



COMMENTARIES

Footloose Workers in Times of Calamities: A Case Study of the 2018 Kerala Floods

S. IRUDAYA RAJAN, ARYA SURESH, and ROHIT IRUDAYARAJAN

Illegal Migration to and from Libya, the Nigerian Factor and the EU: An Agenda for a Resolution

ALEXANDER C. UGWUKAH

Unsustainable Systems: Externalization as a Nonviable Form of Migration Management in the Face of Climate Change

ABDULLAH AYAZ

Turkey's Buffer Zone in Northern Syria and Its Impact on Irregular Migration

ÖMER YILMAZ

Global Developments in Climate Policy and Migration Policy: Can the UN Be a Base to Create an Adequate Legal Framework?

BURAK GÜNEŞ and HAYDAR KARAMAN

The New German Coalition and Its Impact on EU-Turkey Relations

ZAFER MEŞE

Footloose Workers in Times of Calamities: A Case Study of the 2018 Kerala Floods

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ABSTRACT *Kerala, the southernmost state in India, much researched for its high standard of living and a model of development, largely dependent on international remittances, experienced one of its worst floods in 2018. The state also experiences a peculiar type of labor crisis; where the local population migrates internationally, attracting inter-state migrants to compensate for the labor deficit. However, in times of calamities like floods, these unorganized laborers are the worst hit and still the last priority. The media widely reported their mass exodus, unhygienic living conditions, and mistreatment in relief camps during the floods, though the policy responses have been unsatisfactory to date. The paper tries to evaluate the role of inter-state migrants in the socio-economic profile of Kerala and comments on the necessity to include them as a priority in the migration policy discussions, particularly in light of the state's extreme proneness to natural disasters.*

Keywords: Climate Change, Kerala Floods, Internal Migrants, Social Justice, Displacement, India

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Climate-Induced Migration: The Indian Scenario

Climate-induced displacement and migration are widely discussed and debated across the globe; yet, there is no universally agreed definition of the phenomenon. Broadly, it refers to the movement of people driven by sudden or progressive changes in the weather or climate.¹ Indeed, while some research indicates that environmental disasters decrease migration,² others show that they increase migration,³ or have no effect on it.⁴ This also illustrates the complexity of the nexus between migration and environmental disasters.⁵ A detailed study conducted by Suleri and Savage in 2006 found that the intensity of the environmental disaster determines its impact on migration; and appropriate measures can be taken through long and short-term initiatives since households suffer a loss of income due to the destruction of productive assets, the death or injury of wage earners, the loss of local jobs, the return of wage earners from distant cities, or the disruption of the flow of remittances.

The Climate Action Network South Asia and ActionAid joint report cautions that even if the targets and mitigation pledges on Greenhouse Gas emissions are met by the world nations, in the five South Asian nations (India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan) an approximate 37.5 million people would suffer displacement by 2030 and an estimated 62.9 million by 2050. Among the

South-Asian countries, the disaster displacement level is the highest in India.⁶ During the monsoons between 2008 and 2019, approximately 3.6 million people were displaced per annum in the country. By 2050, India is predicted to witness the displacement of 45 million people owing to climate change and natural disasters, which is thrice the current rate.⁷ In India, the economic cost of environmental degradation is \$80 billion per year (which is 5.7 percent of the 2009 GDP), and the natural calamities and disasters together result in a loss of 2 percent from its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) annually.⁸

The climate change-migration nexus is peculiarly complex in India, primarily due to the massive share of the population⁹ depending on primary sector occupations like agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and allied industries, which are sensitive to climate change. The intersectional impacts of regional dynamics, socio-economic causes, and environmental issues create added vulnerability, forcing people to migrate.¹⁰ A hundred million people, which is nearly 20 percent of India's labor force in any given year, is on the move within the country for employment reasons¹¹ and the remittance sent home by these internal migrants is about eight times more than the central government's budgetary allocations for education and health sectors combined.¹²

Given the complex, intertwined nature of climate change, natural calamities, and migration in India, specific policy interventions are vital. Water-

shed management, crop insurance, development of village industries to reduce the over-dependence on agricultural output for living, efforts to study and understand the possibility of climate-resilient farming, etc. are some of the initiatives that should be promoted. At destination locations, especially cities where laborers from rural areas migrate to, their healthy and safe living should be ensured. Proper documentation, ensuring their access to social security services and rations should be of top priority. Such interventions at both the source and destination locations are important to develop a sustainable migration system for a country, which is largely prone to natural calamities and highly dependent on inter-state migrants.

The Kerala Flood of 2018

The state of Kerala, in the Southwestern part of the Indian headland bordered by the Arabian Sea on its West and the Western Ghats to the East, has a land area of 38,868 km² and is densely populated with 819 people per km².¹³ Known as the 'Gateway of the Summer Monsoon' in India, the state experiences a humid tropical climate, the dominant climatic phenomena being the South-West (June to September) and the North-East (October to December) monsoons. Due to its close proximity to the sea, with a coastline of nearly 600 km, and the presence of numerous rivers, lakes, backwaters, and estuaries, a considerable proportion of the total land area¹⁴ is susceptible to floods and

Natural disasters such as floods not only affect human life, public infrastructure, and the economy, but also cause enormous psychological trauma, which includes insecurity, fear, and depression

landslides.¹⁵ Bhagat observes¹⁶ that such phenomena are only projected to increase in the coming years, with India identified as one of the most vulnerable countries in the context of global climate change, and Kerala identified as a hotspot of climate change vulnerability within India.¹⁷

With an annual rainfall of approximately 300 cm received during a span of 6 months, Kerala records the highest monsoon rains in India. Home to over 50 dams and 44 rivers flowing through its territory and the torrential rains lasting from 2018 August 1 to 19, Kerala experienced its worst flooding since 1924.¹⁸ The rainfall, 164 percent above the usual levels resulted in serious flooding and landslides, which caused severe damages across the state and killed 433 people. According to official statistics, the flood-affected 5.4 million of the population, spread across 775 villages, destroying many buildings: 1,186 completely and 19,588 partially.¹⁹ Having displaced approximately 500,000 people and caused

Migration has been the most obvious choice for people, since the local economy generates lesser opportunities. The people of Kerala, a state with a long history of emigration, are more inclined to migrate on a large scale

severe harm to roads, electric lines, and other infrastructural facilities, the damage that the flood created accounts for \$4.4 billion.²⁰

The Kerala floods remind us of the importance of updating water and disaster management schemes. Recently, the government has come up with initiatives such as the Dam Safety Bill 2018, which consists of these protocols and suggests setting up a Dam Safety Authority, a good step towards

the impact of rainfall, are illegal stone quarrying, deforestation, sand mining, destruction of paddy fields, and unstable drainage patterns.²²

Mismanagement of dams and the lack of proper Emergency Action Plans, which is a basic requirement for major dams worldwide, aggravated the situation further. In 2011, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), a committee set up under the renowned ecologist Madhav Gadgil, suggested the classification of the Ghats into three zones based on sensitivity. Directives on land utilization were also given, however, the government of Kerala rejected most recommendations of the committee and continues to follow the outdated Kerala Forest (Vesting and Management of Ecological Fragile Land) Act 2003, which was widely criticized following the flood.

The study conducted by the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Development Studies reported that the warning

Table 1: Rainfall Received in Kerala in 2018 in Comparison to Normal Rainfall

Period	Rainfall Received in 2018 (mm)	Normal Rainfall (mm)	Increase above Normal (percent)
June	750	650	15
July	857	726	18
August (1-19)	759	288	164
June 1-August 19	2366	1664	42

Source: Indian Meteorological Department. See: AIR²¹ Worldwide Report

flood risk reduction. Though one of the reasons for the havoc is extreme rainfall, which cannot be prevented, the factors, which have aggravated

from the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) was not effective in making people understand the gravity of the situation and to prepare



themselves for such a serious disaster.²³ Not only the people but also the local, district, and state authorities ignored the weather forecast and this resulted in delayed rescue and rehabilitation measures as well as delays in the coordinated functioning of governmental agencies including the Disaster Management Authority (DMA). The situation highlighted the need to convey in time the required information to the right people and the responsible authorities to tackle such situations with efficiency.

Natural disasters such as floods not only affect human life, public infrastructure, and the economy, but also cause enormous psychological trauma, which includes insecurity, fear, and depression.²⁴ While the negative impact of these disasters is inevitable, it also stimulates the local population to find new economic avenues.²⁵ Among these, migration has been the most obvious choice for people, since the local economy generates lesser opportunities.²⁶ The people of Kerala, a state with a long

history of emigration,²⁷ are more inclined to migrate on a large scale.²⁸

Migrant Challenges in the Face of a Calamity

The 2018 Kerala flood and the COVID-19 pandemic divulged the vulnerable and pathetic plight of migrant workers at destinations, and their stories gained unprecedented public attention.²⁹ The Hindu daily further reported that the Kerala flood crisis had further repercussions in the Northeastern states of India, from where the largest share of migrants arrives. Owing to the flooding of their living spaces and the industries, they worked being forced to shut down, they had no income to sustain themselves in the state, and they resorted to a mass exodus. It not only dried up the incomes of several families in the source states but at the same time created huge labor deficits in Kerala, which, in turn adversely affected the post-disaster reconstruction efforts. The

Workers load relief materials into trucks at the Karnataka Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Bangalore before heading for distribution in the neighboring flood affected state of Kerala, on October 22, 2021.

Getty Images

The high rate of international migration and large remittance receipt has enhanced the living standards in Kerala, which has resulted in a huge fall in the local availability of unskilled/low-skilled labor in the state

Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID) opined that the footloose workers were the worst hit. The *Indian Express* reported that there were also baseless rumors circulated among these workers, which resulted in their mass exodus.³⁰ Various industries faced a shortage of workers and in their desperate bid to retain available workers, instances of 'forced detention' occurred using strategies such as withholding their wages, identity proofs, other belongings, curtailing their freedom of movement using physical violence in some cases.

In addition, in the absence of proper information about the availability of trains, several workers were reported to have paid up to Rs 8,000 per person to return to their native places in buses, even though free trains were available.

The migrant workers' residential areas are prone to flooding and landslides and their shelters are mostly dilapidated, reveals a report submitted by the *Amicus Curiae* (impartial advisor) before the Kerala High Court. It

added that unhygienic surroundings in the residential pockets of the migrant workers might trigger epidemics like dengue and cholera.

An online journal reported that, in spite of being the worst hit, the migrant workers were seen to be the last priority in the rescue missions. Rescued and rehabilitated at the very end, they were further discriminated against on space and food supply at the relief camps. The non-Malayalee population also suffered the disadvantage of being not able to follow the warnings and instructions given by the authorities in Malayalam, the native language of Keralites.³¹

Circulation of fake news among the social media networks of the migrant workers created unwanted panic, which largely impacted the rescue operations. They were made to believe that dams had collapsed, and a terrifying mass rushed to railway stations to flee the state. The fear, unemployment, and hopelessness coupled with the discrimination at relief camps resulted in facilitating their mass exodus from the state.³²

A study conducted by the Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development narrates how the objection from the locals to accommodate migrants in the relief camps with them forced the district administrations to set up separate camps exclusively for migrants.³³ As was observed during the Chennai floods in 2018, migrants not being able to follow instructions given in the local tongues proved to be a problem in Kerala as well.³⁴

Though there were isolated incidents of mistreatments and miscommunications, the real issue that Kerala now faces is that the government, the policymakers, and the society at large, still do not recognize and appreciate the role played by the inter-state migrants in the socio-economic functioning of Kerala.

Inter-State Migration and Its Socio-Economic Implications

The Kerala model of development has received significant attention globally, and the state ranks first among the Indian states in the sustainable development (SDG) indices

with exceptional achievements in enhancing health outcomes, reducing hunger, promoting gender equality, and providing universal and quality education.³⁵ The Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) of Kerala was \$98.1 billion at current prices in 2017-2018 with a per capita GSDP of \$2,844.3 for the period. Over 80 percent of the workforce is engaged in non-agricultural activities, predominantly in the service sector. With its diaspora spread all over the world, migration plays a major role in the state's economy, impacting every household in the state directly or indirectly. The remittances of Malayalis³⁶ amount to almost one-third of the state's GSDP and on its tiny

Table 2: Estimated Number of Migrant Labor in the State of Kerala

Sector	Total Employment (Thousand)	Percentage of Migrant Labor	Estimated Number of Migrants (Thousand)
Agriculture	227	12.8	2.9
Fishing and Aquaculture	1.8	12.3	0.2
Mining and Quarrying	0.3	26.7	0.1
Manufacturing	13.5	46.8	6.3
Electricity, Gas and Water Supply	0.8	5.5	0.0
Construction	22.8	76.7	17.5
Wholesale and Retail Trade Services	16.7	5.1	0.9
Hotel and Restaurant Services	3.3	52.4	1.7
Education	5.9	2.1	0.1
Health and Social Services	3.4	1.9	0.1
Other Services	28.2	5.5	1.6
Total	119.3	26.3	31.4

Source: The projections made by the authors based on NSSO and Census data for the Kerala State Planning Board (SPB)³⁷



Two women forced to wade through water in Bihar, following the worst monsoon floods in living memory to affect the Indian sub-continent. The extreme weather submerged thousands of villages and huge swathes of farmland affecting more than 16 million people. August 2007, India.

Gideon Mendel for Action Aid / Corbis via Getty Images

strip of land; the state has four international airports, the highest among the Indian states. While the size of the Kerala diaspora is nearly three million, the state has also evolved as a major destination of migrant workers from some of the most deprived regions of the country. The estimated number of such migrants in the state is over three million and they have become an indispensable part of the state's economy.

The high rate of international migration and large remittance receipt has enhanced the living standards in Kerala, which has resulted in a huge

fall in the local availability of unskilled/low-skilled labor in the state. Coupled with the aging problem, where the share of the population at employable age has reduced and those in the dependent age groups increase, the state is now hardly able to meet its labor demands locally. With a large share of youngsters migrating abroad, the remittances are put to use mainly in the construction sector, especially, for housing. This contributes largely to the growth of labor-intensive trades and hence, the demand for labor, which is now being compensated by inter-state workers who migrate to Kerala on a

seasonal, or sometimes permanent basis.³⁸

The inter-state migrants, displaced and stranded in the floods are vital to the economic functioning of the state for their involvement in almost every sector in the economy.³⁹ Moreover, with the youth from the state largely migrating to the Gulf countries and moving out for white/blue-collar jobs, these low-skilled migrant workers are a must for the cleaning and post-flood reconstruction activities.

In Kerala, the flood disaster is likely to trigger even greater migration.⁴⁰ In the case of emigrants, those who are already abroad would prolong their stay rather than return.⁴¹ However, migration also reduces the numbers of local labor required to recover from disasters.⁴² Approximately 3 million inter-state migrants are employed in Kerala, replacing those workers that have migrated to the Middle East from Kerala, showing a clear case of replacement migration in the state. The Kerala Migration Survey 2018 points at a fall in the emigration rates from the state. It is hence interesting and inevitable to observe and analyze the future of migration patterns, remittance receipt, and other migration dynamics that the state might experience, to rightly integrate them in the state's policy legislations. Two major inferences can be made from the report. First, migration from other states has shown a considerable increase. Second, the flow of remittances has seen a considerable increase, while migration from Kerala has seen a

For the inter-state workers, their migration to Kerala is a coping mechanism against the poverty, unemployment, natural calamities, and several other challenges that they face in their home states and is a continuous, inter-generational process

significant decrease, which implies that the state may be receiving lesser remittances.

Policy Suggestions and Conclusions

During the years from 2001 to 2011, the share of inter-state workers in the population of Kerala has doubled.⁴³ However, in spite of being an integral part of the economy, they are still treated with hostility by mainstream society. Acknowledging their role in the economic productivity of the state and the growth of the GSDP, it is inevitable that they are retained in their respective sectors of employment for longer years, and with stability. A major share of these domestic workers moves to Kerala on a temporary or seasonal basis and also in the prime of their lives. It has been noticed that as they grow older, they prefer to stay in their own states and the younger generations take their place.⁴⁴

It should also be highlighted that at present, the only legal framework that protects the rights of the vulnerable categories of migrant workers is the Inter-state Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act 1979, which is outdated and flawed. It covers only laborers migrating through a contractor, leaving out millions of independent migrants. Without the state's legal recognition, they live a life of statelessness. Displaced within their own country, without any protection from the government, millions of these footloose workers are in true sense climate refugees.

In light of the floods of 2018, the following policy suggestions need to be taken into account.

- i.* The state government should consider migrant workers as a vulnerable group for disaster-risk-reduction interventions, considering past experiences.
- ii.* Stringent action should be taken against any employer who attempts to forcefully retain migrant workers preventing their return home through any means such as retention of their ID cards or wages.
- iii.* Just as the concepts of wage theft and migrant issues of the international migrants are discussed, similar issues of inter-state migrants should be made part of policy and academic discussions.
- iv.* In times of calamities, migrants should be provided with the necessary information in their languages, and any attempts to mislead them should be penalized.
- v.* To avoid mass exodus owing to job loss and financial crises, efforts should be made to retain them by employing them in temporary jobs, reconstruction activities, etc.
- vi.* Nodal offices should be established from where they could access information, services, and employment assistance.
- vii.* Integrational efforts like language training should be promoted.
- viii.* Management of migrant data including their numbers, migratory patterns, and settlement details should be rightly collected and maintained by the government.
- ix.* Providing them with social welfare support, insurance, and ration supplies should be a priority.

For the inter-state workers, their migration to Kerala is a coping mechanism against the poverty, unemployment, natural calamities, and several other challenges that they face in their home states and is a continuous, inter-generational process. For the receiving state of Kerala, it is the only way to tackle the severe labor shortage experienced in the domestic market. Hence, it is a win-win for both parties that this migrant flow is sustained, by offering them wages higher than those offered in their home states and by ensuring for them, safe, hygienic living conditions and the protection that social insurance and access to social welfare schemes can provide. Especially being prone to frequent floods, landslides, and other natural calamities, it is high time that the interstate migrants are integrated into the society and the policies of the state alike to avoid their mass exodus

and mistreatment during such difficult times. ■

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