



# Role and Effect of Migrant Workers on Economic Rationalization and the Unorganized Sector in Kerala

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## Abstract

Recently, there has been a significant arrival of migrant labourers from various parts of India to Kerala, attracted by higher wages, abundant job opportunities, and a shortage of local workers. This study aims to explore the impact of migrant workers on Kerala's economy and labour market, examining their professional and personal benefits. Employing a descriptive research approach, the study heavily relies on secondary sources from print and digital media, including books, journals, newspapers, articles, and government databases. It analyzes the effect of migration on economic rationalization and assesses the economic and social advantages brought about by migration. Parameters such as the number of migrant employees, labour force participation rate, worker-population ratio, and wage rates are investigated. The study anticipates a substantial increase in migrant workers in the Kerala economy, from 650,000 in 2011 to 31,500,000 in 2020. It also reveals improvements in earnings and employment prospects, particularly in the construction industry (60%), manufacturing sector (8%), lodging and food services (7%), commerce (2%), and agriculture (2%). Migration enhances living conditions, enriches social lives, and promotes intergroup harmony through exposure to diverse cultures, traditions, and languages.

**Keywords:** Contract Employees, Migration, Migrant Workers

## 1. Introduction

Despite Kerala's reputation for natural attractiveness and high human development indices, the informal sector dominates the state's economy. This sector is vital to the state's economic stability and encompasses numerous industries, including construction, agriculture, hospitality, and light manufacturing. In recent years, Kerala has experienced an influx of migratory labourers from neighbouring states, who have become an integral part of the workforce in the unorganized sector. This study examines how the presence of migrant labourers in Kerala's unorganized sector has aided, obstructed, and had social and economic consequences. Kerala's economy has always relied on migrant labour. In recent decades, however, the dynamics of the informal sector have transformed owing to an increase in migrant labour. Without the influx of migrant labourers from neighbouring states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and West Bengal, numerous businesses in Kerala would be

unable to function<sup>1</sup>. In numerous ways, migrant labourers have contributed to the formalization of Kerala's informal economy. First, their propensity to work for lower salaries makes them an attractive labour force for businesses of all types. Multiple industries, including construction, have benefited from the availability of migrant labour, resulting in the conclusion of numerous infrastructure projects, and contributing to the state's ongoing economic growth and development<sup>2</sup>. The same can be said for the agriculture industry, where migrant workers have helped boost output and guarantee the continued viability of local producers by substituting for seasonal labourers.

The arrival of migrant labourers has bolstered entrepreneurialism in the informal economy. By establishing their businesses, such as food stalls, retail stores, and restaurants, many immigrants have aided the local economy and created employment opportunities for themselves<sup>1</sup>. Even if it is mutually beneficial, the influx of migrant labourers into Kerala's unorganized sector raises social and economic

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concerns. The loss of local jobs is a significant cause for concern. Since migrants are generally willing to accept lower wages and work under more challenging conditions, they can frequently replace native employees in specific industries, resulting in increased competition for jobs and potentially harmful effects on the local population's standard of living. Furthermore, the exploitation of migrant labour and inadequate working conditions are significant issues. Many undocumented migrants are subjected to severe treatment and maltreatment because they are unaware of their rights and local labour regulations. A comprehensive government response is necessary to safeguard the interests of all affected employees<sup>2</sup>.

## 1.1 Review of Literature

Migration is the migration of people from one location to another, typically to settle there permanently or temporarily (geographic region). A "migrant worker" is a person who moves to a new nation to work for someone else<sup>3</sup>. Although migrant workers contribute significantly to economic growth in their host countries, they also provide substantial benefits to their home countries through remittances and new skills acquired overseas<sup>4</sup>.

Numerous people rely on migration as a means of livelihood. Still, this choice is impacted by factors beyond their control, such as cultural norms and structures, family dynamics, gender roles and ideologies, social contracts and networks, and economic conditions. Various things influence everyone's mobility and opportunities to explore new experiences in various parts of the world. The concentration of institutions and economic activity makes cities more appealing. More excellent financial benefits can be obtained by focusing on extensive metropolitan areas. Economic opportunities, or lack thereof, and geographic isolation motivate individuals to relocate around the nation<sup>5</sup>.

This study examines the effects of migration on Kerala's economy and the state's overall growth. The analysis argues that growth may have slowed due to increased migrant worker remittances, particularly in the goods-producing sectors. It has been concluded that the increase in migrant workers' remittance payments benefits the local economy<sup>6</sup>.

Studies comparing the two nations revealed that in India, interstate migrants were more likely to move from rural to urban regions than other types of internal migrants, who were more likely to go from rural to rural areas. According to research on internal migration, people leave fewer wealthy regions for more prosperous ones. When designing growth strategies, internal migration within a country's borders must be considered<sup>7</sup>.

Migration trends in India are explored, especially the departure from Kerala. The state's unique educational system

has facilitated Kerala's expansion and population shift. A significant element of the extravagant spending that has come to characterize the lives of many Keralites may be attributed to the remittances paid back to the state by foreign employees, who account for a significant portion of the state's wealth<sup>8</sup>.

According to micro studies of migration, disparities in land ownership, poverty, and agricultural backwardness are the primary causes of out-migration in India. This study examines the lowest rungs of the job ladder to establish the impact that formalization, migration, segmentation, and social discrimination play in the expanding gap between economic success and pay discrepancy<sup>9</sup>.

Numerous developing nations, such as India, face agricultural stagnation and instability. Since the bulk of the rise in non-agricultural employment in many states is attributable to poverty, the potential for developing non-agricultural livelihood options in rural regions is limited. Seasonal migrant labour is disproportionately affected by this. Researcher relates seasonal migration to pull pressures, such as the temporary relocation of year-round workers, the deployment of marketing and extension personnel, etc. People who rely on coping strategies or improvised arrangements for assistance during the lean season may constitute a significant proportion of seasonal migrants<sup>10</sup>.

Peter *et al.*, are researching the precarious lifestyles of migrant workers in Kerala; the number of individuals relocating to the state from other parts of India has risen considerably in recent years<sup>11</sup>. The findings indicate that cross-state movers may need help getting federal and state benefits for which they were previously eligible. Legally admitted workers are not granted the same rights as natives. The poll also revealed that migrants from other states had trouble accessing medical care and exercising their legal rights owing to linguistic barriers. Even though a program to help migrant workers was launched in 2010, it severely lacks necessities<sup>11</sup>.

Migration has grown increasingly significant to the global economy and society; thus, it is unsurprising that the study of migration has gained popularity in the modern, globalized world. The massive migration of Keralites to countries outside India, especially the Middle East, has been the topic of much research. However, scholars have given less attention to the state's increasing population. It urgently requires comprehensive, policy-oriented research on internal migration, focusing on migration's economic and social advantages (such as increased employment opportunities, reduced poverty, and broader economic growth). Questions pertinent to the labour market include the type of migration, seasonality, and the impact on Kerala's work schedule.

Kerala requires 3.5 million persons from other states. Unorganized migrant workers in India earn the highest wages. During the nationwide lockdown, the state included and

comforted its employees. The secondary sources for this study include labour migration to Kerala, social security programs, and the state's repressive response to the distress of migrant workers. State programs for social assistance and intervention are well-designed. Some disregard public requirements and access-improving developments. Thus, intended objectives and substantial investments were unsuccessful. Following two natural calamities and a statewide public health emergency, the state was prepared to address employee concerns during the closure. According to state data, enterprises and civil society have provided employees with more food and housing than the government<sup>3</sup>.

Compare the earnings of migrant and native construction employees in Kerala using secondary and primary sources. The Census and NSS migration surveys supplied a stratified random sample from three Kerala districts with secondary data. Kerala now receives more West Bengal, Assam, and Bihar migrants than neighbouring states. However, Kerala's higher wages and job security attract individuals from other regions of India, where destitution and unemployment are rising. Remittances for food, clothing, and housing alleviate destitution in the sending regions. Kerala pays less for migrant labour. The long-term economic success of Kerala is contingent on low-skilled migrants, so authorities should clear up their apprehensions<sup>4</sup>.

Due to COVID-19, Bengali construction employees cannot send money home. Field surveys and in-depth interviews revealed that Bengali migrant construction workers learned to remit money through official channels because they trusted their peers. Domestic money transfers are unofficial. Due to their high earnings, construction workers in Kerala sent home large sums of money to invest in productive initiatives and meet fundamental family requirements. Before COVID-19 ceased paying, significant advances improved prospects<sup>5</sup>.

Jayesh examines the interstate migration of Indian labourers. A comprehensive investigation of migrant construction labourers in Kozhikode, Kerala, supports this concept. This thesis uses secondary data regarding India's population, economy, and immigrants. India requires research on internal labour migration for three reasons. The accelerated inflow of unskilled Indian labourers has been extensively covered. Indians have migrated westward and southward from densely populated eastern and northern states. Another concern is the emigration of the Indian upper class. According to research, there is a substantial seasonal or transient migration of low-wage employees from rural to urban and semi-urban areas. Third, despite the expanding significance of internal migration to India's labour market, no reliable official data is available for study. The investigation examined the backgrounds of Kozhikode-relocating construction employees. The study investigated why and how job-seekers changed fields and locations. Employment background explains emigration<sup>6</sup>.

The rural economy evolved due to erratic participation, divided property ownership, and a collapsing agricultural economy; rural youth migrated to urban areas for employment. Most migrants work in unofficial construction. Rarely do migrant employees join unions. Migrant labourers are unaware of aid<sup>7</sup>.

West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and Tamil Nadu workers visit Kerala. In 2015, according to the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, 2.5 million migrants relocated to Kerala. Every year, 2.35 million individuals visit Kerala. Kerala analyzes the socioeconomic status of Indian migrant labourers. Pala selected fifty seasonal employees at random-percentage utilization. According to the report, migrant employees were more satisfied with their pay than their native counterparts. Better pay comes with more difficult working conditions. A 2020 study demonstrates that their living standards and social standing have improved. Development in Kerala fosters flourishing economies and communities. Human advancement, which includes social safety systems, stimulates the economy<sup>8</sup>, pensions for farmers, and national welfare. Kerala is developing social protection systems. Several employees at WWFB are covered by social security. Mat weavers and other traditional artisans produce few products. Inadequate education, knowledge, and employment levels create deficits in social security strategies- a comprehensive safety net for most unorganized bamboo labourers, primarily impoverished women<sup>9</sup>.

Kerala promoted social welfare initiatives for the impoverished in India. These programs administered by welfare boards do not assist most economically disadvantaged people, including immigrants. The concurrent list and directive principles of state policy of the federal Indian Constitution include social security. Kerala promotes social security for unorganized labourers. This article discusses the government's significant social security policies for migrant workers<sup>10</sup>.

Migration enhances the economy. 45.36 per cent of Indians are emigrants. The salaries and living conditions in Kerala attract employees. Workers are ineligible for the Interstate Workmen Act of 1979 benefits due to their lack of political participation and disorganized work. The study quantitatively evaluated the trend using empirical data and descriptive research and concluded the act's effectiveness and policy benefits in protecting Perumbavoor's plywood employees. The survey revealed that most employees must know their entitlements<sup>11</sup>.

## 1.2 Theoretical Overview of the Study

Numerous concepts have been advanced to explain human migration and its economic effects. Lall and Selod<sup>12</sup> argue that agricultural employees are enticed away from the countryside

by the new city economy’s more excellent wages. Watanabe<sup>13</sup> proposed a dual economy hypothesis of migration that explores the discrepancy between the fully-employed modern industrial sector and the under and jobless subsistence agriculture sector. The average salary in the current industrial sector is significantly greater than in the rural sector. Meng provided a second prominent perspective on the causes of rural-to-urban migration, suggesting that economic factors drive migration<sup>14</sup>. The choice to migrate is influenced by various factors, including the possibility of a better wage (real wage differentials) and the availability of local work possibilities.

## 2. Methodology

This analysis utilized descriptive research, which employs already collected data. This paper will focus on the state of Kerala. Examples of secondary sources include books, newspapers, journals, articles, and magazines. The same is true for government websites. We acquired this information from Google Scholar and Sci-hub by doing searches for “rural labour market,” “migrant labourers,” “construction sector”, and “economic development” and then carefully evaluating the results. The primary objective of this study is to investigate how migrant workers in Kerala’s construction industry have helped the state’s economic rationalization. Counting the number of locals and foreigners working in rural areas and calculating

how much migrants have contributed to the economic growth of Kerala are secondary objectives.

## 3. Results

Internal migrants are those who migrate within a country for any cause. Before 2001, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra were the largest sources of immigration to Kerala. Until 2011, there was a continuous rise; however, this pattern has reversed. Although Kerala is not bordered by West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, and Bihar, it has attracted many new residents from these states. At best, the migration rate rose marginally between 2001 and 2011. But then, following that, there’s a tremendous influx of other arrivals, as seen in Figure 1<sup>15-18</sup>.

About 7% of Kerala’s population comprises migrant labourers from other Indian states. Most of these individuals were physically fit between 18 and 30 years old. They were predominantly young, unattached men and women from rural areas of eastern Indian states such as West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, and Bihar who had travelled considerable distances to arrive. They self-identified as SC, ST, or OBC members<sup>19</sup>.

Deepika and Savadatti conducted a study for the State Planning Board in 2018<sup>20</sup>. Given that this scene takes place before the release of Covid-19, the number of contract employees should have decreased. The construction industry ranks first. An estimated 17,500,000 individuals from other states are employed in the construction industry. Numerous

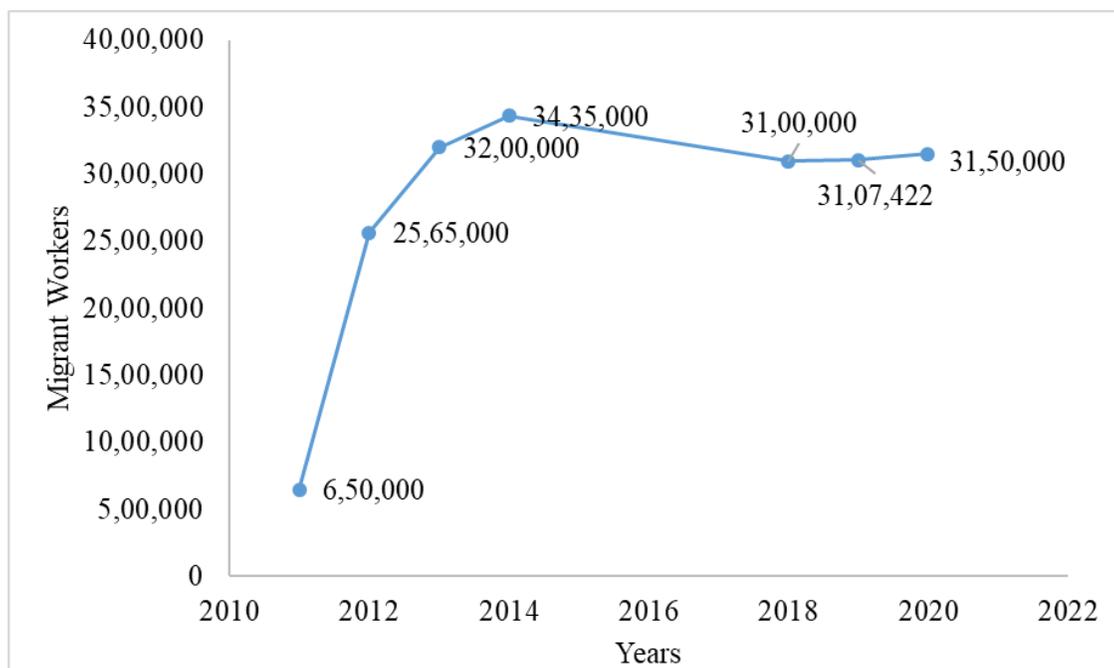


Figure 1. The year-wise population of migrant workers in Kerala.

people from adjacent Indian states commute to the city to work in manufacturing, the second primary industry in the city. There are around six million contract employees. The high salaries in Kerala are attracting individuals from other states<sup>21</sup>.

### 3.1 Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR)

Both employed and unemployed people are classified as part of the labour force since they are considered members of the economically active population. Two approaches were utilized to determine workforce estimates: The Usual Status (ps+ss) Approach, which examines both primary and secondary jobs, and the Current Weekly Status Approach, which only takes primary occupations into account. The estimated labour force in the usual status (ps+ss) is comprised of individuals who (a) worked or were available for work for most of the reference period of 365 days previous to the survey date and (b) worked for at least 30 days during the same reference period.

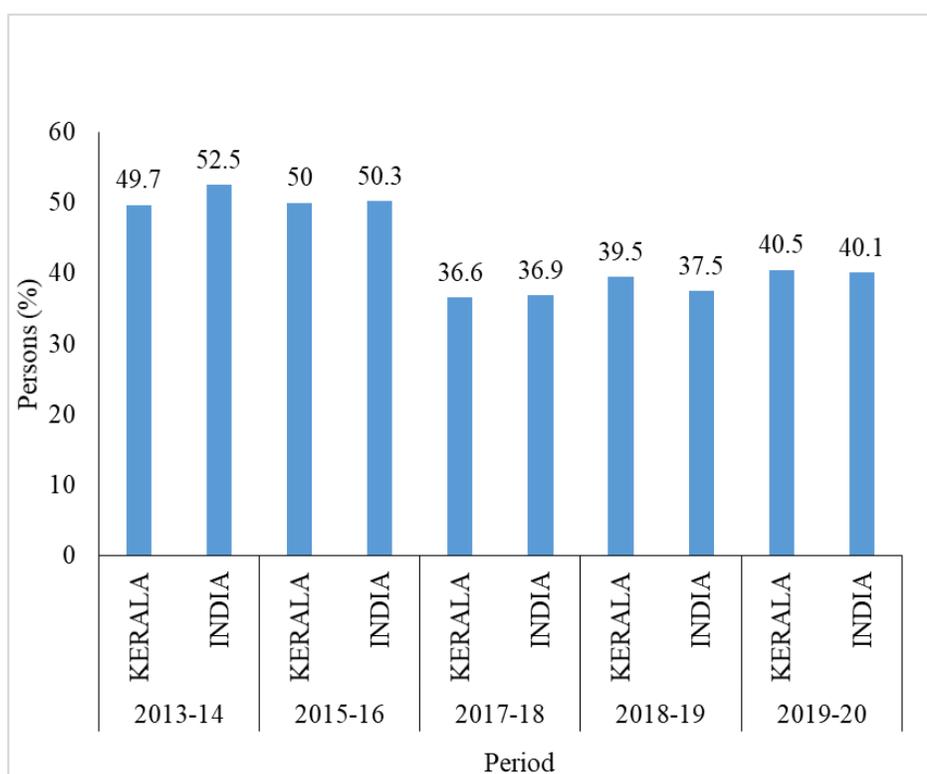
The LFPR in India decreased by 13.4 percentage points, from 52.5% in 2013-14 to 50.3% in 2017-18. However, the LFPR (for all ages) in 2018-19 (Rural + Urban) has increased by 0.6% compared to 2017-18. Overall, the LFPR for this academic year was 40.1%. The LFPR (Rural + Urban) for all inhabitants of Kerala was 49.7 in 2013-14, 50 in 2015-16, 13.4% lower in 2017-18, 39.5 in 2018-19, and 40.5 in 2019-20 (Figure 2).

### 3.2 Worker Population Ratio (WPR)

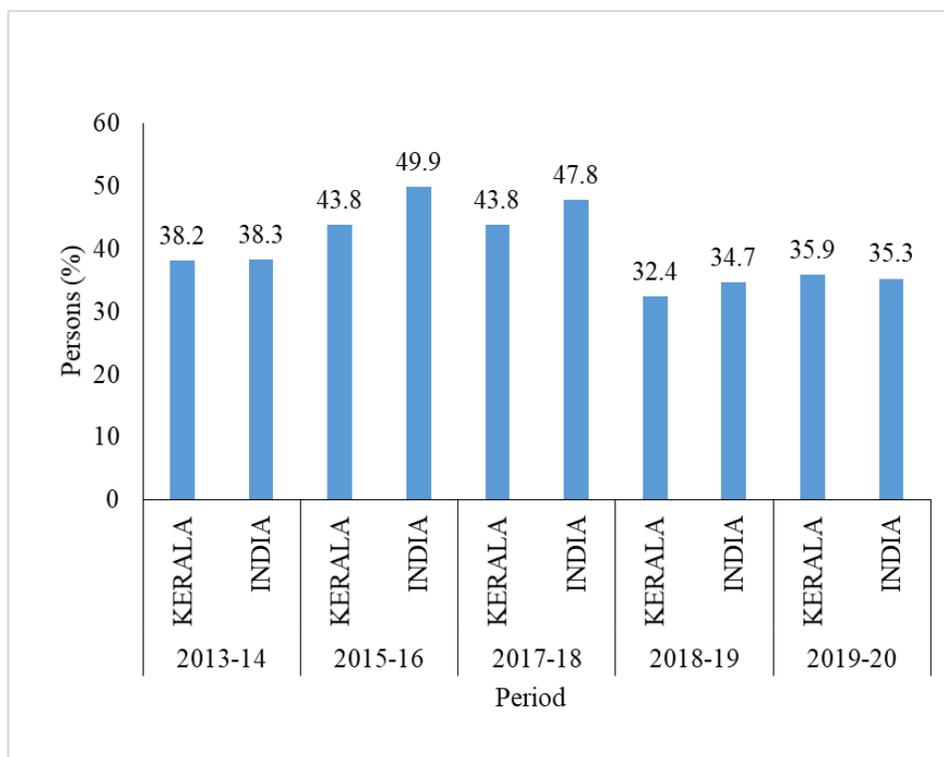
The Worker Population Ratio (WPR) is a metric of employment that may be used to determine what percentage of the population is involved in producing goods and services. “Workforce Participation Rate” refers to the proportion of the population employed or actively seeking work.

Figure 3 displays the Worker Population Ratio (in per cent) by Usual status for 2011-12, 2013-14, 2015-16, 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20. India’s Worker Population Ratio (Rural + Urban) (all ages) climbed from 38.3 in 2011-2012 to 49.9 in 2013-2014, then decreased to 49.8 in 2015-2016 before rising to 34.7 in 2017-2018 and 35.3% in 2018-2019. The following school year, it averaged approximately 38%. In Kerala, the WPR increased from 38.1% in 2011-12 to 43.8% in 2013-14. It remained at 43.8% in 2015-16, then rose to 35.9% in 2018-19 and 36.5% in 2019-20 from 32.4% in 2017-18.

The growth rate of the elderly population in Kerala is among the highest in India. In 1961, the proportion of elderly persons was 5.6%, lower than the national average of 5.6%. In 2001, the proportion of elderly citizens in Kerala was 10.6%, much higher than the national average of 6.2%. In 2011, 12.6% of Kerala’s Population was aged 60 or older, compared to 8.6% of India’s Population. In 2018, the senior population in Kerala



**Figure 2.** Labour force participation rate of Kerala and India from 2013 to 2020.



**Figure 3.** Worker Population Ratio of Kerala and India from 2013 to 2020.

was predicted to have reached 12.9%, up from the national average of 8.1% in 2017.

### 3.3 The Population Growth Rate of Kerala Is Decreasing

Population estimates for 2036 indicate that Kerala’s Population will have grown from 3.34 million in 2011 to 3.69 million. This will raise population density by 5%, from 860 to 951, per square kilometer. The percentage of individuals under the age of 15 is projected to decline from 23.5 per cent in 2011 to 17.7 per cent in 2036, while the number of those aged 15 to 59 is projected to decline from 63.9 per cent in 2011 to 59.5 per cent in 2036. Recent years have seen a decline in the availability of employees, particularly for unskilled positions, due to Kerala’s high literacy rate (96.11 per cent), improved education, and shortage of professional and skilled occupations, as well as the state’s increasing senior population. The average hourly wage in Kerala: According to the International Labor Organization’s India Wage Report, Kerala, Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, and Haryana have the most consistent casual pay.

Kerala, one of the subnational entities in South Asia, is a favourite destination for migrant labourers due to its high unorganized sector incomes. Daily wage/salary wages (in CWS) for casual employees in Kerala are significantly greater

than India’s national average. According to PLFS, the average salary in Kerala is higher than in the rest of India. The most crucial factor is that in Kerala, the remuneration for casual workers is around 65 per cent greater than in India. In Kerala, women earn less than males, but this is not the situation in other states<sup>20</sup>.

## 4. Findings

In recent years, Kerala’s population growth rate has slowed, and the emigration of Keralites has led to a labour shortage. Sixty per cent of migrant workers are employed in the construction business, 8 per cent in manufacturing, 7 per cent in the hotel and food service industry, 2 per cent in commerce and agriculture, and 23 per cent in other occupations<sup>20</sup>. According to most research, such movement has accelerated over time, considerably increasing the market’s growth in major cities. According to Kundu (2008), 11% of migrants are absorbed into the informal sector, which “contributes to a substantial increase in the urban population in many regions.” Forecasts indicate that migrants will increase from 4,12,849 in 2001 to 31,500,000 in 2020. Significant factors are expanding access to attractive work and high earnings<sup>17,19,22-26</sup>. Even in the unorganized sector of Kerala, the same patterns could be observed.

New employees, customers, and taxpayers contribute to the economy's growth- the greater the number of individuals working on a project, the greater its efficiency<sup>26</sup>. The average daily income for migrant workers in Kerala is 723 rupees, 369 rupees more than the national average of 354. Money returned home by migrants promotes consumption and raises the living level of those left behind<sup>27</sup>. As a direct result of increased immigration, Kerala today has a more extensive workforce, pays its employees more, and has witnessed more capital accumulation from immigrants and locals. One of the benefits of migration is that it can improve people's standard of living. Those who try to learn about the beliefs and behaviours of others derive significant societal benefits from doing so. This benefits society by encouraging better relationships across different groups<sup>28</sup>.

#### 4.1 Suggestion

Despite the importance of the construction, hotel, and retail sectors to the state's economy, the vast majority of migrant workers in the state lack specialized skills. Low-skilled migrant labour cannot make up for the shortfall of skilled workers. It has been suggested that the state develop higher education and vocational training facilities. Every immigrant is obligated to utilize it. Concerns have been raised over the low school attendance of migrant children in Kerala, a state with a historically high literacy rate.

## 5. Conclusion

A well-managed internal migration can result in rapid economic development and poverty eradication. Those who remain in rural regions benefit economically from rural-to-urban migration, which boosts production. Migration to Kerala has coincided with the state's expanding economy, which has aided migrants' economic advancement as they meet the desires of natives. This is because the subsidized economy has become a representative portion of the economy. When one group in a society flourishes, it motivates others to succeed as well. This holds for job success, personal growth, and intellectual achievements. It ultimately results in growth that is beneficial for the entire community.

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