

Migrants and the Inclusive Policy Framework: Has Kerala Set the Precedent for Others to Emulate?

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Abstract

Migrants are subjects that are often left out in the policy discourse, even though India has one of the largest floating populations in the world. At times when the migrant communities are facing scornful events at different quarters of their lives, the State of Kerala has addressed similar concerns through policy deliberations framed with the utmost care and importance, thus emerging as the pro-migrant State in the country. The article incorporates a discussion on the various policy initiatives adopted by the State machinery for the welfare and betterment of inter-state migrant workers employed in the State. Expanding the scope, the study deals with the different policy interventions adopted by the State machinery to address the vulnerabilities of in-migrants which emerged during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. An evaluation of the State's existing migrant related policy framework points to the extent of its effectiveness in sensitising and improving the lives of inter-state migrants. Through these efforts, the Government of Kerala sends a strong message on the inevitability of having an inclusive and unified approach in identifying and addressing the needs of the migrant community by transcending the trivial human-made distinctions while keeping human beings and humanity at the centre of all actions.

Keywords

COVID-19, Kerala, inclusiveness, inter-state migrants, pandemic, policy framework

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Introduction

In this highly globalised contemporary world, it has been observed that migrants are not given the considerable attention that they actually deserve. Being from the poorest, vulnerable and socially disadvantaged groups, migrants often undergo different kinds of sufferings and discrimination, not only at the place of destination but also in their place of origin. The conditions of migrants in the society are further exacerbated by the precarious nature of their jobs, which are poorly paid, predominantly unskilled, and which occupy the informal and unregulated sectors of the economy. Moreover, several studies have shown that migrants who belong to most vulnerable sections of the society succumb to different difficulties during their stay in a host society (Varenes, 2003). The status of being an outsider and a minority in terms of their caste, ethnic, religious and linguistic orientations always places migrants as regular victims of harassment, discrimination, exploitation and prejudicial attitudes. Many contemporary reports also highlighted a steady increase in incidents instigating violence against migrant communities through the propagation of fake news and rumours in the past few years (Juhász and Szicherle, 2017; IOM, 2018). The existing scenario presents a dismal picture of migrants across the length and breadth of the country, which is further aggravated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Amidst several afflicting and chaotic events confronting the migrant populations of the country, the State of Kerala has emerged as a pro-migrant State by incorporating various effective policy interventions aimed at ensuring the welfare and well-being of migrants during their stay. This is certainly unique and the first of its kind in India.

Generally, the opinion of natives or the host society on migrant populations can be largely defined through the 'context of reception' which includes among others, the capacity and willingness of local institutions to cater to the needs of new entrants, relationships between natives and newcomers, acceptance by the local labour market, and inclusiveness in the local policies that offer access to social goods. All of these are shaped in accordance with the opinion of natives on immigrants and immigration process (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). While linking with ground realities, the proactive measures taken by the incumbent government for the welfare of migrants can be considered as a token of acceptance in lieu of relentless sweat and blood offered by migrant labourers. In cognisance of the deplorable living and working conditions of migrant workers in the State, the government has initiated different welfare schemes to address the

housing, medical needs, safety and security of migrants. A critical aspect that the government took into consideration while formulating its policy framework dwells on the fact that migrants are no longer the subject of secondary importance and rather should be treated on a par with the residents of the State. The recent gesture of addressing migrant workers as *Athidi thozhilikkal* (guest workers) by the government should be seen as an accolade-cum-acknowledgement of their contributions in the path of progress and development of the State. In a Facebook post¹, Pinarayi Vijayan, Chief Minister of Kerala, exhorted Keralites to show broad-mindedness and compassion to accept the inter-state workers as one among them. Thus, the government has been playing the role of a crusader for migrant labourers in the State. Meanwhile, this article recounts and narrates the policy interventions and operational insights of various pro-migrant schemes implemented by the Government of Kerala towards the betterment and welfare of inter-state migrant workers employed in the State. Furthermore, it dwells upon different policy deliberations adopted by the State machinery for migrants during the national lockdown imposed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Making the 'Invisible' Visible: Migrant Policies and Programmes

Kerala became the first State in the country to implement a social welfare scheme exclusively for inter-state migrants through the enactment of the Migrant Workers' Welfare Scheme 2010 (GOK, 2010) under the aegis of the Kerala Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board. Migrant workers between the ages of 18-60 years employed in the State can avail themselves of the benefits of the scheme through an annual contribution of ₹30. The scheme extends four kinds of benefits to migrants and their families on enrolment. Firstly, migrants are provided with accidental/medical care of up to a maximum of ₹10,000. Secondly, the scheme covers an insurance of ₹50,000 to the family members, in case of the death of a migrant, during the enrolment period. Extending its scope further, the scheme also provides financial support to transport the mortal remains of migrant to their home State. This scheme includes the provision to offer grants to the children of migrants at different tiers of their education. And finally, ample provisions have been incorporated to extend a maximum sum of ₹15,000 as termination benefits upon the completion of five years

¹ Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/PinarayiVijayan/posts/1122965017795327>. Accessed on 19 May 2019.

in the scheme. In contrast, a look at its operational level points to the low turnout of migrants in joining the scheme (Basheer, 2015). Ever since the inception of a migrant-centric approach in 2010, the State has further expanded the ambit of its social welfare and social security schemes to cover the housing, health, educational and other needs of migrant community. Some of them are presented below.

Aapna Ghar

Aapna Ghar is a housing scheme launched under the aegis of the Bhavanam Foundation Kerala, Department of Labour, Government of Kerala at Kanjikode in the district of Palakkad. The project costing around 1,000 million rupees was inaugurated on 24 February 2019 by the Chief Minister of Kerala. The scheme has been implemented on the land leased from the Kerala Industrial Infrastructure Development Corporation (KINFRA) for 30 years. This is a first of its kind in the country aimed at providing economical, secure and hygienic rental accommodation for migrant workers. Under the *Aapna Ghar* scheme, a four-storied building covering an area of 44000 sq. ft. has been constructed with 64 rooms, 96 bathrooms, 32 kitchens, 8 dining halls and specified cloth drying areas. The hostel provides shared residential rooms with bunk beds that can accommodate ten individuals. In total, the facility will provide accommodation for 640 workers. The hostel also has a rainwater harvesting system, generator system, fire-fighting system, and CCTV. The government has taken adequate measures to ensure the safety of the residents by appointing round the clock security guards. An external agency maintains the cleanliness in the hostel. The migrant inhabitants are also provided with the provision of television and resting areas to relax after a day's long hard work. The residents have the facility of individual cupboards to lock up their valuables. The government has fixed the monthly rent as ₹1000 per head, which includes cooking facilities.

Currently, the rooms are made available to migrants through the employers. The companies operating around the facility are allocated a fixed number of beds according to their demands and all the dealings and transactions are carried out through them only. The companies have the responsibility of allocating the rooms to migrants, which is usually done by their supervisor. The companies have to fill out an application form in a prescribed format along with the details and identity proofs of their employees in order to access the lodging facility. The monthly rent is

credited by the companies directly to their head office at Thiruvananthapuram. In case of any problems with the residents, the company supervisor is contacted and their problem is solved immediately. The officials concerned reported that there is a high demand for rooms from the companies and hence they are not in a position to fulfil their requirements. The bathroom facilities are designed and constructed based on the preferences of migrants and are therefore equipped with both open bathrooms and water tank facilities. The walls of the building are adorned with pictures of North Indian festivals and places, which can make them feel in a homely atmosphere. The building has also installed facilities to harness solar power and the waste management is largely done through the installation of biogas plants.

When asked about the problems that may arise out of differences in caste, religion, and State of origin among migrants, the Warden replied that all measures had been taken to avoid such kinds of conflicts. The companies have been entrusted with the responsibility for the behaviour and actions of their employees. The facility has employed 12 staff, which is comprised of six security personnel, three cleaning staff, one plumber and two office staff including the Warden. All the security staff recruited have an ex-service background, including the Warden who is retired with an officer rank. Being a first of its kind, they are also not fully aware of the issues that may occur during the implementation of the project, but at the same time are taking all possible measures to prevent any kinds of untoward incidents from happening. It is also noteworthy that this facility was used as a shelter home for victims during the floods in the district. The government allowed the use of facilities for both natives and migrants at the time of rain fury in the State, even before its official inauguration.

At present, the Bhavanam Foundation has plans to expand the project to other districts of the State and has already allotted land to KINFRA Hi-Tech Park, Kalamassery in the Ernakulam district and KINFRA Advanced Technology Park, Ramanattukara in the Kozhikode district.

Aawaz

Another unique initiative taken by the State government is the implementation of a health insurance scheme named *Aawaz* for migrant workers in the State. The first of its kind in the country, the programme is aimed at migrant labourers aged between 18 and 60. Under this scheme,

individual migrant labourers are provided with free medical treatment worth ₹15,000 from the government hospitals as well as empanelled private hospitals of the State. The scheme also includes an accidental death coverage of ₹200,000 for migrants. For access to the service, the migrants have to enrol with the labour department who will issue an *Aawaz* insurance card after collecting the biometric and personal details of the migrant. Apart from providing insurance coverage to migrants, the card will serve the purpose of identity. The insurance scheme also serves the purpose of creating a comprehensive database of migrant labourers working in the State. The programme has helped in generating a sense of inclusiveness among migrants. As per the available records until January 2020, about 500,000 biometric cards have been issued to migrants by the labour department in the State (TNN, 2020).

An analysis into the claims (Table 1) made by migrants under the *Aawaz* scheme across the State from 16 November 2018 to 31 July 2019 points at its under-utilisation as only 101 cases were registered in 18 out of the 58 empanelled hospitals in the State. During the same period, ₹520,000 were disbursed for treating the health ailments of migrants. Currently, the implementation of the project is taken care of by the Comprehensive Health Insurance Agency of Kerala (CHIAK), a society registered under the provisions of the Travancore Cochin Literary Scientific and Charitable Societies Registration Act, 1955, which is responsible for the implementation of the RSBY-CHIS health insurance schemes in Kerala. The Department of Labour and Skills is the nodal agency for implementation of the scheme and works in close collaboration with the Department of Local Self Government and the Department of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Kerala.

Table 1: Claims under the *Aawaz* Scheme from 16 November 2018 to 31 July 2019

No.	Hospital Name	Number of cases	Amount (₹)
1	Alappuzha Medical College	10	47023
2	Cochin Medical College, Kalamasseri	9	55600
3	District Hospital Tirur	1	1500
4	District Hospital Kanhangad	2	2500
5	Ernakulam General Hospital	3	21500

6	General Hospital Thalassery	2	3000
7	General Hospital Trivandrum	6	43000
8	Kannur District Hospital	6	20275
9	Kottayam District Hospital	2	7300
10	Kottayam Medical College	3	29075
11	Kozhikode General Hospital	1	6000
12	Kozhikode Medical College	11	55700
13	New Medical College Thrissur	20	141175
14	Palakkad District Hospital	2	15425
15	Pathanamthitta General Hospital	1	500
16	Taluk Headquarters Hospital, Perumbavoor	4	11750
17	Trivandrum Medical College	6	28125
18	Wayanad District Hospital	12	30500
Total		101	519948

Roshini

Roshini is a project implemented by the Ernakulam district administration for the socio-educational development of migrant children. The reason for choosing the Ernakulam district for the implementation of this project lies in the fact that a large migrant community resides here and the corresponding surveys identified the presence of around 2,000 migrant children spread over 18 schools in the district. A look at the contextual base for implementation of the programme points to a high irregularity amongst migrant children in attending the classes and the prevailing high dropout rates. Students belonging to different linguistic communities with the instructional language of Malayalam found it challenging for them to adapt to the school environment. The project was introduced on a pilot basis in four schools of the district from October 2017 to February 2018. The project is being implemented with the support of the Ernakulam district panchayat, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and NGOs. The Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited is the prime sponsor of the programme. The primary objective of the programme is to prevent migrant students from dropping out of schools and to encourage their talents through scientific means.

With the success of the pilot project, this programme was extended to 14 more schools in the district. The project enables migrant children to gain proficiency in languages such as English, Hindi and Malayalam by

making use of a code-switching strategy through special packages and by taking extra morning hours of about 90 minutes before the morning classes (Ernakulam District Administration, 2020). Educational volunteers who are well versed in Odia, Bengali, and Hindi are appointed to serve on this project which enhances communication abilities with children to understand their problems. It also promotes and ensures balanced morning food and conducts comprehensive intellectual boosting workshops and study tours for migrant children. The project not only focuses on the language skill development of migrant children but adopts an integrated approach which helps them to identify and prune their art and crafts skills, along with their academic subjects.

Literacy Programme for Migrant Labourers (Changathi)

Changathi, literally meaning companion was an ambitious literacy programme initiated by the Kerala State Literacy Mission Authority (KSLMA) on 15 August 2017 through which hundreds of migrant workers from several north Indian States were initiated into the world of Malayalam. The programme aims at teaching migrant labourers to read and write Malayalam and Hindi within a time span of four months. The scheme was initially introduced in the Perumbavoor municipality of the Ernakulam district. The primary objective of the programme was to end the social ostracism faced by migrants in the society of Kerala, by bringing them into the mainstream and empowering them to introduce and learn Malayalam, the socio-cultural characteristics of the State, and creating legal and health-related awareness (KSLMA, 2017). It is widely believed that the learning of Malayalam will help migrants to overcome the different levels of exploitation that they face in their working sector. The scheme is implemented through study centres, which usually conduct a five-hour class per week. Each study centre operates through 5 to 10 clusters, with each cluster having 15 to 20 participants and an instructor who is proficient both in Hindi and Malayalam. Furthermore, the expertise of educationally qualified migrant labourers and students of the Literacy Missions Higher Secondary Equivalency course are being utilised for the purpose (KSLMA, 2017.).

The recent news of Rommiya Kathur, a 26 year old hailing from a village in Bihar scoring full marks and coming top in the examination conducted by the Kerala State Literacy Mission Authority proves that language is no longer a barrier for her (KSLMA, 2020). Currently settled with her husband and three children in Umayanallor in the Kollam district,

she arrived at the State in 2014. She started learning Malayalam in order to interact with the locals as she owns and runs a juice parlour in the area. Romiya was one among 1998 migrants who had enrolled for the second level of the *Changathi* programme. Media reports quote her eagerness to appear and pass the higher secondary equivalency exam conducted by the mission. In the reports, she also expressed the effectiveness of the scheme in equipping her to deal with the hustles and bustles of daily life in the host society (*The Hindu*, 2020a).

Hamari Malayalam

Hamari Malayalam (Our Malayalam) is the basic textbook that is used to teach the migrants under the *Changathi* programme. The book comprises of 25 chapters dealing with various topics ranging from ethical values, health and technology to rights of workers and hygiene (IPRD Kerala, 2017). The study material is prepared in relation to the needs of migrant workers and their interaction with the society. The chapters are designed in the format of dialogues set in various backgrounds such as a school, a bank and a market and so on. *Hamari Malayalam* goes beyond the primary aim of teaching Malayalam. The book has been designed in such a manner as to equip the migrant labourers to interact freely with the local people. The objective of this scheme also extends to inculcate the fundamental etiquettes of health, sanitation and values among migrants in a lucid manner. At present, the *Changathi* project is being implemented in one panchayat in every district of the State.

Crèche Facility for Migrant Children

Setting a model for other States of the country, the Kerala government has taken a decision to start 14 crèches exclusively for the care and protection of children of migrant labourers in different districts of the State. In this direction, the government has earmarked ₹11,200,000 for implementing the project by the Department of Women and Child Welfare. The first crèche was started in the Ernakulam district on an experimental basis, and currently the project has also been expanded to other districts. The crèches will be operating under the selected *Anganwadi* in the areas where there is a large presence of migrant families. The project aims to include children between the ages of six months to three years. The crèche is equipped with a vehicle to pick up and drop children from nearby places. The to-and-fro transportation of migrant children is facilitated and taken care by

the respective local self-governments. The crèche will remain functional for 25 days a month operating from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. It operates in two shifts, 7 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. and 12.30 p.m. to 6 p.m. with two dedicated staff in each shift. The employees also take care of the personal hygiene and food requirements of the children. The employees with a minimum qualification of higher secondary and a basic course on child welfare management are appointed on a contractual basis. Under the scheme, the children are provided with nutritious food three times a day and ₹25 has been earmarked for a child's diet for a day. There will also be a cradle facility for babies. The crèche aims at providing protection and nutrition to the babies of migrant workers and also aims at empowering women by enhancing their participation in jobs.

Though the crèche was started with a stated objective of supplementing the nutritional needs of migrant children, it serves many more functions than originally intended. Firstly, the crèche facility encourages migrant women to achieve economic self-sufficiency and an improved standard of living by offering them opportunities to enter the labour market. Secondly, the facility acts as a centre for the dissemination of information and awareness among migrants about various avenues available in the host society. The crèche also tries to impart knowledge on hygiene and sanitation among children and their parents. The unit has plans to initiate a vaccination drive for children enrolled in the crèche with the help of a primary health centre in the area. Lastly, the unit facilitates interaction between the members of the host community and migrants, which in turn acts as a stimulus for the integration and assimilation of migrants. One shortcoming of the service is its non-functionality during Sundays and other holidays. The job nature of migrants in the area necessitates the extension of such services to all days of the week. Nowadays there is a persistent demand from natives to avail themselves of these facilities, and the authorities are now planning to cater for their needs in the near future. Our interactions with the staff hinted that they had a very tough time in getting the children admitted to the crèche owing to the prevailing ignorance and social stigma among migrants in obtaining the services.

Countering the Pandemic – Policy Actions and Initiatives

The months of March, April and May in 2020 have witnessed the desperate plight and sufferings of diverse sections of Indian society emerging from the national lockdown declared by the Government of India as a

precautionary measure to contain the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The scene that caught everyone's attention was its devastating impact on the migrant population of this country. People stood as mute spectators to the harrowing images and videos of thousands of migrants trudging thousands of miles on Indian roads, without food and water, braving the scorching sun and disrespectful of the State's directions in their zeal to reach their homes. The utter sense of despondency or despair visible on the faces of these migrant workers in their efforts to return back home is highly symptomatic of the fact that their migration dreams are hardly driven or fuelled by aspirations or prospects to attain any upward social mobility. Rather, it rests solely on the incapability of local economies or decentralised governing bodies to provide and ensure sustainable and alternate livelihood opportunities for them. Moreover, the appalling scenes of reverse migration to the predominantly agrarian States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Odisha further portray the distress caused by spatial apathy in the development agenda over the years, especially during the post-liberalisation and globalisation era.

The upcoming section incorporates a discussion on the policy engagements adopted by the Government of Kerala to address the vulnerabilities of in-migrants emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ever since the reporting of the first COVID case in the country, the Kerala government instituted a slew of measures to ensure the welfare of its citizens, including the resident migrants of the State. A pandemic of such gravity and magnitude can only be addressed through the joint efforts of both the government and the people, thereby leaving no stone unturned. As pointed out by Roy and Davé (2020), during a crisis, the States should be assigned the role of a welfare state which can infuse confidence amongst people that the government will support them at their times of greatest need. The application of a humane and people centric approach by the State government has helped to instil a sense of security and relief among the affected during the pandemic. More importantly, a crisis of such stature or magnitude can only be tackled through a government machinery which has adequate resources and infrastructures to address the risks through the incorporation of sound, transparent and participatory contingency plans. In this account, the efforts of the Kerala government sends a strong message for the need of an unified approach to address and fight the pandemic by transcending the human made differences and thus keeping human beings and humanity at the centre of all actions. Through the incorporation of

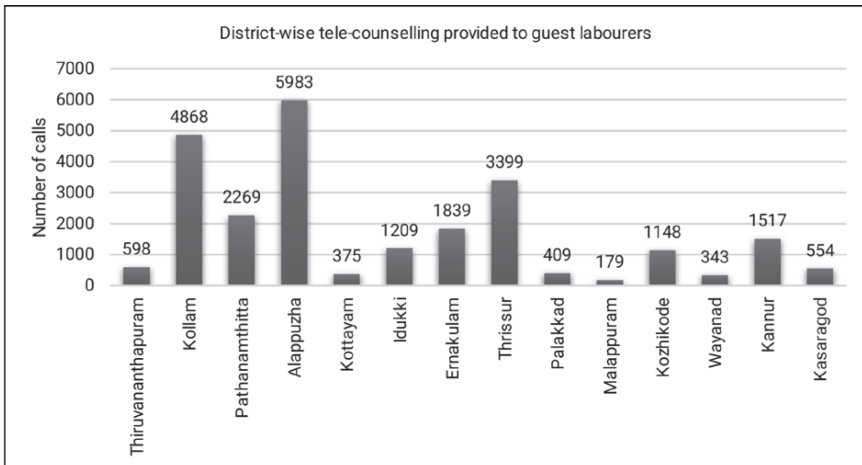
ideas from the earlier experience of tackling the Nipah outbreak in 2018, the State had developed expertise in planning and handling situations of similar nature, which proved fruitful in managing the COVID-19 crisis.

The Government of Kerala issued COVID-19 guidelines for the first time on 24 January 2020, after assessing and evaluating the impending disastrous aftermaths of the spreading pandemic from its place of origin. Such high preparedness largely emerged in response to the multiple risks that the State imminently faces owing to its exposure to the globalised world furthered by the increased movement of its human capital. And ironically, the first COVID case in India was confirmed in the Thrissur district of Kerala on 30 January 2020, where a student returned from Wuhan in China tested positive for the virus. Ever since then, the State has adopted a slew of measures to combat and resist the spread of such an invasive and lethal virus. As a preliminary measure, the government declared the coronavirus outbreak to be a state disaster on 4 February 2020, immediately after the confirmation of a third case. This steered the state machinery to concentrate, coordinate and streamline its efforts towards containing the deadly pandemic in an efficient and vigorous manner. On 20 March 2020, Kerala became the first State in India to announce an immediate financial relief package worth ₹200,000 million to overcome the COVID-19 crisis despite facing severe financial constraints (*Hindustan Times*, 2020). As a subsequent measure, the State also made adequate arrangements in ensuring food security including free rations and the opening of community kitchens for all beneficiaries including migrant workers, free accommodation, sanctioning of arrear-free pensions and the disbursement of loans to *Kudumbasree* members, besides earmarking additional grants for fighting the crisis.

In the early phase of the spread, the government took determined action to disseminate information on the epidemic in different languages such as Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Assamese and Odia through the *Athithi Devo Bhava* Campaign (Praveen, 2020). This initiative made use of migrant link workers who were trained under the National Health Mission (NHM) for creating awareness of the coronavirus amongst migrant communities. Call centres, control rooms and counselling centres were also set up in the State to address the concerns of individuals during the lockdown, along that of migrants residing in the State. The statistics show that so far 24,690 guest labourers across 14 districts have availed themselves of the psycho-social support provided by the Government of Kerala (GOK, 2020a). The district-

wise details of migrants offered the counselling service are presented in Figure 1. Amidst this, the government introduced some measures to ensure the food, accommodation, medical needs and safety of the migrants. During the period, authorities issued strict orders against the eviction of migrants from their dwellings, and contractors were directed to take care of accommodation and food needs of migrants employed by them. The government also took necessary precautions to control the spread of rumours through social networking platforms targeting the migrant community, and punitive actions were initiated against offenders for breaching the imposed rules.

Figure 1: District-wise tele-counselling services provided to guest labourers during the lockdown

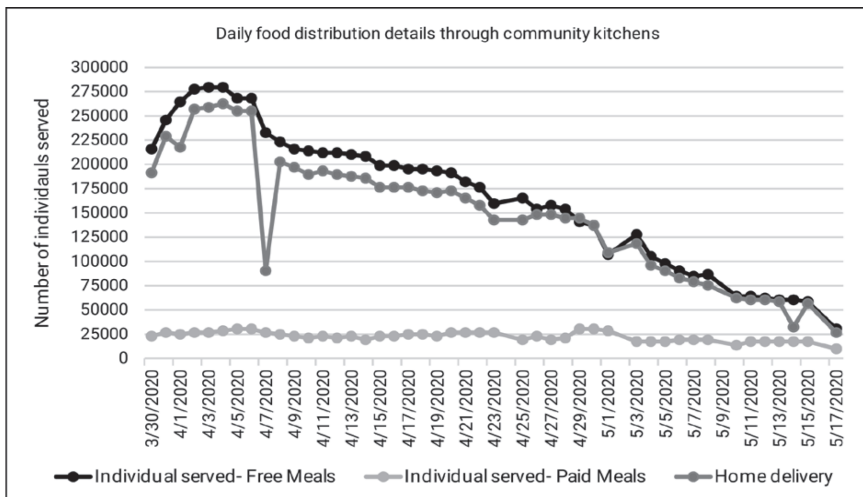


Source: <https://dashboard.kerala.gov.in/psycosocial.php>. Statistics as of 25 June 2020.

The status report filed by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in the Supreme Court revealed that the Kerala government had opened 15,541 migrant camps which accounted for 68.9 per cent of the total number of shelter camps in the entire country providing accommodation for around 0.302 million migrant workers, which constituted about 47.9 per cent of the total migrants sheltered across the country (*The Wire*, 2020). At its peak during the lockdown, the State had operated 20,826 camps that addressed the food and accommodation needs of 0.36 million migrant workers across the State (*Outlook, The News Scroll*, 2020). The State also

took elaborate steps to ensure the availability of masks, soap and sanitizers in the COVID-19 camps. The government set up community kitchens in different parts of the State to ensure the availability of food for guest labourers. The food choices in these kitchens were set in line with the preferences of migrants and in some places free rations were also provided for them. At the peak of the crisis, the community kitchens served more than 500,000 meals per day (Isaac and Sadanandan, 2020). As of 17 May 2020, the record shows that around 8.65 million individuals including migrants were served through 1,325 community kitchens across 1,034 local self-government institutions (GOK, 2020b). Figure 2 denotes the number of individuals who availed the services of community kitchen during the lockdown period. To meet the health requirements of the migrant workers, the health department also deployed mobile vans at different locations with a higher migrant concentration. In an additional move, the State government, in collaboration with mobile service operators, took measures to recharge the phones of migrants, thus enabling them to keep in touch with their family in the home State. During the stay, options for entertainment such as television, indoor games like caroms and chess were also made available for migrants in their camps.

Figure 2: Daily food distribution through community kitchens during the lockdown period



Source: <https://dashboard.kerala.gov.in/psycosocial.php>. Statistics as of 25 June 2020.

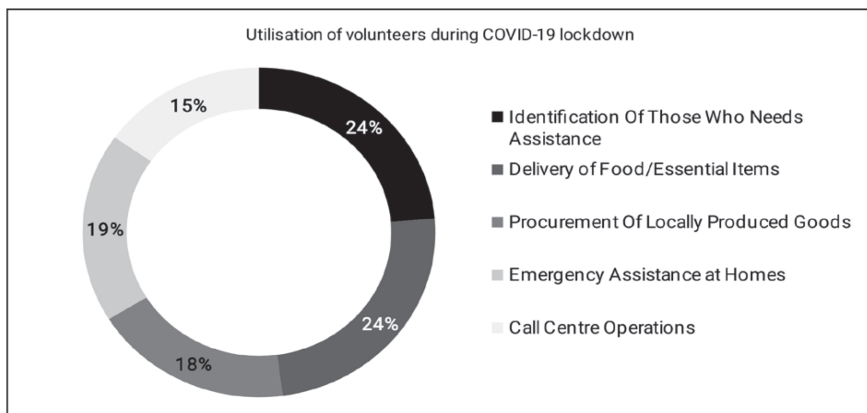
In the earlier section, we touched upon different pro-active steps taken by the Kerala government for migrants during the national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The subsequent section attempts to unveil the factors that enabled the state machinery in the effective delivery of policy measures. The crucial element which brought in efficiency in the domain of policy intervention and implementation is the existence of proactive and efficient grassroots democratic institutions. Several studies have shown that Kerala is one among few States in the country that has implemented the democratic decentralisation successfully (UNDP, 2012). The success of Kerala's decentralisation model is based on the proper devolution of plan resources which is non-discretionary and equitable in its approach (GOK, 2017). Furthermore, this model offers absolute autonomy to the local democratic institutions in formulating and implementing projects based on their needs and priorities, which makes them institutions of self-governance rather than mechanisms for the delivery of services.

A pandemic of the COVID-19 nature demands the interdependence and cooperation between the people and the system more than ever before and this necessitates the existence of empowered and participatory self-governments at the grassroots level. The Panchayati Raj institutions in the State have played a pivotal role in addressing the contingencies which emerged during the pandemic period. The autonomy and empowerment of rural and urban local bodies have significantly helped in devising and implementing swift policy decisions. For example, during the days of lockdown, the functioning of community kitchens was done directly under the supervision of respective local self-governing institutions, which turned out to be a significant relief to the needy. With the launch of the *Aardram* Mission, the participation of local self-governments in promoting healthcare at the grassroots level was further strengthened through community management. Such local democratic institutions enhanced the purchase of drugs and medical equipment, employed more contractual nurses, doctors and paramedical staff, supplemented the incentives of the Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers and finally led to improving the infrastructure and maintenance of primary health care centres (Isaac and Sadanandan, 2020; Vijayan, 2020). It can be deduced that the effectiveness of delivery mechanisms can be enhanced through the proper devolution of powers and responsibilities at the grassroots level.

The success and efficacy of the State government in policy planning and implementation can be largely attributed to the enhanced and effective coordination between different departments of the government on a real-

time basis. The bringing in of various departments under the collective aegis has invariably helped in reducing bureaucratic delays and thus brought more fluidity to the entire set of operations. For addressing the concerns of migrants, the concerted efforts of the departments of labour, revenue, health and home affairs have injected more pace and synergy to the whole range of activities. In the highly globalised world, the role and service of various civil society organisations and NGOs can hardly be ignored. While taking cognisance of evolving events during the outbreak of the epidemic, the State government has brought in multiple actors like NGOs, civil society organisations and committed volunteers to assist in different activities. These combined efforts helped in the invigoration of various relief activities, thus enabling judicious delivery of services to the affected. For example, the involvement of *Kudumbasree* and *Ayalkootam* units contributed immensely to the successful running of community kitchens during the lockdown period. Similar kitchens were also opened in the migrant camps to take care of the food needs of guest workers employed in the State. The use of *Sannadha Sena* (Community Volunteer Corps) also ensured the timely disposal of food and medicines to the beneficiaries stranded during the lockdown. At present, the government has undertaken the task of imparting professional training to these volunteers which would empower them in handling emergency situations and natural calamities apart from making the system more participatory (Vijayan, 2020). Figure 3 represents the details on the segregation of the efforts of the volunteers during the lockdown period.

Figure 3: Segregation of COVID-19 efforts of volunteers during the lockdown period



Source: <https://dashboard.kerala.gov.in/volunteers.php>. Statistics as of 25 June 2020.

One of the critical elements in any policy action plan lies in the real-time assessment and monitoring of the ground realities, which will help in the quick disposal of redressal mechanisms to counter the adversities. During the recent outbreak, the Government of Kerala instituted an empowered committee to analyse the prevailing situations in the State and to make recommendations accordingly. The advice of the committee was duly brought in the form of policy interventions to mitigate the crisis. Another plausible factor that needs to be highlighted is the effort taken by the government in ensuring accountability in its operations. Through the daily press conference, the Chief Minister of Kerala explained the day-to-day updates of the government activities aimed at tackling the coronavirus and also addressed different concerns and apprehensions emerging from the society. While ensuring financial transparency and accountability in matters regarding contributions to the Chief Minister's Disaster Relief Fund (CMDRF), the government has published an updated real time display of its receipts and expenditures incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in its official website. As per the latest information available (as on 23 November 2020), the government has so far received ₹5,230.05 million in receipts and an expenditure worth ₹5,990.1 million was allotted for addressing the various requirements of the COVID-19 pandemic.² The CMDRF expenditure details for COVID-19 are displayed in Table 2. Isaac and Sadanandan (2020) argue that the social capital of the State, active involvement of the community through local governance, and trust-based social contract between the State and the people are the defining factors. Being a robust health system and the demand for healthcare contributed to Kerala's success in its fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2: CMDRF Allotments for addressing COVID-19
(As on 12-10-2020)

Purpose	Amount allotted (in million)
Food grain and provision kit Civil Supplies Department	3500.00
Fund allotted to NORKA for providing financial assistance to Pravisis's	80.50
Co-operative Dept. -Financial Assistance to BPL(PHH), AAY Family	1470.82
Assistance to KSRTC for providing bus services by following COVID Protocol	50.00
Financial Assistance to Devika's Parents	0.5

² The latest figures on receipts and expenditures can be accessed at https://donation.cmdrf.kerala.gov.in/index.php/Dashboard/allType_transaction

Norka Roots - financial assistance to Pravasis's (2nd allotment)	500.00
Directorate of Health (Financial Assistance to hospital Management Committee)	360.36
Financial Assistance to School Cooking Staffs	10.37
Total	5990.1

Source: <https://donation.cmdrf.kerala.gov.in/index.php/Settings/transparency#expenditure>. Accessed on 16 October 2020.

Any policy planning with respect to addressing a crisis like that of COVID-19 requires the existence of adequate and efficient delivery mechanisms to tackle the calamities emerging from it. Vijayan (2020) commented that the lack of political commitment and inadequate public investment in modernising the country's public health care sector has in fact staggered its growth ever since the 1990s, thus keeping the poor out of its reach and making the situation more vulnerable. On the other hand, Kerala presents a promising and optimistic picture. Since its formation, the State made concerted efforts to modernise and expand the health care services across the length and breadth of the State. This has invariably helped in the timely identification and treatment of the infected cases, thereby reducing the fatality rates to some extent during this pandemic. Through the incorporation of ideas from the earlier experience of tackling the Nipah outbreak in 2018, the State had developed expertise in planning and handling situations of a similar nature and magnitude, which proved fruitful in managing the COVID-19 crisis. The imperative of any policy planning is to foresee and empower the necessary institutional mechanisms to tackle the contingencies and thereby reduce its adversities. Furthermore, through concerted and systematic efforts, the Government of Kerala has to a great extent succeeded in providing the necessary care to everyone in the State with proper interventions ever since the reporting of the first case of coronavirus in the State.

Recommendations

No policy initiative can attain its objectives without the active involvement of different subjects upon which it is directed. However, it is often observed that migrants are left out in policy discourses and their voices and demands are hardly heard. The ongoing events in the country point towards the failure of the existing legal and policy frameworks in preventing such dreadful migrant stories from becoming a reality. Such unfortunate incidents underline the need of bringing in overarching changes to the laws and

policies that govern the welfare and wellbeing of migrants in this country. At the same time, while undertaking such moves, it is imperative that these policy initiatives reflect and satisfy the interests of real migrants and not the bureaucrats.

Migrants may never feel at home unless they are accepted fully in the host society and thus become a part of it. From the existing conditions, it can be derived that migrants are often devoid of their 'spaces' in the urban sprawls of our country, where they are usually considered as a means to carry out the work or as a cog in the machine fulfilling the urban demands. Moreover, migrants are often denied their basic rights in the city and thus devoid of a deserving place in the urban social structure, even though their services are utilised and extracted at its maximum level on a day-to-day basis. To overcome this situation, our cities need to be reoriented in such a way that they are more inclusive and accommodative towards the migrants. Efforts should be put in place to ensure the assimilation of migrants with the local population. This is a two-way process which demands directions from the government to sensitise the natives about migrants and their roles, significance and contributions to the sustenance and functioning of urban centres or life. In triggering such a move, the government should use different institutional mechanisms to introduce more awareness among locals in developing a more inclusive attitude towards them, which in turn would pave the way for their social, economic and political inclusion. Assimilation of outsiders can be attained only through their involvement in the socio-cultural moorings and linguistic milieu of the State. To achieve this, the State can engage in creating platforms for the effective transfusion and exchange of cultural traits between the members of the same community. The acceptance and recognition of cultural diversity in the society can help in ensuring better assimilation of migrants into the host community. This sort of inclusiveness, to a great extent, would have averted the recent mass exodus of migrant populations from the cities of the country.

Indian cities need to be planned and restructured to accommodate the needs of the migrant community. The lack of proper amenities, higher cost of living, and denial of the right to health, housing and education make the lives of migrants more precarious and arduous in an urban environment. The unfortunate incidents of migrant deaths due to extreme climatic conditions especially during harsh winters is a testimonial to the hardships faced by migrants in Indian cities. Our cities have to develop a strategy that reflects the needs and addresses the woes of migrants living in

the cities and ensures access to all urban facilities without any discrimination like that of any urban inhabitant. Furthermore, the changes in social conditions and situations mandate a corresponding change in social institutions attuned to the evolving needs and times. Rather than focusing on short-term prescriptions, the State should engineer long-term policy initiatives to bring in changes in the lives of migrants that would incorporate all elements of their lives. The State has a pivotal role to play in overcoming the imbalances emerging from burgeoning labour in-migration. The State needs to upgrade its civil rights system to ensure that migrants can enjoy all their social, economic, and political rights and duties. The adjustments at the policy level are necessary to respond to the changes at the societal level and to sustain and preserve social peace and harmony.

In the matter of ensuring the welfare of migrants, an important initiative that can be brought in is through the enhanced cooperation and coordination between the sending and receiving States at various levels of governance. The implementation of the 'One Nation-One Ration Card' initiative in collaboration with the central and State governments is a positive move towards ensuring food security among migrant populations. Currently, the programme is implemented in 20 States and union territories and it is expected to cover the entire country by March, 2021 (*The Hindu*, 2020b). The greater interactions between the government machineries at the central and State levels will pay back in terms of enhancing the quality of lives of migrants and also help in tackling the threats of law and order involving migrants. Such an initiative can reassure the natives to dispel their fears towards the migrants. The expansion and reachability of different entitlements and facilities for the migrants in the host community can help in creating a sense of being, new identity and greater acceptance into the mainstream society. The accessibility to essential services will help the migrant community to lessen their financial burden or expenditure in the host society and thus prompting them to stay longer in the host community. The expansion of different schemes will help migrants to access other services of the community like the voters card, gas connection and ration cards which can definitely act as a catalyst in enhancing assimilation into the host society.

In the age of globalisation and privatisation, the importance of the roles played by different private stakeholders in the migration process cannot be ignored. The complexity of the migration process demands the inclusion of private players like the NGOs and civil society organisations in augmenting the welfare activities and the inclusion process of the migrants. The inclusion

of the inputs and expertise of the civil society organisations in the welfare efforts can bring in new dimensions and pace to the whole developmental process involving the migrant community. The inclusion of private players can deliver a new synergy to the entire range of operations through the incorporation of new ideas. The enhanced participation of the private sector can expand the reachability and efficacy of such initiatives.

All the contemporary events pertaining to migration urge and stipulate the need of overhauling reforms in the legal and policy frameworks determining the life of migrants of this country. The key legislation that governs the inter-state migrants in India is the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 (GOI, 1979). The Act was enacted with an intention of preventing the exploitation of migrant workers by the contractors at the destination and thus ensuring fair and decent working conditions. Under the Act, migrants are entitled to equal pay for equal work on a par with other workmen, displacement and journey allowances. The Act envisages for regular payment of wages, provision for suitable accommodation, free medical facilities and protective clothing for migrant workers. Another Act that brings a migrant worker under the ambit of protection and welfare schemes is the Unorganised Worker's Social Security Act, 2008 (GOI, 2008) which extends to include the casual and wage workers of the unorganised sector. The Act offers the coverage of social security schemes viz. health and maternity, life and disability, old age protection and other benefits to the unorganised workers. Like many other statutory enactments, various provisions of the aforementioned Acts are living on paper only. In reality, it could not be found to be an effective instrument in redressing the grievances of inter-state migrants. The employers, the migrant community or the implementing agencies are not aware of such welfare-centric provisions contained in these acts, and, to a great extent, have become obsolete in addressing the challenges of today's massive inter-state migration. A report on the conditions of work and promotion of livelihoods in the unorganised sector conducted by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) termed the above mentioned inter-state migrant act as ineffective and outdated. Existing laws should be revamped to address the agonies and concerns of migrants and thereby offering them with chance of being heard, their presence felt and their contributions recognised by the larger society.

The Way Forward

From the above discussions, it is clear that Kerala has earned the distinction of becoming a thriving job market for workers hailing from other regions of

the country. It is equally evident that the persisting socio-economic and demographic conditions demand their presence in future and the State inevitably has no other option than to seek the services of migrant labour to fulfil the demands of the labour market. While identifying the roles and contributions of migrants to the State, the government has been playing a proactive role in ensuring a conducive environment for the peaceful and sustainable living of migrants in Kerala. The State machinery has already instituted different social security schemes available to them in terms of housing, health, education and socialisation during their stay in the State. The State also took concerted efforts to ensure the welfare and well-being of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence and observations in the preceding passages prove that to some extent, these initiatives have succeeded in sensitising and improving the lives of migrants employed in the State.

It is true that the advent of migrants has constructively addressed many of the outstanding issues that the State faced in the past owing to demographic changes and out-migration. Conversely, what needs to be addressed urgently and promptly is to ensure their welfare and well-being in the host State during their residency, combined with all manifestations of human considerations, values and legal rights. Kerala has achieved distinguished laurels in terms of social and human development and has set a precedent for other States in the country to emulate. As migrants form an inevitable part of the State's future, the course of Kerala's human development is also dependent on their growth, progress and sustenance which they can be neither deprived of nor denied. The State's migrant inclusive programmes and policies should strive to uplift migrants on a par with the State's human development indices and socio-economic parameters. This would be possible only through proper interventions and deliberations at different levels that will ensure them the best available offers and services in order to catch up with the level of development of the State. It is worthwhile to note that the State government is taking such bold initiatives at times where there is a strong emergence of anti-migrant sentiments in some parts of our country. Thus, Kerala is setting a model for other States to emulate, and some have already shown their interest in implementing similar schemes. Furthermore, these initiatives can be observed as a positive step by the government towards augmenting the assimilation process of migrants under the socio-economic and cultural fabric of the host society. Through these efforts, the Government of Kerala sends a strong message on the inevitability of having an inclusive and unified approach in identifying

and addressing the needs of the migrant community by transcending the trivial human-made distinctions while keeping abreast of humanity, mankind and its sacred values and practices at the core of all actions.

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