

## Protection Strategies for Interstate Migrant Workers in Kerala: An Urgent Call for Policy Reforms



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**ABSTRACT:** Interstate migrant workers in India are highly disenfranchised, often facing exploitative labour conditions without access to social protection, healthcare, housing, or other basic rights. Their informal employment leads to precarious living situations and limited worker rights. Despite their significant contribution to India's GDP, these workers are denied full citizen rights, exacerbating their economic vulnerabilities. Addressing these issues requires recognizing them as right-bearing citizens, entitled to essential services and protections. Policy measures should focus on empowering these workers, enhancing their economic security, and ensuring their rights as equal members of society. Kerala has seen a substantial influx of interstate migrant workers, with approximately 3.4 million migrants as of 2021. This migration shift from South-South states to North East-South, as indicated by Census 2011 data, highlights the diverse origins of these workers seeking employment opportunities. Despite policies aimed at their support, many migrants remain outside these protective measures. The authors' fieldwork reveals pervasive human rights violations, including inadequate shelter, unequal wages, and limited access to labour and health protections. Legally Indian citizens, these migrants often face systemic denial of their constitutional and human rights, with international and national human rights standards unmet in Kerala. This paper emphasises the economic vulnerabilities of migrant workers and the concept of right-bearing citizens, advocating for policy reforms to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Recommendations include strengthening policy implementation, enhancing legal protections, raising awareness, improving access to services, and promoting social inclusion.

**KEYWORDS:** Interstate Migration, Social Inclusion, Labour Protection, Human Rights Violation, Economic Vulnerabilities, Right-Bearing Citizens

### I. INTRODUCTION

Interstate migration in Kerala has seen significant fluctuations over recent years, reflecting the state's evolving economic and social landscape. According to a Right to Information (RTI) revelation in 2023 (ANRF 2023), there were 5,16,158 interstate migrant workers in Kerala. This contrasts with the Kerala Planning Board's report (Parida & Raman, 2021), which estimated the migrant population at 3.4 million, indicating a substantial increase over the past decade. Earlier, the Department of Labour and Skills (Narayana 2013) had reported a migrant population of 2.5 million, while the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation's (GIFT 2013) estimate highlighted an annual addition of approximately 1,82,000 migrants to the state's workforce.

The 2011 Census revealed a major shift in migration patterns to Kerala. Before 2011, most interstate migrants came from the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh, indicating a predominantly south-south migration trend. However, after 2000, there was a notable change, with a significant influx of migrants from states such as West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, Manipur, and Meghalaya. This shift underscores the changing dynamics of interstate migration in Kerala, influenced by various economic and social factors that attract workers from diverse regions across India.

A recent study by the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), titled "Effect of Social, Institutional, and Technological Interventions on Access to Healthcare Among Interstate Migrant Labourers in Kerala," reveals that there are currently 80 defined job categories for migrant workers in Kerala, though migrants fill roles in over 150 categories. The living and working conditions vary significantly across these categories, highlighting diverse needs among migrant groups. The ANRF project utilizes a dual analytical approach to understand these differences. First, the study emphasizes that interstate migrant workers form an essential part of Kerala's labor force, filling roles across both professional and non-professional sectors. These workers bring specialized skills in fields where they secure employment, thus fitting into what are termed "professional" roles within a sociological—not purely economic—framework. Second, ANRF's observations identify key industries where migrant labor is most concentrated: construction, manufacturing, agriculture, hospitality, and services, along with roles in informal sectors

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such as street vending. The project underscores the significance of addressing the unique challenges and healthcare needs across job categories to enhance social inclusion and ensure sustainable access to healthcare for migrant workers in Kerala. This holistic approach aids policymakers and institutions in designing targeted interventions to improve working and living standards for migrant communities.

The interstate migrant workers constitute a significant yet marginalized segment of the proletariat. Despite their indispensable role across diverse economic sectors, these workers often face precarious working conditions and limited access to basic rights like healthcare—a consequence of capitalist structures that prioritize profit over worker welfare. The classification of jobs into "professional" and "non-professional" sectors here serves not as an indicator of skill or autonomy but as a mechanism to justify differential treatment and exploitation, reinforcing labor segmentation to drive down wages and weaken collective bargaining. Migrant workers, particularly those in construction, manufacturing, and agriculture, form a flexible labour reserve that absorbs the most physically taxing and least secure jobs, with their economic contributions undervalued due to their transient status and lack of institutional support.

### II. IMPORTANCE OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN KERALA'S ECONOMY

Interstate migrant workers form a vital foundation of Kerala's economy, bridging significant labor gaps and contributing to its sustained growth and productivity. Kerala's unique demographic profile, characterized by a highly educated populace and a declining birth rate, has led to labor shortages across numerous sectors, particularly in construction, agriculture, and services. This shortage presents structural challenges that migrant workers have effectively addressed, filling essential roles and ensuring continuity in productivity, while simultaneously enhancing Kerala's competitive position. The critical role of migrant labor becomes evident when examined through an economic lens, as it directly impacts Kerala's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) and supports sustainable development across its industries.

A recent study by the Planning Board ((Parida & Raman, 2021)) emphasizes that migrant workers substantially contribute to Kerala's economic growth. By filling labor-intensive roles that often remain unappealing to the local workforce, they help prevent delays in essential projects and services, which can have ripple effects across Kerala's economy. In construction, for example, migrant labor is integral to the completion of vital infrastructure projects, such as roads, housing developments, and public facilities, which support urban development and, in turn, economic growth. Without this labour force, projects might stagnate, leading to reduced economic output and stalling Kerala's infrastructural and social progress. The economic output generated by migrant workers is measurable in their contributions to GSDP. Migrant labor enhances productivity across multiple sectors, translating into higher levels of economic output. Their participation is especially significant in industries like agriculture, which heavily rely on their labor, particularly during peak harvest seasons when workforce demand is high. With a steady influx of migrant workers, these sectors maintain operational continuity, stabilizing Kerala's agricultural and service outputs. This stability underpins Kerala's position as a productive, economically viable state within India.

Beyond their direct contributions to Kerala's economy, migrant workers also generate substantial remittance flows, which have profound effects on both Kerala's economy and the economies of their home states. These workers frequently remit a portion of their income to families in their home regions, creating a dual economic impact that spans states. As noted by the Planning Board (Parida & Raman, 2021), these remittances serve as a critical income source for households in migrant-sending regions, often representing a substantial percentage of household income. This inflow of funds supports local economies, driving consumption and investment in goods and services, and providing families with the means to improve their standard of living.

In Kerala, the economic effects of this remittance flow are equally significant. Migrant workers contribute to the local economy by spending on housing, food, and other essentials, which supports Kerala's small businesses and drives demand in various service sectors. This spending creates a multiplier effect, boosting local commerce and generating additional employment opportunities for Kerala residents. Furthermore, the presence of migrant workers in these communities stabilizes labor costs, ensuring affordability in essential sectors like healthcare and hospitality, which depend on a steady, reasonably priced labor supply to operate efficiently. The inflow of remittance funds from migrant workers thus creates a cycle of economic benefits that underpins both short-term productivity and long-term growth.

The contributions of interstate migrant workers extend beyond the economic realm, deeply enriching Kerala's social fabric. These workers bring diverse cultures, languages, skills, and traditions, fostering a multicultural environment that contributes to innovation and creativity within the state. This cultural diversity facilitates a dynamic and adaptive social landscape, promoting greater inclusivity and tolerance. In the healthcare and hospitality sectors, for instance, migrant workers' willingness to engage in roles that may be less attractive to local labor helps maintain continuity and quality of service, reinforcing the resilience of these critical sectors. By sustaining high-demand industries, migrant workers contribute to a stable economy, while also integrating socially and contributing to Kerala's multicultural ethos.

The infusion of diverse cultural perspectives has tangible socioeconomic benefits as well. For example, migrant workers often introduce new ideas and approaches in their work, which can lead to more innovative practices within the industries in which they are employed. In agriculture, migrant laborers may bring techniques from their home regions that increase efficiency or

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productivity. Similarly, in the construction industry, migrant workers often employ practices learned from various regions, contributing to a versatile and skilled workforce. This cross-pollination of ideas enhances Kerala's adaptability and creates a vibrant, collaborative work environment that fosters creative solutions to industry challenges.

Remittance data, highlighted by the Planning Board (Parida & Raman, 2021), underscores the transformative role of interstate migrant workers in stabilizing and uplifting local economies. For many households in migrant-sending regions, remittances constitute a primary income source, often surpassing income from other economic activities. The influx of remittance funds allows families to invest in critical areas like education, healthcare, and housing, fostering improved living standards and upward mobility. This increased household consumption stimulates local businesses and creates new employment opportunities, strengthening the economic foundation of migrant-sending regions. Additionally, remittances serve as economic stabilizers, providing a safety net during downturns and economic shocks, and allowing families to maintain consistent consumption levels even in challenging times.

This economic flow not only alleviates poverty but also has a stabilizing effect on Kerala's economy. Migrant workers' expenditures within the state create demand for goods and services, supporting businesses and driving economic activity. For instance, demand for housing creates opportunities within the real estate sector, while spending on goods and services stimulates local retail and service industries. This dynamic supports Kerala's economic resilience, as the steady demand for goods and services generated by migrant workers sustains employment and supports long-term economic stability.

The significant contributions of interstate migrant workers to Kerala's economy present a compelling case for policies that address their unique needs and challenges. By implementing policies that support the social and economic integration of migrant workers, Kerala can not only protect this essential labor force but also enhance its overall economic resilience. Measures such as ensuring equitable access to healthcare, implementing fair labor practices, and providing social security for migrant workers are critical to fostering an inclusive labor market. Furthermore, investing in programs that facilitate skills development among migrant workers can help improve productivity and generate a more adaptable workforce that is better equipped to meet Kerala's evolving economic needs. Additionally, policies that address the informal sector, where many migrant workers are employed, can improve working conditions and safeguard the rights of this vulnerable labor segment. Formalizing employment in sectors like agriculture and construction, where migrant labor is indispensable, can lead to greater economic stability and provide migrant workers with enhanced social protections. Through comprehensive policy reform, Kerala can strengthen its labor market, ensuring that migrant workers receive the support and protections they deserve, thereby fostering an inclusive and sustainable economic environment.

Interstate migrant workers are a linchpin of Kerala's economy, providing essential labor that supports productivity across multiple sectors and fostering a dual economic flow that benefits both Kerala and their home states. Their contributions extend beyond labor supply, impacting economic growth, remittance flows, and cultural diversity, which collectively enhance Kerala's social and economic landscape. By filling roles in high-demand sectors, migrant workers not only address immediate labor shortages but also bolster long-term economic resilience and social cohesion. The influx of remittances from these workers into local economies reinforces financial stability, reduces poverty, and facilitates investments in education, healthcare, and housing, significantly enhancing the quality of life for families in migrant-sending regions. To sustain these benefits, policy measures that safeguard the rights and welfare of migrant workers are imperative. By fostering inclusive policies that promote fair labor practices, healthcare access, and skills development, Kerala can secure a resilient, productive labor market that supports sustained economic growth. In recognizing and addressing the essential contributions of migrant workers, Kerala can continue to benefit from a dynamic, adaptable workforce that strengthens its economic and social foundations, ensuring prosperity and development for all residents.

### III. CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

The contemporary context of interstate migration in Kerala is influenced by an interplay of socio-economic and political factors shaping labor mobility within the state. Kerala's economy exhibits a marked dependency on interstate migrant labor, especially from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, to meet workforce needs in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and services, which are integral to its growth trajectory. Notably, Kerala's high wages in the unorganized sector have made it an attractive destination, leading to a consistent influx of migrants seeking improved employment prospects and living standards. To enhance the integration of migrant labor, the Government of Kerala has implemented progressive social security measures, including access to healthcare, housing, and legal protections, all aimed at promoting the welfare and inclusion of this workforce.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant disruptions to interstate migration patterns. Many migrant workers experienced economic distress due to job loss and limited access to essential services, a crisis to which Kerala responded through decentralized governance and community-based support mechanisms, underscoring the vital role of local governments in crisis response. Despite these efforts, substantial challenges persist in fully integrating migrant workers, as bureaucratic barriers, limited rights awareness, and social stigma often inhibit access to essential services. Furthermore, while the diverse migrant workforce has fostered valuable cultural exchanges, it has also raised social dynamics concerns, making local community sensitization critical to promoting mutual understanding and social cohesion.

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Looking forward, with demographic shifts including declining birth rates, migration will increasingly shape Kerala's population structure, highlighting the importance of inclusive policies to harness the contributions of migrant workers. In sum, Kerala's contemporary migration landscape is characterized by a complex balance of economic opportunity, state-supported social protections, and persistent integration challenges. Addressing these areas will be essential for fostering sustainable development for both the migrant community and the broader socio-economic framework of the state.

### IV. ABDICATION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The protection of human rights for interstate migrants in Kerala is vital for upholding dignity, equality, and justice. As stipulated by the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**, all individuals are born free and equal in dignity, and interstate migrants are entitled to the same respect and recognition. Legal protections, such as the right to recognition before the law (Article 6 of the UDHR), ensure that migrants can seek recourse against discrimination and arbitrary actions. Migrants often face discrimination based on their origin, violating their basic rights. The UDHR's Article 2 guarantees protection against such discrimination, reinforcing the need to actively combat exclusion.

Furthermore, ensuring access to basic services like healthcare, education, and housing is crucial, as these workers contribute significantly to Kerala's economy. Article 25 of the UDHR asserts the right to an adequate standard of living, which must be safeguarded for migrants. Protecting these rights fosters social cohesion, stability, and economic growth, ensuring migrants' inclusion in society. Kerala must implement policies that raise awareness of migrant rights, offer legal aid, and train local authorities. In doing so, Kerala can honour both its domestic and international commitments to human rights and create a more inclusive, just community.

The protection of human rights for interstate migrants in Kerala is not only a legal obligation but also a moral imperative, aligning with the **Global Compact for Migration (GCM)**. As outlined in the GCM, ensuring migrants' dignity and rights is fundamental to fostering inclusive societies. Interstate migrants in Kerala, who contribute significantly to the state's economy, particularly in construction, agriculture, and domestic work, deserve recognition of their inherent dignity and rights (Objective 6). Kerala's legal framework must comply with international human rights obligations, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ensuring migrants' access to fair wages, safe working conditions, and legal protection (Objective 1, 2). The GCM stresses the prevention of exploitation and abuse, urging countries to combat human trafficking and labor exploitation (Objective 10), which is vital for protecting interstate migrants in Kerala from forced labor, wage theft, and unsafe conditions. Moreover, the GCM underscores the importance of access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and social protection for migrants (Objective 15), a principle that Kerala should embrace to promote social cohesion and reduce vulnerabilities. By empowering migrants and ensuring their participation in society (Objective 17), Kerala can foster a sense of belonging, contributing positively to both the local economy and culture. Finally, combating discrimination, as emphasized in the GCM (Objective 16), will ensure that all migrants, regardless of origin, are treated with equality and respect, enhancing social harmony. Through these efforts, Kerala can align its policies with global standards, setting a precedent for human rights protection that resonates nationwide.

The protection of human rights for interstate migrant workers is essential to ensure their dignity and equality under the **Indian Constitution**. Fundamental rights such as the Right to Equality (Articles 14–18) ensure non-discrimination and equal opportunities, including access to public employment. The Right to Freedom (Articles 19–22) guarantees basic freedoms, including personal liberty and the right to education. The Right against Exploitation (Articles 23 and 24) protects migrant workers from forced labor and child labor, addressing their vulnerability in the workplace. Furthermore, the Right to Freedom of Religion (Articles 25–28) ensures religious freedom, enabling workers to practice their faith without fear of persecution. Cultural and Educational Rights (Articles 29 and 30) safeguard the cultural identity and educational access of migrant workers and their families. Finally, the Right to Constitutional Remedies (Articles 32–35) empowers migrant workers to seek justice in cases of rights violations, reinforcing their legal protection.

### V. HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

Above the UDHR, the GCM, and the provisions of the Indian Constitution provide rights-based support for interstate migrant workers in Kerala. The authors' field study will identify the different experiences of these workers. The Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979 offers various supports and protections to ensure the well-being and fair treatment of interstate migrant workers. The Act mandates that establishments employing migrant workers be registered, and contractors must obtain licenses from both the home and host states (Section 4). It ensures that workers are entitled to wages from the date of recruitment, along with displacement and journey allowances (Section 13). The Act also guarantees equal pay for equal work, regardless of sex (Section 16). It requires suitable working conditions for workers, particularly considering their employment in a state other than their own (Section 17). Additionally, employers must provide suitable residential accommodation and prescribed medical facilities, free of charge (Sections 18 and 19). Employers are obligated to provide protective clothing for workers' safety (Section 20). In the event of fatal accidents or serious injuries, employers must report incidents to the relevant authorities and notify the worker's next of kin (Section 21). The Act also provides for inspectors to ensure compliance with these provisions (Section 26),

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and legal aid is available to migrant workers (Section 28). These provisions collectively enhance the welfare and rights of interstate migrant workers, ensuring they are treated fairly and supported during their employment.

However, when the authors conducted field visits in Perumbavoor, Ernakulam district, Kerala, from March to August 2024, they found that migrant workers faced significant challenges and rights violations. The main findings from the fieldwork are as follows:

1. In most manufacturing units, such as the plywood and plastic industries, each unit employs over 15 migrant workers, with some plywood factories having up to 200 workers. However, only 5-7 of these migrant workers are registered by the employer. Employers are required to register migrant workers with the district labor office. In Kerala, assistant labor officers in each district labor office are responsible for coordinating and maintaining migrant worker records. The floating nature of the migrant workforce presents a major challenge for registration at every administrative level, from local to state. Consequently, many workers remain unregistered. To address this issue, the government has mandated employer responsibility for worker registration. In 2017, the Kerala government introduced the AWAS insurance registration system, and approximately 516,000 migrant workers registered under this initiative. Unfortunately, the policy's vision has not adapted to current conditions.
2. In a focus group discussion with migrant workers in Bengali Colony, a community with a significant population of migrants from West Bengal and Assam, it was revealed that most employers do not provide wages from the date of recruitment, nor do they offer displacement or journey allowances. A major issue arises because employers typically hire workers through agents. While these agents were traditionally from Kerala, many migrant workers who have been in Kerala for over 10 years now act as intermediaries. This practice often leads to the denial of migrant workers' legal rights. Additionally, employers are reluctant to register migrant workers under the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) scheme.
3. Wage issues are a significant challenge for migrant workers, who often face unequal pay compared to local workers and gender-based wage disparities among migrants. According to the Basic Wage Act, each sector has designated minimum wages. In Kerala, the minimum wage for casual, or "footloose," laborers is approximately ₹750 per day. However, footloose laborers often negotiate directly with employers, with many able to secure around ₹900 per day through bargaining. Agents play a substantial role in wage exploitation for these workers. In Perumbavoor's early morning labor market, agents arrive around 5:30 a.m., selecting workers for specific jobs. Agents typically charge employers ₹850-900 but pay workers only ₹650. Despite the exploitation, most workers accept these terms because it guarantees them daily work. In the construction sector, the minimum wage for unskilled labour, as specified in order LBRD-E1/42/2020-LBRD dated 18 June 2020, is ₹730 per day. However, many migrants employed by multinational companies receive only ₹400-550, with only professional masons earning the full wage. In the fishing industry, the minimum wage ranges from ₹350-450, but the physically demanding nature of the work would warrant wages closer to ₹650-750. Women migrants, particularly those working in fishing and cashew industries, are often paid less than the stipulated minimum wage, reflecting widespread wage exploitation.
4. The authors' fieldwork revealed that migrant workers endure inadequate residential accommodations and lack access to legally mandated medical facilities. Many are housed in cramped quarters, with six people often sharing a single 250-square-foot room, where the kitchen is also located within the living space, leading to poor hygiene and increased health risks. For women, the situation is even more severe, as they frequently lack access to functional toilets and are often forced to use unsanitary facilities, if available at all. In many manufacturing units, particularly in Perumbavoor, hygiene conditions are severely inadequate, with employers neglecting basic sanitation standards, such as waste disposal, ventilation, and cleanliness. This lack of suitable accommodation and sanitation not only infringes on migrant workers' rights but also increases their susceptibility to health issues, especially in physically demanding industries.
5. The authors' fieldwork revealed that occupational health and safety measures are largely neglected among interstate migrant workers, especially in the manufacturing and construction sectors. Safety tools and equipment are rarely used, as employers fail to enforce these security measures. In cases of workplace accidents, employers often do not provide adequate medical treatment.

One incident highlighted by Mr. George Mathew, a leader in the Progressive Workers Union, involved a serious accident at a manufacturing unit in Perumbavoor. The employer initially admitted the injured worker to a hospital and provided a small amount of money, which was insufficient even for a few hours of care. After consulting with doctors, it was decided that the worker's hand needed to be amputated, requiring major surgery. Despite the severity of the injury, the employer offered no further support. George Mathew advocated for the worker, demanding justice, but was subsequently threatened by the employer. He was kidnapped, beaten, and left for dead in a remote area. Fortunately, he was found and taken to a hospital where he eventually recovered. The employer later visited George and offered him ₹500,000 to withdraw the complaint. George replied that the amount should instead go to the injured worker. The authors later met this worker, who was now running a small lottery shop with his remaining hand.

Additionally, Ms Supriya Prasanth, a migrant link worker with the National Health Mission and research supporter at the Centre for Migration Policy and Inclusive Governance, Mahatma Gandhi University, shared reports of exploitation among female

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migrants in manufacturing units. Supervisors often harass these women, threatening them with job loss if they do not comply with sexual demands. In some cases, supervisors suggest sex work to female migrants as a way to earn higher wages.

Furthermore, the authors spoke with a link worker from the interstate migrant workers' HIV prevention teams in Kerala. This worker reported that a recent study and medical tests conducted by her team found that 54 interstate migrants tested positive for HIV and are now receiving treatment.

These findings highlight severe issues with occupational safety, hazard prevention, and the right to medical care among interstate migrant workers.

### VI. WAY FORWARD

The existing policy frameworks require significant enhancement to address the pressing social, institutional, and health-related challenges faced by interstate migrant workers. One of the most complex issues is the collection of data on this floating population, which poses a challenge not only due to the transient nature of migration but also because of the lack of clarity regarding the purpose of such data collection. Migrants frequently move between cities in search of better employment opportunities, a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the Migration Theory of Push and Pull Factors. This theory posits that migration is influenced by both 'push' factors—such as poverty or limited job opportunities in the place of origin—and 'pull' factors, such as better job prospects or higher wages at the destination.

To better understand and address these challenges, the authors have engaged in extensive discussions with a variety of stakeholders, including social activists, administrative officials, academicians, leaders of non-governmental organizations, and, most crucially, the migrant workers themselves. Drawing upon these consultations, the following recommendations have been formulated to improve the existing policy landscape and ensure that it is more responsive to the needs of interstate migrant workers. These suggested improvements aim to provide a more comprehensive, rights-based framework for migrant workers, ensuring their well-being, equitable treatment, and access to basic services such as healthcare and legal support. With these interventions, it is hoped that both state and national policies can better address the complexities of interstate migration and create a more just and supportive environment for these workers.

Based on the findings from fieldwork in Kerala, it is evident that several significant policy reforms are required to address the multifaceted challenges faced by interstate migrant workers. These challenges include issues such as inadequate registration processes, wage exploitation, poor living conditions, insufficient occupational safety measures, and gender-based discrimination. The following five policy recommendations and their associated interventions aim to remedy these issues and provide a more robust framework for migrant worker welfare.

#### 1. Enhancing the Registration System for Migrant Workers

The current AWAS registration system must be expanded and digitalized to enable real-time updates and seamless verification of migrant workers across districts. Given the transient nature of migrant workers, who frequently change employers, the implementation of an efficient digital platform is vital for tracking their employment status. Additionally, stringent enforcement of employer responsibility for registration is necessary, with substantial penalties for non-compliance. Labour inspectors should carry out regular audits to ensure that employers, particularly in large-scale sectors such as plywood and plastic manufacturing, are consistently registering workers with the relevant authorities.

#### 2. Ensuring Fair Wages and Mitigating Wage Exploitation

A comprehensive wage monitoring system must be established, requiring employers to report wages to district labour offices on a regular basis. Workers must be educated about their wage rights, and regular wage audits should be conducted to ensure that employers adhere to minimum wage laws. Wage exploitation, often perpetuated by intermediaries or agents who charge exorbitant fees or take a significant portion of workers' earnings, must be addressed through stringent regulations. Labour agents should be licensed, and their activities should be closely monitored. Additionally, a grievance redressal mechanism must be implemented, offering workers a platform to report wage-related issues or exploitation by agents.

#### 3. Improving Housing and Living Conditions

Employers must be required to provide migrant workers with adequate, safe, and sanitary housing that meets the government's strict standards. These standards should guarantee sufficient ventilation, access to clean drinking water, proper sanitation facilities, and privacy. Many workers, particularly those in areas such as Perumbavoor, currently live in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions that pose significant health risks. A dedicated regulatory body should be established to regularly inspect housing facilities, with provisions for workers to report violations anonymously. Employers failing to comply with these standards should face penalties, and workers must be guaranteed the right to hygienic living conditions.

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### 4. Enhancing Occupational Health and Safety Standards

Mandatory occupational health and safety training is essential, particularly in high-risk sectors such as construction and manufacturing. Employers must be obligated to provide workers with appropriate protective equipment and ensure the implementation of safety measures to minimize workplace risks. Workers should also be educated on emergency response protocols. In the event of accidents, employers should be responsible for providing immediate medical care, and a compensation scheme should be established for injured workers. A workers' compensation fund could ensure that workers receive adequate financial support for rehabilitation and recovery after a work-related injury.

### 5. Strengthening Protections for Female Migrant Workers

Specific policies are necessary to safeguard female migrant workers from exploitation and harassment. Employers must establish clear and confidential reporting channels for sexual harassment, ensuring swift and effective handling of complaints. Strict legal action must be taken against any form of sexual exploitation. Furthermore, female migrant workers must have access to gender-sensitive healthcare services, including reproductive health care and HIV prevention programs. Health workers should receive training on addressing the unique health needs of women migrants, ensuring that they have access to the care and support they require.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The situation of interstate migrant workers in Kerala exemplifies a stark violation of human rights, particularly within the context of Social Contract Theory. This theory emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between individuals and the state, where individuals agree to live under the state's governance in exchange for the protection of their rights and security. However, for many migrant workers in Kerala, this social contract is broken, as they face systemic neglect, exploitation, and inadequate legal protections despite their significant contributions to the state's economy. Kerala's rapid economic growth, particularly in sectors like plywood, construction, and agriculture, heavily depends on the labor of interstate migrant workers. These workers, often from marginalized communities, live in conditions that are far removed from the protections promised under the social contract. They work in hazardous environments for low wages, and many do not have access to basic rights such as healthcare, housing, or social security. This breach of the social contract underscores the failure of the state to fulfill its obligations, resulting in the denial of fundamental human rights for migrant workers.

The state's obligation to ensure the well-being of its population, including migrant workers, is at the heart of Social Contract Theory. However, despite the considerable economic contributions of migrant workers, Kerala has failed to provide adequate legal and social protections for them. One of the most glaring issues is the failure to ensure proper registration of workers, despite legal requirements for employers to register their migrant workforce. This lack of registration not only excludes workers from essential welfare schemes but also exposes them to exploitation and abuse. The AWAS insurance registration system, introduced in 2017, has not been successful in addressing this issue, and the floating nature of the migrant workforce poses a major challenge for both registration and effective policy enforcement. In addition to issues related to registration, migrant workers face significant wage disparities. Despite the existence of minimum wage laws, many workers receive far less than what is legally mandated. In industries like construction and fishing, wages are often below the minimum wage, and workers are subjected to exploitation by middlemen or agents, who further erode their earnings. Gender-based wage disparities also persist, with women migrant workers often receiving lower wages than their male counterparts, even for the same work. This economic exploitation highlights the state's failure to ensure equitable treatment and protection of workers' rights, as promised in the social contract.

Furthermore, migrant workers in Kerala endure substandard living conditions, which violate their right to adequate housing and sanitation. Many workers live in cramped, unsanitary conditions, with multiple individuals sharing a small room and limited access to clean water or functioning toilets. The failure of employers to provide adequate accommodations and the state's lack of enforcement of housing regulations exacerbate these issues, leaving migrant workers vulnerable to health risks and exploitation. The lack of occupational health and safety measures further compounds the vulnerability of migrant workers. In industries like manufacturing and construction, safety measures are often neglected, and workers are exposed to serious hazards without proper protective equipment or training. In cases of workplace accidents, the state's response is typically insufficient, with employers failing to provide adequate medical care or compensation. This negligence not only violates the workers' right to a safe working environment but also highlights the gap between the state's obligations and its actual provision of protections.

The denial of human rights to interstate migrant workers in Kerala reflects a broader issue of social and institutional neglect, exacerbated by the state's failure to uphold the social contract. The gap between the state's promises and the lived realities of migrant workers calls for comprehensive policy reforms that address the multifaceted challenges faced by this vulnerable group. These reforms should prioritize better registration systems, stricter enforcement of labor laws, fair wage practices, and improved

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living and working conditions. Only through such interventions can the state begin to fulfill its duty to protect the rights and dignity of interstate migrant workers, aligning with the principles of Social Contract Theory.

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