

## **EXPLOITATION OF IN-MIGRANT CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN KERALA: A CASE STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

*The construction industry forms an integral part of the Indian economy and a conduit for a substantial part of its development investment, is poised for growth on account of industrialization, urbanization, economic development. The sector is labour-intensive and, including indirect jobs, provides employment to millions of people. The construction sector is also the second largest employer in the country following agriculture. The industry comprises of highly specified tasks, and for each task and stage, a different contractor is engaged and under each contractor different labourers are working. All construction labourers are casual workers. Unskilled labour is unaware of his principal employer as there is a chain of contractors between principal employer and unskilled labourers. In-migration with its significant impact on various spheres of life is relatively new experience in the long history of Kerala which was otherwise considered as a region dominating in out-migration. Majority of these in-migrant workers in Kerala are employed in the construction sector. The construction work is hard physical labour often under difficult conditions like adverse weather, low pay and poor living conditions with lack of basic amenities and separation from family. It is in this context the present study analyzed these issues in details.*

**Keywords:** *Construction sector, In-migration, working conditions, wages*



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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The construction activity is included in the secondary sector. Within the secondary sector, construction maintained a reasonably high growth rate. In Kerala, with the spectacular development of service sector, the demand for construction activities, both residential as well as commercial, have gone up in the recent years. The relatively faster pace of urbanization in the State also contributes to this. As per 2011 census, the decadal percentage of urban population has increased from 29.96 in 2001 to 47.72 in 2011 which is higher than the national average of 31.16. Several areas of the States including the capital city Thiruvananthapuram are witnessing considerable real estate development, with a spurt in the construction of high rises. In a land scarce State like Kerala, the ever increasing demand for

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residential and commercial places would mean more vertical development in the future which underscores the importance of a technologically advanced, sophisticated and efficient urban construction sector in the State (P. Nimmi, 2014, Dynamics of urban construction sector. p.6).

As compared with other parts of the country, reported wage rate of workers in both agriculture and non-agriculture sector of Kerala are higher. Average daily wage rate of agriculture and non-agricultural workers in India published by Labour Bureau, Government of India shows that for males, general agricultural workers in rural Kerala it is 590 rupees (as on June 2015). The national average is only 232 rupees. Even though people in Kerala are more illiterate, the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) and Workers Population Ratio (WPR) for the persons of age group of above 15 are below the national average and this has been a persistent characteristic of the Kerala Labour Market. (Economic Review, 2015, Government of Kerala).

Better education and high literacy has prompted Keralites to look for skilled labour and higher wages abroad which are sometimes considered more respectable. This has led to a decline in the availability of workforce in Kerala especially in unskilled jobs. This gap is filled by the migrant workers from other States. Traditionally, the largest number of migrant workers in Kerala used to come from Tamil Nadu. But as on 2015, 75% of the in-migrant workers are from five States namely West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha and about 60% of them working in construction sector. There are over 4 million domestic migrant labourers in Kerala from other States of India, as well as from Bangladesh and Nepal (Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, 2013, "Domestic Migrant Labour").

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The characteristics of the construction industry and employment of the labour on causal basis are the important reasons for the absence of collective bargaining in the construction industry. Migration deals with the exploitation of the in-migrant workers specially the poor, illiterate, unskilled categories. Kerala state is known for out-migration and at present she is experiencing large number of in-migration. Kerala's key attraction as a destination of domestic migrant workers is the high wage levels in the State as compared to the States of origin. Globalization breeds competition and sophistication in construction industry. In spite of all technological advancement workers have to work at less remunerative pay, particularly when they are unskilled. The profit motive technologies and investment in construction sector neglect priority of the working class. Migrant labourers are usually employed in dangerous,  
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dirty and degrading jobs. These are jobs which the local population of the developed State would not take up. These jobs are invariably associated with more occupational hazards than other jobs. They commonly suffer from falls, injuries caused by machines, amputations and crush injuries. The contractors are not concerned about any welfare measures for workers, health issues and working conditions. No serious studies have been made in this area. The present study examined these issues related to in-migrant workers in the construction sector of Kerala.

### **3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE STUDY**

Human migration is one of the most important aspects of social science. It has maintained a close relation with mankind from its earlier stage. Although migration phenomena have been studied by social scientists, thinkers, reformers, and others from the very beginning of human civilization, the theoretical and empirical knowledge of migration has not developed to a considerable extent. Even today this study needs migration theories, laws and models, concerning its spatial and temporal variations. The migration laws, however, cannot be made rigid like physical laws. Social scientists and scholars have mainly developed hypotheses, formulated only a few theories and laws, and suggested migration models. Theories concerning migration flow and other process appeared first of all in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834), William Farr (1807-83) and Earnest George Ravenstein (1834-1913) are three prominent scholars of population who made important contribution to population theory and analysis (Sinha, 1987).

The neo-classical dual models of Lewis (1954) and Fei and Ranis (1961) provide a comprehensive theoretical explanation of migration. The neo-classical model assumes perfect market and labour surplus in the traditional agricultural sector that is absorbed by industrial sector. Workers in the rural areas are pulled by positive wage differential and migrate to the urban sector. Michael P. Todaro in the late 1960s developed a theory in which migration is determined more by rural urban differences in expected earnings rather than actual earnings. Neo-classical models are based on income maximisation strategy; the new economics of migration seeks to explain it in terms of risk minimizing strategy. The new economics of migration has emerged to challenge many of the assumptions and conclusions of neo-classical theory. Strak, Bloom, Katz, Levhari and Taylor are the main exponents of new migration theory. The new theory states that families or other culturally defined units of production and consumption are the appropriate units of analysis for migration research, not

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the autonomous individual. The new economics of migration also examines the complex process of migration like living environment, working conditions, exploitation of migrant workers etc.

The impact of male migration on the family in Kerala is the focus of the study of Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation (1983). The major economic impact of this migration at the family level has been the inflow of remittances and the consequential improvement in living standards, especially housing and household articles. Zachariah and Rajan (2001) examined the push factors for migration in Kerala. The study examined the economic and non-economic factors which pushed for migration. The study found that there was a negative relationship between migration and economic factors. Nair (2005) made a study on “Migrant Labourers from Kerala and the Impact on the Household Economy.” It used a systematic, multi-stage sample of households. The study covered all the States of India. The total number of households interviewed was 4387. The study revealed that there were more Muslim migrants (42%) than Hindus (37%) and Christian (21.2%). The study found that migration helps in raising standard of living of the households. Ramesh (2007) in his study on “Out-Migration of Labour from Rural Area” stated that the main reason behind the out-migration is the search for employments. The study showed that 60% of the agricultural labourers interviewed reported that they usually moved to other places as there was not sufficient work in the local village.

Saikia Dileep (2008) made a study on “Economic conditions of migrant workers in Kerala: A study in the Trivandrum district.” The purpose of the study was to examine the characteristics and economic conditions of the migrant workers in Kerala. The study examines the living and working conditions of migrant workers, reasons for migration, income and wages, consumption and savings and remittances. Prakash V. (2009) in the study “Inter Regional Migration of worker: A Study of Migrant Construction Workers in Kerala” focused on the enquiry into the phenomenon of in-migration to Kerala, a region that was known for out-migration in the last several decades. The findings of the study suggested that the phenomenon of large scale in-migration to Kerala was one of the results of the so called Kerala Model of Development and the out-migration it facilitated. The study revealed that working and living conditions of in-migrants involved a number of health hazards.

Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation study “Domestic Migrant Labour in Kerala-Community health interventions and scope of convergence” (2013) figured migrant labour population in Kerala in 2013 was assessed around 25 lakhs with 2.35 lakhs new migrants  
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arriving in the state every year. The study shows that their access to welfare schemes is near to nil, especially with regard to health care, and even many public care services are inaccessible to them due to numerous linguistic and social barriers. There were several studies carried out in India and Kerala State analyzed the rural-urban migration, pull and push factors in migration. But only few studies analyzed the problems of in-migrants and critical evaluation of State's role in protecting in-migrant workers. Keeping in view the research gaps, the present study examined these issues in details with the specific objectivities

#### **4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

1. To study the socio-economic background of the in-migrant workers.
2. To analyze the living conditions and working conditions of the in-migrant workers.

#### **5. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

In-migrant workers in the construction sectors of Kerala are facing wide ranges of problems. The study examined only a few dimensions of vulnerability of in-migrant workers who have come from different States in India. Both primary and secondary data were used for the study. Major part of the study was carried out by field survey with the help of structured interview schedule. Construction work is regularly mentioned as one of the most common occupations for rural to urban migrants (ILO, 2001). There are difficulties in estimating the exact number of in-migrant workers in Thiruvananthapuram district. The latest estimate shows that there are about 4 lakhs migrant workers in Thiruvananthapuram district. It is impossible to find out the exact number of construction workers among them. The district is composed of six Taluks. The concentration of in-migrant workers is highest in Thiruvananthapuram Taluk, so the researcher selected Thiruvananthapuram taluk as the study area. Samples of 120 workers were selected from six construction site in Thiruvananthapuram taluk conveniently. Socio-economic background of in-migrant workers, living conditions and working conditions were the variables used for the study. The researcher also interviewed officials of State Labour Department, Local workers, contractors, elected representatives, trade union leaders and representatives of civil society organizations working among in-migrant workers. The secondary data source includes Government reports, research papers, survey reports etc. Simple statistical tools were used for the study.

#### **6. SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND AND LIVING CONDITIONS OF THE IN-MIGRANT WORKERS**

There are over 2.5 million domestic workers in Kerala from other States as well as from Bangladesh and Nepal in 2013. In 2016 this figure stood over 4 million with an annual arrival  
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rate of 2.35 lakhs. The number of migrant workers in Kerala is much larger compared to only 1.6 million Keralites working outside India. Besides, within 10 years, the majority of the local population would have aged above 40 years and this could lead to a further increase of migration from other States. (Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, Op.Cit’)

### 6.1 In-migrants population estimates in Kerala

According to the census 2011 report, Kerala State’s population is about 33.4 million. Of this 8.7 million are male in the age group 20-64 years. The fact is that only half of them are in the local work force. Migrants now outnumbered local workers in many professions and have totally replaced them in manual jobs and the manufacturing sector in the Kerala. Within 10 years the majority of the local population will be in the age group above 40. It would open doors for more migration. (Ibid)

**Table: 6.1 District wise in-migrants population estimates**

District	In-migrants population (2016)
Ernakulam	800,000
<b>Thiruvananthapuram</b>	<b>400,000</b>
Palakkad	400,000
Kozhikode	400,000
Thrissur	250,000
Kannur	250,000
Malappuram	250,000
Kollam	250,000
Others	150,000
Total (Kerala State)	4,000,000

Source: Gulati Survey Estimates.

A relatively younger bunch of unskilled and semi-skilled in-migrant workers are the main characteristics of the in-migration in Kerala. About 74% of the in-migrants are in between the age group 18 to 33. Only 3% of the in-migrants are in the age group above 50. The most shocking finding is that about 28% of the in-migrants are illiterate.

### 6.2 State of origin of In-migrant workers

The study shows that most of the in-migrant workers are from three States namely West Bengal (33%), Odisha (19%) and Assam (16%). They together constitute 69% of the sample. Migrants from Tamil Nadu constitute 9 percent of the total sample migrants and migrants from UP, Bihar and North East States are only less than 9 percent. About 64% of the in-migrants are unmarried.

**Table: 6.2 State of origin**

Native State	No. of In-migrants	Percent
West Bengal	40	33.33
Odisha	23	19.17
Assam	19	15.83
Tamil Nadu	11	9.17
Jharkhand	10	8.33
Uttar Pradesh	08	6.67
Bihar	06	5
North East States	3	2.5
Total	120	100

*Source: Primary data*

### 6.3 Source of information regarding migration to Kerala

The study revealed that 55% of the in-migrants got the information about the employment opportunities in Kerala through their friends who already migrated to Kerala, 23% from relatives and only 15 % from contractors and middlemen's.

**Table: 6.3 Source of information regarding in-migration**

Source of information	No. of In-migrants	Percent
Middle men's/ contractors	18	15
Friends	66	55
Relatives	28	23.33
Others	8	6.67
Total	120	100

*Source: Primary data*

### 6.4 Social profile of in-migrant workers

The study shows that majority (77%) of the respondents belongs to Hindu religion. Around 16 percent of total respondents are from Islam religion followed by Christian religion (4.16%) and others around 2%. Most of the migrants belong to other backward class. Around 29 per cent belongs to SC/ST category. It is also worth to note that 16 per cent of the migrants come from forward community.

**Table: 6.4 Educational level of sample migrant**

Schooling level	No. of In-migrants	Percent
No schooling (illiterate)	34	28.33
Primary schooling	58	48.33
High school	25	20.84
Higher Secondary education	3	2.5
Total	120	100

*Source: Primary data*

The study revealed a shocking fact that 28 Percent of the migrant workers are illiterate. 48 percent of the workers have only primary education. 21 percent of the migrant workers have high school education and no one have educational qualification above higher secondary level

### 6.5 Motivational factors of In-migration

Respondent were asked to identify for the reason for migration, the order of preference were better employment opportunities (53%), repayment of debt (28%), financing household expenditure (15%) and for the construction of house/purchase of land (6%).

**Table: 6.5 Motivational factors of In-migration**

Reasons	No. of In-migrants	Percent
Employment	63	52.5
Repayment of debt	33	27.5
Construction of house/purchase of land	7	5.83
Financing household expenditure	17	14.16
Total	120	100

*Source: Primary data*

The study shows that most of the respondents engaged in various occupations in their native States before migrating to Kerala. Among them 31 percent of workers engaged in agricultural activities and around 18 percent of workers did casual work. Around 27 percent of the workers had no employment in their native place. Others include students, petty trader etc.

### 7. WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF IN-MIGRANT WORKERS

Of all the factors which motivate one to migrate, the most important are the economic factors, because of which one leaves his original residence and migrate to another place. Migration equalizes economic opportunities. At some place there is availability of employment but lack of man power. In both condition production is adversely affected. Adverse effect is minimized by migration. Migration brings adjustments in demand and supply and assists the creation of national capital. As a result of migration balanced economic growth takes place. There will be operation of right man, right job, only by migration. Thus, migration acts as equalizer.

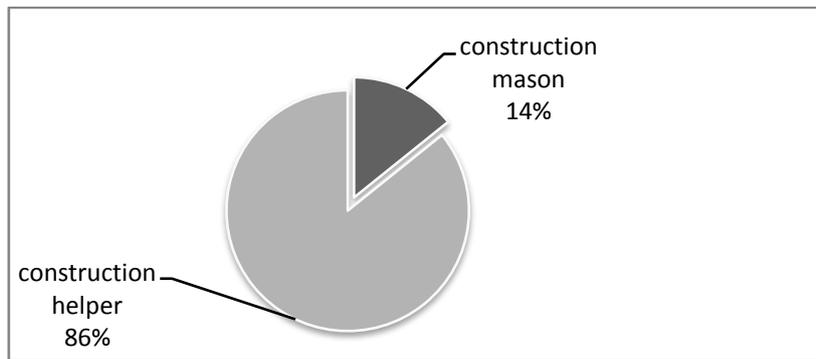
The difference of wages between the local and in-migrant workers has been found to be ranging between 10 to 40%. The average wages for in-migrant construction mason ranges from 600-700, but in the case of local mason its ranges from 800 to 1000. The average wages for in-migrant construction helper ranges from 400 to 500 but in the case of local workers ranges from 600 to 700.

The study has revealed that 12.5% migrant workers have suffered from the problem of nonpayment of their wages and or dues at the time they were to leave for their homes. The workers alleged that their employers went on delaying the payments and ultimately they had to go without payments. The in-migrant workers have to work for longer hours and are dedicated and sincere; they put in long hours and are ready to do overtime. The normal working day ranges between 8 to 14 hours depending upon the sector, location and type of contract. But they are denied social security benefits. Many of the in-migrants, who have worked outside their States of origin, have been attracted to Kerala by the higher wage level.

**7.1 Present occupation of in-migrant workers**

The study shows that 86 percent of the in-migrant workers are working as construction helper and 14 percent are contract mason.

**Figure : 7.1. Present occupation of in-migrant workers**



*Source: Primary data*

**7.2 Working days per week**

The study revealed that around 59 percent of the migrant workers work for 6 days. 20 percent of the respondents work for all days. 15 percent of respondents work for 5 days in a week.

**Table: 7.2 Working days per week**

Working days	No. of In-migrants	Percent
Upto 4 days	7	5.83
5 days	18	15
6 days	71	59.17
7 days	24	20
Total	120	100

*Source: Primary data*

**7.3 Working hours per day**

The study shows that around 47 percent of the migrant workers works for 8 to 10 hours in a day. 30 percent of the respondents work for 10 to 12 hours. 16 percent of the workers work for 8 hours. It is also worth to note that 7.5 percent of the respondents workers for more than

12 hours in a day.

**Table: 7.3. Working hours per day**

Working Hours	No. of In-migrants	Percent
8 hours	19	15.83
8-10 hours	56	46.67
10 to 12 hours	36	30
Above 12 hours	09	7.5
Total	120	100

*Source: Primary data*

#### 7.4 Mode of payment and periodicity of receiving wages

The study revealed that the majority of construction helper's gets an average daily wages ranging from 400 to 500 (73%). In the case of construction mason the majority of them are in the range between 600 rupees to 700 (76.5%). None of the construction helper gets more than 600 rupees and none of the mason gets more than 800 rupees.

Majority of the respondents (43.33%) get wage on weekends. 30 per cent of the respondents are monthly wage earners. 14 percent of the respondents get wage per day and 12.5 per cent of the respondents have to wait for finishing work they engaged in to get their full wages.

Most of the in-migrant workers remain an unbanked population. Only 34 percent of the respondents are having bank accounts. Because of the absence of proof of residence and identity, in-migrants are unable to open bank accounts. In the absence of bank accounts, they are depending heavily on informal ways to send money to home. The study shows that around 33 percent of the respondents remit money through own bank account, 29 percent by hand during visit and 22.5 percent respondents remit money to their home through friends. Others includes through post office, money order etc.

**Table: 7.4. Periodicity of receiving wages**

Category	No. of In-migrants	Percent
Daily	17	14.17
Weekend	52	43.33
Monthly	36	30
Keeping dues / After finishing work	15	12.5
Total	120	100

*Source: Primary data*

#### 7.5 In-migrant workers opinion regarding working conditions

It has also come to light during the study that there exists an amount of discrimination with the in-migrant workers on the issues of job allotments in an establishment. In-migrant workers are offered the jobs, which the local workers normally shirk to perform. 56 percent

of the in-migrant workers opined that there are no safety precautions at the work sites and 64 percent of in-migrants opined that there are no first aid facilities at the work sites. The majority of the respondents (52%) are not getting fresh drinking water.

**Table: 7.5 Working conditions of the respondents**

Category	No. of In-migrants (out of total 120 samples)	Percent
Respondents working under extreme condition	101	84.17
Getting safety precautions	53	44.17
Respondents getting first aid	43	35.83
Respondents getting fresh drinking water	58	48.33
Respondents facing discrimination from local workers and local people	79	65.83

*Source: Primary data*

## 8. LIVING CONDITIONS OF THE IN-MIGRANT WORKERS

Housing is the biggest problem that the in-migrant workers face in Kerala. Notwithstanding a reasonably good level of income after migration; most of the respondents are living in deplorable conditions. The study revealed that the migrant workers prefer to work with an employer who offers free residence with adequate supply of water even if they are paid a little less. But such facilities are not offered for the in-migrant workers.

The study found that about 58 percent of in-migrants are living with 6 to 15 workers in a room, 10% are sharing a room with more than 15 workers. In most of the cases there is no provision of hygienic sanitation and safe drinking water. The shocking point is that around 53 % of the respondents argued that their residence is of poor quality. Only 15% argued that there is living in good quality residence.

### 8.1 Type of stay and accommodation of In-migrant workers

The field survey showed that an overwhelming majority, 85 percent of in-migrants are living with friends and co-workers, 13% with their family, around 2 percent staying alone.

**Table: 8.1 Type of stay in Kerala**

Type of stay	No. of In-migrants	Percent
With family	16	13.33
Alone	2	1.67
With co-workers/friends	102	85
Total	120	100

*Source: Primary data*

**Table: 8.2 Nature of accommodation**

Category	No. of In-migrants	Percent
Rented house	61	50.83
Work site and Temporary sheds	51	42.5
Lodges and hotels	8	6.67
Total	120	100

**Source: Primary data**

The study revealed that about 43 percent of the respondents reside at the working sites, 56 percent reside in poor rented houses with single room shared by many. Around 61 percent of the migrant workers use common toilet. Only 16 percent of the workers use attached toilet. Others includes open defecation, public toilets etc and it contributes 9 percent of the total In-migrant workers are working under extreme conditions. The workers are living in crowded rooms with little space to move. Life is not easy for the in-migrants most living in groups sharing a single room with little toilet facilities. Because of this, they are vulnerable to communicable and occupational diseases. In-migrant workers in Kerala are not getting any benefits from Health insurance scheme. The contractors are not providing any medical care for the workers. Accidents and deaths at work places are also common in the construction sector, which is aggravated by the absence of any kind of social protection.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Construction activities are associated with every phase of development of an economy. The construction work is a perennial industry and a very crucial one, providing substantial employment opportunities to unskilled labourers. A high proportion of socially and economically weaker sections of the society are engaged in the unorganized economic activities in India and Kerala. Majority of the in-migrant workers are employed in the informal construction sector in the Kerala. They often work long hours in poor working conditions, devoid of social security and legal protection Since in-migrants are unaware of laws and policies, they are exploited in the construction sector of the State. There is a need to ensure that all migrants and their families have access to services and entitlements as enshrined in policies and law, while ensuring urban settlements become inclusive spaces as they expand in size and diversity.

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