased the demand for low-skilled and semi-skilled labour in Kerala. To fill this demand-

supply gap, a large number of other state migrant workers moved to Kerala either seasonally or permanently. Every year the population of migrant worker in Kerala increases by 2.35 lakh people. Migration is a global phenomenon caused not only by economic factors but many other factors like social, political, cultural and environmental are included under the broader classification of push and pull factors of migration.

The state has been receiving large numbers of migrants from States like West Bengal, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. These migrants have outnumbered the local workforce in almost all sectors and their numbers particularly outweigh those in sectors such as construction, hotels /restaurants, plywood, and other industries. The migrant workers in Kerala mainly consist of people who are engaged in the informal sector. They usually undertake manual work in the form of loading and unloading, construction work, brick-making, and self-employment. Coir, cashew, and handloom are providing a sizable number of employment opportunities. The Information Technology (IT) industry and tourism sector indirectly increase the labour demand through a large number of restaurants where migrant labours are largely employed. They are ready to work for long hours on hard tasks without equitable compensation. They also seemed to be less demanding. The all-weather working atmosphere in the state has caught the attention of workers in other states.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The burgeoning migration of other state workers in Kerala increases the

population structure of the economy. Having a large population puts too much pressure on natural resources, amenities, and public services. The growth of labour-intensive industries increased the demand for low and semi-skilled workers. To fill this demand-supply gap, a large number of other state migrant workers moved to Kerala, because the state is unable to maintain an adequate labour supply. Therefore, a detailed study is essential in this area to analyse the trends in labour migration to Kerala economy, and to find out whether this burgeoning migration is relevant or not. If it is irrelevant, it is high time that the government should look into the matter and take effective measures to control migration.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The basic objective of the study is to analyze the trends in labour migration to the Kerala economy from 1971 to 2021. This paper also aims at the recent trends in their state of origin and their choice of destination.

### **Review of Literature**

Internal migration plays a key role in the development of both sending and receiving states. Migrants and their families benefit from remittances, which can contribute to inclusive and sustainable development in both origin and destination states. Migration and development both is interdependent. It can be seen both as positive and negative aspects of both the place of origin and destination.

According to Rajan and Zachariah (2020), large numbers of the working-

age population, currently estimated at 2.1 million persons have emigrated from Kerala. This has given rise to a situation wherein emigrants are being replaced by the flow of in-migrants from other States in India into Kerala.

Mishra and Rajan (2018) observed that the decline of the labour force and the continuous movements of persons from Kerala to the rest of India and abroad necessitate large-scale migration into Kerala, in order to replace the workforce within the State. There are various factors, like the existence of the best wage rates in the country, the demand for more labour force due to the vacuum by the gulf boom, comparatively better rights and welfare programs for the labours, less exploitation of migrant labours due to better political and cultural traditions, and finally the strong trade unions – that accelerates the migrant flow into Kerala.

In their study, Parida, J K & Raviraman K (2021), for State Planning Board estimated that there are over 31.5 lakh domestic migrant workers in Kerala. It is reckoned that one in every twelfth person in Kerala is an interstate migrant worker.

Maheen and Jubily (2013) evaluate the reasons for the in-migration of workers to Kerala with special reference to Allappuzha district. They found a small section of them are professionals and skilled workers, and the majority of them are unskilled or semi-skilled workers engaged in the fields of construction, road work, pipe laying, etc. The major reasons were a shortage of local labours, high wages for unskilled labours, and

opportunities for employment in their home places led to the massive influx of migrant labours to the state.

According to Bhagat (2009), the net in-migration is mainly found in developed states like Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Delhi because the pull factor is stronger there. On the other hand, most of the remaining states are net out-migrating states, but not all of them are poor states. For example, Kerala is an out-migrating state though it is not a poor state.

Sumeetha (2015) stated that efforts to map the living and working conditions of migrant workers who came in search of better opportunities in Kerala from other parts of India. The sweat and toil they endure is because of a promise for a better future. Thus, every day struggles in the form of wage struggle; struggle for better working, living conditions becomes a part of migrant life.

### **Scope of the Study**

The study confines its scope to labour migration to the Kerala economy. Other state semi-skilled or low-skilled workers are the target group of the study. It focuses on the rapid population of migrant workers from 1971 to 2021. The paper will cover their choice of destination among the districts in Kerala and their state of origin. This topic has a wider scope for future researchers and students. Govt can make use of this study for various policy formulation and implementation. The societal and political significance of migration has increased over the past years. Therefore, migration itself is a vast topic to study.

### **Significance of the Study**

An estimated 3.1 million interstate migrant workers have become an indispensable part of Kerala's economy. Kerala has evolved as one of the most attractive destinations for migrant workers from the rest of India. Almost all economic sectors that require arduous physical labour are dependent on migrant workers. A high concentration of migrant workers is located in Ernakulam, Thiruvananthapuram, and Calicut districts. Kerala is the first state in the country to enact a social security scheme for migrant workers. Labour migration has become a vital feature of the Kerala economy due to several factors. Migration creates both opportunities and risks for the sending and receiving regions. Migration plays an important role in the expansion of the population in receiving regions. Excess population creates problems like unemployment, shortage of food, social problems, and economic and social insecurity. So the study is significant to examine the trends in labour migration to Kerala's economy.

### **Methodology Used**

The study was based on secondary data from the existing literature published in different journals and various government publications. The secondary data regarding the total number of migrant workers in Kerala were collected from the Census of India 1971 to 2021. Economic Review of Kerala for the year 2021 was used. Collected data were tabulated and analysed using an Excel spreadsheet and simple statistical techniques like averages and percentages.

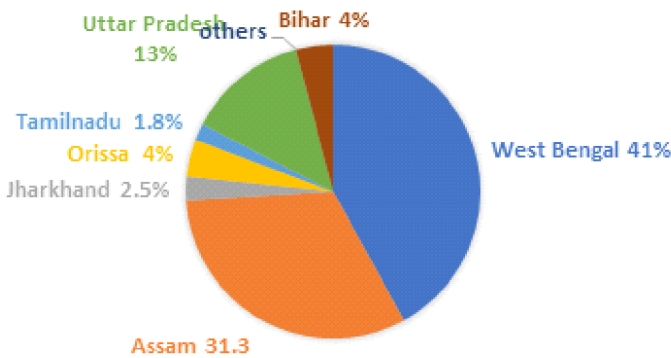
**Trends in Migration**

During 1971-81 Kerala experienced large outflows rather than inflows. Because Kerala was a densely populated state with 655 people per square km, has less agricultural land, and low urbanization and the literacy rate is about 70per cent - the highest among all the states in India. The

distribution of migrant workers from different states is given in figure1.

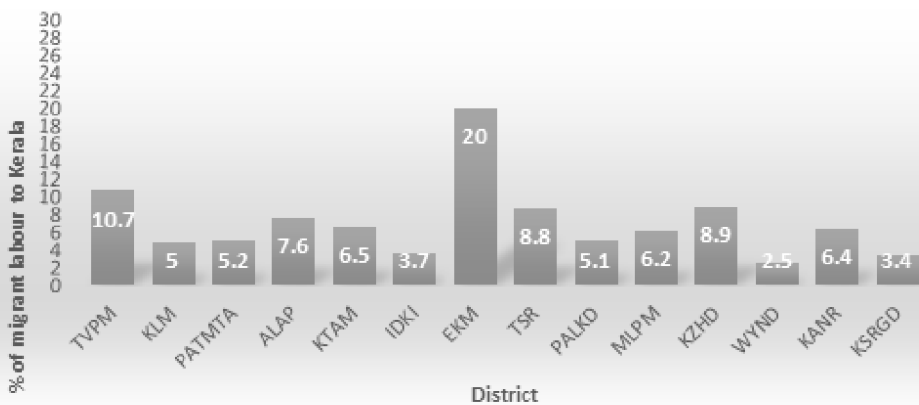
It is seen from the figure 1 that out of the total Inter-State Migrants (ISM), 41 per cent of workers are from West Bengal followed by Assam – 31.3 per cent and UP – 13 per cent. Bihar and Orissa contribute 4 per cent of workers as

**Figure 1**  
**MIGRANT WORKERS BY THEIR STATE OF ORIGIN**



Source: Economic Review 2020, (Kerala State Planning Board)

**Figure 2**  
**MIGRANTS IN KERALA - DISTRICT WISE DISTRIBUTION**



Source: Economic Review 2020, (Kerala State Planning Board)

migrants to Kerala's economy from each of the states. The most common fact is that these states are on the list of the poorest states in India.

Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand have emerged as the poorest states in India. As per the Multidimensional Poverty Index, 51.91 per cent population of Bihar is poor, and 37.79 per cent of people in Uttar Pradesh are poor, which is the largest state in India and a state with the most malnourished children. Orissa is among the nine poorest states in India. In case of West Bengal, it has become an out-migrating state in India with steady growth in outbound migration.

Out of the total 31.4 lakh migrants in Kerala, about 6.3 lakh are found in Ernakulam. 3.4 lakh migrants are residing in the second major destination of Thiruvananthapuram. The third major destinations of migrants are the districts Kozhikode (about 2.8 lakhs) and Thrissur (about 2.8 lakhs) respectively. The districts

Kannur and Kottayam rank fourth with about 2 lakh migrants residing in each of these districts. The district Malappuram ranks fifth with an estimated 1.9 lakh migrants. However, the district Wayanad ranks last (only 0.8 lakhs)

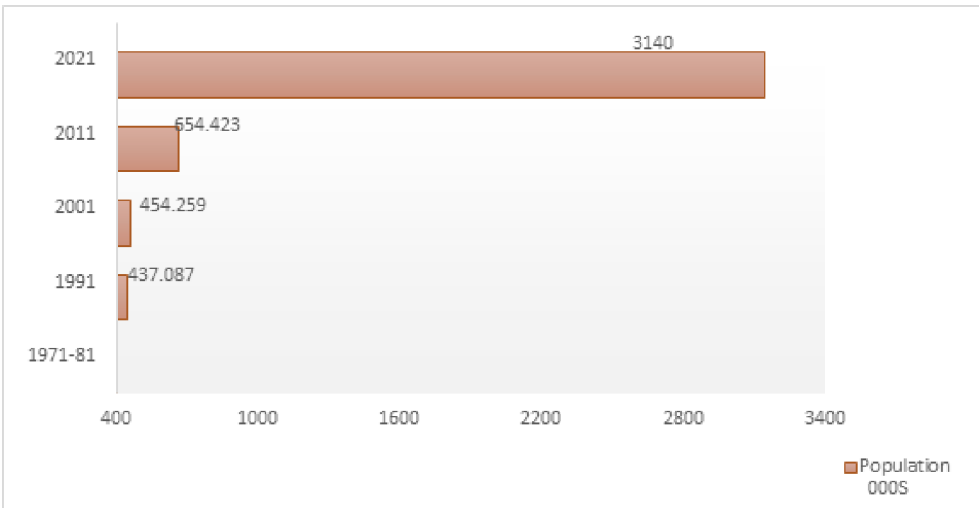
From the study (Table 1), we can see that it was less than 4 lakh workers in 1971-81 and it increased to 3.1 million in 2021. The 2011-2021 period witness tremendous growth in the migrant worker population, 6.5 lakh workers rose to 31 Lakh within a ten-year difference. The 1991-2001 periods was a slow-growth period, there was only 3 per cent increase in the population. As per the Census of India, 2011 shows 44 per cent increase from 2001. Number of migrants in 2021 portrayed a remarkable picture with 3.1 million population. In short, labour migration to Kerala has been rising after 1971. Growth in the number of migrant workers has been robust over the last decade.

**Table 1**  
**Trends in Labour Migration**

Year	Number of migrants	Difference	Increase/ Decrease
1971-81	3,25,000	-	
1991	4,37,087	112087	Increase
2001	4,54,259	17172	Increase
2011	6,54,423	2,00,164	Increase
2021	31,40,000	24,85,577	Increase
	TOTAL	28,15,000	

*Source: Economic Review 2020, (Kerala State Planning Board)*

**Figure 3**  
**TRENDS IN LABOUR MIGRATION TO KERALA, 1971-2021**



*Source: Census of India 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011, Economic Review 2021, (Kerala State Planning Board)*

In this graph (Figure 3), we can observe that labour migrants have been increasing over the years. There is a continuous upward trend in the stock of labour migrants in the respective districts in Kerala since 1971. A report released by the Kerala State Planning Board revealed that the total number of workers will exceed 60 lakhs by 2030. Ernakulam is the largest destination for migrant workers in Kerala with 6.3 lakh workers in 2021, and it continues to be the largest choice of destination for migrants for years. Overall, this continued upward trend shows that the number of migrant workers increased predominantly from 1971 to 2021 in Kerala.

The recent trend in the employment sector in Kerala shows a large inflow of migrant workers from states such as West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh besides the neighbouring states.

About 13 lakhs of the total migrants (about 41 per cent) come from West Bengal only. The state of Assam contributes about 9.8 lakhs (31.2 per cent) of migrants to Kerala. The third highest number of migrants has come from Uttar Pradesh (4.1 lakhs and about 13.1 per cent). The states Bihar and Odisha each contribute about 4 per cent (1.2 lakhs) of migrants to Kerala. About 0.8 lakh migrants (2.5 per cent) are belonging to Jharkhand. Poverty is one of the major pushing factors behind this low-skilled migration to Kerala. Moreover, it also explored recent growing unemployment rates, particularly, due to the growth of mechanization, low wage rates, agricultural failure, debt, drought and other natural calamities also causing migration. It is important to note that about 26.3 per cent of the total workforce in Kerala consists of other state migrants.

At present, the state of Kerala has the “highest number of emigrants in the Gulf countries” and in return, the state is receiving remittance, this being an intermediate factor for migration. Initially, this out-migration contributed towards the reduction of poverty and unemployment in the state of Kerala. But later on, this out-migration created a scarcity of workers which then contributed to the increase of wages calling the attention of workers from other states.

### Findings

During 1971-81 Kerala experienced large outflows with low urbanization. After three decades there is a ceaseless upward trend in the stock of migrant workers population. High population density and less agricultural land act as push factors causing high out-migration from the state in 1971. But the trend has changed and ceaseless in-migration makes upward trend in the stock of other state workers. Kerala paves a path to migrants from the rest of India through urbanisation. As per previous study it is reckoned that one in every twelfth person in Kerala is an interstate migrant worker.

Neighbouring states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra were the major migrant source states till 2011. But since then this trend has changed and West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, and Bihar emerged as the major source state for migrant workers. About 13 lakhs of the total migrants (about 41 per cent) come from West Bengal only. It is noted that in most of these origin states, the incidence of poverty is relatively higher than in Kerala. According to NITI Aayog’s Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)

Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh have emerged as the poorest states in India.

Kerala recently has become a welcome destination for migrant workers who constitute around 26.3 percent of its total population. The district Ernakulam ranks the top in receiving migrant workers with 20 per cent. The second major destination is Thiruvananthapuram with 10.7 per cent. Relatively higher wages compared to their home state and prompt payment, better life conditions, and good health and education opportunities at destinations are the vital factors that lure them to Kerala. The study reveals that role of migrant workers in the process of urbanisation in Kerala is perceptible.

### Conclusions and Suggestions

Kerala is the major migrant corridor with 3.1 million workers spread over the region. Development and migration can go hand in hand if it is well planned because, in all parts of the state, they dominate the workforce. It can be seen both as positive and negative aspects of both the place of origin and destination. The reason for the upward migration trend observed from the study is urbanisation and various infrastructural projects that have absorbed a large number of workers. Urbanization has been a major driver of internal migration. Rates of urbanization influence rural-urban wage differences. An increase in demand for labour in urban areas can push up urban wages and increase migration. Patterns of migration and their socio-economic impact have significantly influenced Kerala’s culture and political process. Migration has been the single



most dynamic factor in the development of Kerala. The decline in the labour force and other factors like the existence of the best wage rates attract migrants from other states in India. The main pull factors of migration to Kerala encompass the boom of industries, the construction sector, and the reluctance of native workers to handle menial and casual work. The growth of the IT sector and industrialization in Kerala necessitated several construction and developmental

activities where the labour shortage is met with migrant workers.

The government needs to concentrate on the increasing demand for labour and skill requirements across all sectors. There should be a proper registration system for migrants. It should be recorded systematically for future reference. The Government may issue official identity cards with biometric information to all registered migrant workers with a permanent address and present address.

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