

Negotiating Structure and Agency: Remittances, Belonging, and Identity among Kerala's In-Migrants

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Abstract

Internal migration has become central to Kerala's contemporary labour economy, yet migrant workers from North and Northeast India continue to occupy socially precarious positions within the state. While Kerala's development model depends increasingly on migrant labour, questions of belonging, recognition, and welfare access remain unevenly negotiated. This article examines how migrant workers navigate remittances, identity, labour precarity, and everyday exclusion in Pathanamthitta district, Kerala. Drawing on mixed-methods fieldwork conducted between 2024 and 2025, including surveys, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic observations, the study argues that migration is not merely an economic process but a deeply emotional and relational experience. Remittances emerge as moral obligations tied to dignity, care, and familial belonging rather than simple financial transfers. At the same time, migrants encounter symbolic and institutional forms of exclusion through linguistic hierarchies, insecure housing, labour segmentation, and the discourse of *athithi thozhilali* ("guest worker"), which frames them as economically necessary yet socially temporary. Rather than romanticising resilience, the article highlights the everyday improvisations through which migrants endure uncertainty and negotiate partial belonging. The paper argues that Kerala's migrant regime reveals differentiated forms of citizenship within the Indian nation-state, where formal mobility coexists with unequal recognition and conditional social membership.

Keywords: internal migration, remittances, belonging, labour precarity, identity, translocality

Introduction

Before sunrise, migrant workers begin gathering near construction sites, junctions, loading centres, and roadside tea shops across Kerala. Some arrive carrying lunch boxes packed the previous night in overcrowded rented rooms. Others stand silently beside labour contractors waiting to hear whether work will be available that day. They mix concrete for apartment complexes they will never inhabit, lay tiles in homes they cannot afford to rent, and prepare food in restaurants where they are rarely treated as customers. Their labour has become deeply embedded within Kerala's economy, yet their social presence remains uncertain and conditional.

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Over the last two decades, Kerala has experienced a major transformation in its labour structure. Declining local participation in physically intensive sectors, combined with rising wage differentials, has led to large-scale migration from states such as Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Tripura. Migrants now sustain crucial sectors including construction, hospitality, transportation, manufacturing, and retail. Despite this dependence, migrant workers continue to occupy an uneasy social position. They are economically necessary but socially temporary.

This contradiction becomes visible in the language through which migrants are publicly described. The term *athithi thozhilali*, commonly translated as “guest worker,” appears respectful and inclusive at first glance. Yet the language of hospitality also marks migrants as outsiders whose presence remains conditional. Guests may be welcomed, but they are not expected to belong permanently. The discourse of hospitality therefore masks a deeper structure of social distance.

This article examines how migrant workers navigate these contradictions in everyday life. Rather than understanding migration solely as labour mobility or economic necessity, the paper approaches migration as an emotional and social condition shaped by obligation, aspiration, exhaustion, humiliation, adaptation, and uncertainty. It asks three interconnected questions. First, how do remittances reshape family relationships and social identity in migrants’ home regions? Second, how do migrants experience belonging and exclusion in Kerala? Third, how do workers negotiate structural constraints through everyday practices of survival and adaptation?

The article argues that Kerala’s migrant regime reveals a broader contradiction within Indian democracy. Migrants possess formal citizenship and constitutional mobility, yet access to dignity, welfare, recognition, and social legitimacy remains uneven. Kerala’s developmental model materially depends upon migrant labour while simultaneously reproducing symbolic and institutional boundaries around who can fully belong.

By examining the everyday experiences of migrant workers, the paper contributes to wider debates on migration, labour, and citizenship in South Asia. It argues that internal migration should not be understood merely as movement across regions, but as a struggle over recognition within the nation-state itself.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Internal Migration and Labour Regimes in India

Internal migration has long shaped India’s economic and social landscape, though it has often remained underrepresented within public discourse and policy debates. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that migration in India is deeply connected to agrarian distress, uneven regional development, informal labour markets, and capitalist restructuring (Bremen 1996; Tumber 2018; Shah and Lerche 2021). Circular migration in particular has emerged as a defining feature of India’s labour economy, producing workers who remain socially tied to rural homes while economically dependent on urban and semi-urban labour markets.

Scholars such as Jan Breman have shown how migrant labour in India is frequently organised through informal and precarious arrangements that deny workers long-term security or social mobility. Rather than functioning as transitional labour, migrants often become permanently mobile populations moving between insecurity in origin regions and insecurity in destination economies. Recent work on Kerala has similarly demonstrated how migrant workers occupy segmented labour positions despite the state's reputation for welfare and social development (Kannan and Pillai 2020; Rajan and Zachariah 2020).

However, much of this scholarship has focused either on labour economics or migration administration. Less attention has been given to how Kerala's welfare-oriented social order itself shapes migrant belonging and exclusion. This article builds on these debates by examining how welfare modernity can coexist with differentiated social membership.

Remittances, Emotional Economies, and Translocal Life

Migration scholarship has increasingly challenged narrow economic understandings of remittances. Rather than simply transferring money, migrants also circulate emotional support, aspirations, values, and social expectations across geographical distance (Levitt 1998). Remittances therefore operate within what scholars describe as moral economies—systems of obligation, reciprocity, sacrifice, and recognition embedded within family and community life.

For many migrants, remitting money becomes tied to masculinity, adulthood, and familial respectability. Appadurai's (2004) discussion of aspiration is particularly relevant here, as migration often becomes linked to the hope of social transformation despite persistent uncertainty. Similarly, studies of translocality emphasise that migration does not sever connections to home but instead produces social worlds stretched across multiple places simultaneously (Brickell and Datta 2011).

Yet remittances are also emotionally burdensome. Migrants frequently experience guilt, pressure, and anxiety regarding their ability to provide for families left behind. Existing literature has sometimes romanticised migrant sacrifice without adequately examining loneliness, emotional exhaustion, or fractured family intimacy. This article therefore approaches remittances not only as expressions of care but also as emotionally demanding forms of relational labour.

Belonging, Boundary-Making, and Differentiated Citizenship

Questions of belonging and recognition have become increasingly central within migration studies. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that identities are continuously negotiated through processes of representation and difference, while Wimmer (2013) demonstrates how social boundaries are actively produced through institutions, discourse, and everyday interaction.

In the Indian context, internal migrants often experience forms of exclusion despite possessing formal citizenship. Recent scholarship has shown that citizenship functions unevenly across class, region, caste, and labour status (Shah and Lerche 2021). Migrants may legally belong to the nation-state while remaining socially peripheral within local spaces.

Kerala presents an important site for examining these contradictions. The state is frequently celebrated for literacy, welfare, and social development, yet migrant workers continue to encounter symbolic distancing, labour segmentation, and unstable welfare inclusion. The discourse of *athithi thozhilali* illustrates this tension clearly. Migrants are incorporated economically while simultaneously marked as socially temporary.

This article conceptualises these dynamics as forms of differentiated citizenship within the nation-state. Rather than focusing solely on legal exclusion, the paper examines how everyday practices of language, labour, housing, and welfare produce unequal forms of recognition among formally equal citizens.

Methodology

The study adopts a convergent mixed-methods design combining survey research, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic observation. Fieldwork was conducted in Pathanamthitta district between July and September 2024 and again between August and September 2025. The district was selected because it reflects an important shift in Kerala's migration geography: migrant labour is increasingly present not only in metropolitan centres but also within smaller towns and semi-rural regions.

Five labour clusters—Konni, Pullad, Kozhencherry, Aranmula, and Pathanamthitta town—were identified through preliminary visits, consultations with labour contractors, and interactions with local organisations. An unstructured survey was administered to 200 migrant workers within the working age, who had completed at least one full work season in Kerala. The survey collected information on employment conditions, wages, remittance practices, housing arrangements, welfare access, and perceptions of belonging.

To deepen the analysis, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with workers from Bihar, Assam, West Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand. Participants worked primarily in construction, transportation, hospitality, and manufacturing sectors. Interviews were conducted in Hindi, Bengali, and Assamese depending on participant preference.

Many conversations moved beyond formal questioning. Workers spoke about loneliness, humiliation, fear of illness, family obligations, aspirations for children, and anxieties surrounding employment instability. Interviews were often interrupted by phone calls from home, work demands, or visible exhaustion after long shifts. These interruptions themselves became part of the research process, revealing the fragmented rhythms of migrant life.

The study also included ten interviews with NGO workers, employers, welfare officials, and trade union representatives. Ethnographic observations were documented through field notes collected in labour camps, railway stations, markets, rented rooms, and informal gathering spaces.

The study has several limitations. Most respondents were male, reflecting the gendered nature of labour migration within the district. The experiences of women migrants therefore remain insufficiently explored. Translation also involved interpretive decisions, particularly when translating conversational expressions into English. Rather than claiming statistical

representativeness, the study seeks analytical depth by examining how migrants themselves narrate precarity, aspiration, and belonging within everyday life.

Findings and Discussions

Remittances, Obligation, and Emotional Economies

Remittances emerged as one of the most emotionally charged dimensions of migration. Nearly all respondents reported sending money home regularly, often reducing their own expenses in order to sustain these flows. Yet workers rarely described remittances in purely financial terms. Sending money home was repeatedly framed as responsibility, emotional continuity, and proof that migration had not weakened familial belonging. One worker from Bihar explained quietly:

“Paise bhejna band ho jaaye toh ghar waale samajhte hain ki hum unko bhool gaye.”

If money stops going home, the family begins to think you have forgotten them.

For many respondents, remittances functioned not simply as economic support but as emotional reassurance across distance. Workers frequently described migration as meaningful only if responsibilities at home continued to be fulfilled. Another respondent reflected:

“Yahan hum khud kam kharch karte hain, taaki ghar mein dikkat na ho.”

Here we spend very little on ourselves so that the family back home does not suffer.

Several workers described postponing medical treatment, avoiding leisure spending, or sharing overcrowded rooms in order to maximise savings. These practices reflected not merely economic necessity but also deeply gendered expectations surrounding masculinity, sacrifice, and duty.

Migration also reshaped household dynamics in sending regions. Some respondents described wives or mothers taking greater responsibility for banking, children’s education, and financial decisions. Yet these shifts were often experienced ambivalently rather than celebrated as empowerment. Workers repeatedly spoke about absence, missed festivals, ageing parents, and the emotional strain of distance. One respondent from Assam remarked:

“Video call mein beta pehchaan leta hai... saamne jao toh pehle sharmaata hai.”

My son recognises me on video calls... but when I go home in person, he becomes shy at first.

Such moments revealed the emotional contradictions embedded within migration. Economic mobility frequently depended upon prolonged emotional absence.

At the same time, remittance expectations generated constant anxiety. Workers feared unemployment not only because income would stop, but because interruptions in remittance flows threatened family trust and masculine self-worth. Migration therefore involved continuous emotional labour alongside physical labour.

Language, Everyday Boundary-Making, and Conditional Belonging

Belonging in Kerala was experienced unevenly and often conditionally. Language emerged as one of the most important markers shaping everyday interaction. Workers who learned basic Malayalam frequently reported receiving somewhat better treatment in shops, buses, and

workplaces. However, language learning was not simply cultural adaptation; it functioned as survival labour. One respondent explained:

“Malayalam bolne se log samajhte hain ki hum theek aadmi hain. Nahin toh kuch bhi sochte hain.” *If you speak Malayalam, people assume you are decent. Otherwise they think anything about you.*

Language therefore became tied to respectability and recognisability. Yet even when migrants learned Malayalam, social distance often persisted. Terms such as “Bhai,” “Hindi worker,” or “Bengali” circulated casually in everyday interactions regardless of workers’ actual origins. While these labels were not always openly abusive, they reduced migrants to broad labour categories rather than recognising individual identities. One worker from West Bengal remarked:

“Naam se kam, state se zyada pehchaante hain.” *People recognise us more by our state than by our names.*

Housing further reinforced exclusion. Most workers lived in overcrowded rented rooms or temporary accommodation arranged by contractors. Several described sleeping in shifts because of limited space, while others spoke about landlords refusing to rent houses directly to migrants. One respondent reflected:

“Dus log ek kamre mein rehte hain... par choice bhi kya hai?” *Ten people stay in one room... but what choice do we really have?*

Another worker explained:

“Hum doosron ke ghar banaate hain, par khud kabhi apna jaisa mehsoos nahi hota.” *We build homes for others, but we ourselves never feel settled.*

At the same time, migrants developed informal support networks that partially softened these exclusions. Workers shared job information, translated documents, pooled money during illness, and guided newly arrived migrants through unfamiliar spaces. These networks created fragile forms of solidarity within otherwise precarious conditions.

Yet the paper resists romanticising resilience. Many workers expressed exhaustion, frustration, and emotional isolation. Kerala was often described not as home, but as a place where one survives because survival elsewhere appears even more uncertain. One respondent summed it up quietly:

“Yahan rehte hain kyunki majboori hai... apnapan ke liye nahi.” *We stay here because we have no choice... not because it feels like home.*

Welfare, Labour, and Differentiated Citizenship

Despite Kerala’s reputation for welfare and social development, migrant workers frequently experienced fragmented access to institutional support. Many respondents possessed limited awareness regarding welfare schemes, health insurance, or labour protections available to them. Others described bureaucratic difficulties linked to documentation, language barriers, or dependence on contractors. One worker remarked:

“Scheme toh bahut bolte hain, par hum jaise logon ko kaise milega koi nahi bataata.” *People talk about many schemes, but nobody explains how people like us are supposed to access them.*

Labour segmentation also remained deeply visible. Migrants were concentrated in physically demanding and hazardous occupations with limited opportunities for advancement. Even workers who had spent years in Kerala rarely described long-term settlement as realistic. A respondent from Odisha stated:

“Kaam ke liye Kerala theek hai... par rehne ke liye apna jaisa nahi lagta.” *Kerala is fine for work... but it never really feels like a place of our own.*

Such narratives reveal how citizenship operates unevenly despite constitutional equality. Migrants are legally mobile within the Indian union, yet recognition remains conditional upon labour usefulness, discipline, and temporary presence.

The discourse of *athithi thozhilali* plays an important role here. While appearing respectful, the language of hospitality subtly limits the possibility of permanent belonging. Guests may be welcomed temporarily, but they are rarely imagined as co-owners of social space. The language therefore transforms labour incorporation into a controlled form of conditional inclusion.

Several respondents also described avoiding hospitals, police stations, or local bureaucratic offices because they feared humiliation or confusion arising from language barriers. One worker explained:

“Police station ya office jaana pad jaaye toh darr lagta hai. Samajh nahi aata kaise baat karein.” *If we have to go to a police station or government office, we become anxious. We do not know how to speak there.*

The findings suggest that Kerala’s developmental economy depends upon a carefully managed contradiction: migrant labour is indispensable, yet migrant belonging remains socially restricted and institutionally fragile.

Discussions

The findings reveal that internal migration in Kerala cannot be understood solely through labour economics or mobility statistics. Migration operates simultaneously as an economic necessity, emotional condition, and political relationship structured by unequal recognition. Remittances emerged not simply as financial behaviour but as moral and emotional practices through which migrants attempted to maintain dignity, obligation, and family continuity. Yet these emotional economies were deeply burdensome. Migration produced aspiration alongside loneliness, mobility alongside absence.

The study also demonstrates how belonging is negotiated through everyday interactions shaped by language, housing, labour, and public discourse. Malayalam proficiency occasionally improved social interaction, but acceptance remained conditional and partial. Adaptation reduced vulnerability without necessarily producing inclusion. Most importantly, the Kerala case reveals how differentiated citizenship can emerge within formally unified national belonging. Migrants possess legal citizenship, yet social membership remains unevenly

distributed. Welfare systems, labour markets, and cultural discourse collectively shape who is recognised as legitimately belonging within regional social life.

Rather than presenting migrants as heroic survivors or passive victims, the findings highlight the ordinary complexity of migrant existence. Workers continuously improvise forms of endurance while navigating exhaustion, aspiration, resentment, obligation, and uncertainty. The article therefore argues that internal migration exposes the hidden internal borders of Indian democracy. Mobility across state boundaries does not automatically dissolve hierarchies of recognition. Instead, migrants inhabit an uneasy space between economic indispensability and social conditionality.

Conclusion

This article examined how migrant workers in Kerala negotiate remittances, belonging, labour precarity, and social recognition within an economy increasingly dependent upon internal migration. The findings demonstrate that migration is not merely a question of employment or mobility but a deeply emotional and relational process shaped by obligation, sacrifice, adaptation, and uncertainty.

Remittances sustain not only households but also emotional ties and moral identities across geographical distance. At the same time, migrants encounter linguistic hierarchies, symbolic exclusion, unstable housing, and fragmented welfare access that position them as temporary contributors rather than full participants in social life.

The paper argues that Kerala's migrant regime reveals an important contradiction within contemporary India. Formal citizenship does not automatically produce equal belonging. Migrants move legally within the nation-state while continuing to encounter uneven recognition shaped by labour status, language, class, and regional identity. Rather than romanticising resilience, the article foregrounds the ordinary tensions of migrant life: aspiration alongside fatigue, adaptation alongside humiliation, mobility alongside emotional loss. Migrants endure not because precarity disappears, but because everyday survival requires continuous improvisation.

Future research should examine how caste, gender, religion, and long-term settlement reshape migrant experiences across different regions of India. Comparative studies across welfare-oriented states may further illuminate how regional political cultures produce differentiated forms of internal citizenship.

Ultimately, the experiences of Kerala's migrant workers compel us to rethink belonging within the Indian nation-state itself—not as a fixed constitutional condition, but as an uneven and continuously negotiated social reality.

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