Life and Livelihoods of Migrant Labourers in Bangalore

This project has been funded by CBPS

SHORT REPORT

This short report is based on the second of the five webinar series conducted by Centre for Budget and Policy Studies on Impact of Covid 19 on children, livelihoods, economy and education including the response mechanisms adopted for the same.

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This short report is based on an exploratory study conducted by the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS). First of all we thank all our respondents who agreed to take out time from their busy lives and talked to us in between the pandemic.

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all the field investigators and our field investigation partner, Public and Social Research Centre (PSRC) for the successful completion of the study. Data collection for this study was difficult as it was done in between the recurring waves of the pandemic and reaching workers employed in informal sectors was a difficult task.

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of our colleagues, Sridhar R Prasad, Vivek P Nair and Atul Kumar at different times during the study. We sincerely acknowledge all those who contributed to the study though it is difficult to add every single name here.

We would also like to thank Professor Narendar Pani for his valuable inputs during the webinar and all participants who gave important suggestions and insights and added to the discussion.

In the end, we would like to express our gratitude to the CBPS administrative team, especially Usha P.V, Mrinalika R. Pandit, and Ramesh for their support throughout the span of this study. Last but not the least, we would like to thank all the members of CBPS for their constant encouragement and patience during the course of the study. It is important to add that we alone are responsible for all errors and omissions.

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<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBPS</td>
<td>Centre for Budget and Policy Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBCs</td>
<td>Other Backward Castes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDS</td>
<td>Public Distribution System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAAPE</td>
<td>South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Scheduled Castes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST</td>
<td>Scheduled Tribes</td>
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</table>
1. Introduction

India’s nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of Covid-19 brought sudden ‘visibility’ to hundreds and thousands of migrant workers stranded in India’s many cities. When migrants started to make the slow and hazardous trek back to their home towns and villages, the desperation, the hunger, (and often times the fatalities) experienced by migrant workers was contrasted repeatedly with their contribution to the Indian economy, which till that point in time, went unrecognised except in limited policy and academic circles.

However, this visibility brought on by the pandemic did not reflect in the policy decisions taken during and post pandemic. The ‘progressive’ reactions by various state governments in India, including repeal of labour laws to revive the economy and attempts to prevent movement of the migrant labourers, further reinforced the notion that they are useful only to serve the interest of the economy. A report published by the South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE), states that across South Asia, governments treat internal migrants as “human entities meant for profiteering by others”1. Even city authorities and industry employers were reported to be wanting migrants back after “turning their backs on migrant workers during the lockdown”2.

While these reports suggest that there was a realization of importance of migrant workers for sustenance of the economy, the policy measures taken were more or less silent about the needs and expectations of migrant workers. This lackadaisical and callous attitude towards migrant workers is especially troubling given the ubiquity of migration within the labour economy.

Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS) was already in the process of conducting an exploratory survey on the lives and livelihoods of migrant workers in Bangalore before the pandemic struck. This study was conceptualized considering the fact that Bangalore has emerged as an important destination for migrant labour from all parts of India in recent years. Migrant workers are also known to be especially vulnerable considering they are often devoid of social support mechanisms in the destination centres. Considering the heightened impact of pandemic on these lives, we conducted a survey in two rounds in 2021 exploring different aspects including livelihood security, work and living conditions, the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on migrant workers’ livelihoods and their children’s education. Our findings were presented in the second webinar of the webinar series organized by CBPS.

1 https://thewire.in/rights/south-asia-alliance-for-poverty-eradication-report-migrants
While understanding the impact of the pandemic on lives of migrant workers was one of the objectives of our study, we also wanted to understand their lives and livelihoods in the ‘normal’ scenario so as to be able to understand the unique vulnerabilities they experience. Taking cognisance of these factors, our survey focused on understanding these key aspects of migrant workers’ lives in Bangalore: 1) livelihoods and income 2) living conditions 3) access to public services 4) status of children’s education and 5) impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its implications for migrant workers’ lives.

This short report summarizes the details of the study including the methodology and the major findings. We discuss the methodology and sampling strategy followed by the main findings of the study. This is followed by the concluding section where we also discuss the policy implications.
2. Methodology and Profile of Respondents

This report is based on findings from an exploratory quantitative survey of 500 migrant workers from five occupational sectors with known high presence of migrant workers in the city of Bangalore. The survey was carried out in two rounds; once during March – April 2021 before the second wave of the pandemic and the second round between July and August 2021 after the second wave had waned. While originally the survey was planned to happen in one go, the severity of the second wave forced us to stop midway. Once the incidence had gone down, we modified the questionnaire slightly and included some questions to enable us to do a comparison between migrant experiences in both the waves and lockdowns.

We adopted a purposive sampling strategy and identified five occupational categories, from which to select respondents. The five sectors or occupations to which our respondents belong are 1) construction 2) garment factories 3) private security services 4) hospitality and 5) domestic help. While initially we had planned to have equal number of respondents across all the categories, the final numbers have more representation from construction, garments and hospitality sectors. As the study was conducted in two rounds, we ensured equal proportion of respondents from different occupational categories (as compared to the proportions in the first round) in the second round as well so as to enable us to make comparisons. After the data collection, simple descriptive analysis with cross-tabulations was conducted to figure out the patterns and trends emerging from the data.

2.1. Profile of Respondents

As explained earlier, in terms of occupational categories, the majority of our respondents were from hospitality, construction and garments sectors (Figure 1-a). 60% of the respondents had migrated from states other than Karnataka while 40% had migrated to Bengaluru from other districts within Karnataka.

The distribution of respondents across religion (90% Hindu, 9% Muslims and 1% Christians) is not very different from the proportions for India’s population (80% Hindus, 14% Muslims and 2% Christians, according to 2011 census). The caste-wise distribution of the respondents shows an over-representation of Scheduled tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs), which together comprise 84% of our sample; this reflects known trends whereby these groups are over-represented among unskilled migrant workers. The presence of respondents from different age groups shows a bias towards younger people, as the majority of our sample (68%) was between 20 and 40 years of age (Figures 1 - f). Sixty-two percent of the sample was male and thirty-eight percent female (figure 1 - e). This could be because on excluding marriage-related migration, internal migration in India is largely employment and male oriented (Srivastava, 2011).
**Figure 1: Profile of Respondents**

**a) Occupational Categories**
- Construction Workers: 26%
- Garments Workers: 16%
- Security Workers: 27%
- Hospitality Workers: 11%
- Domestic help Workers: 20%

**b) State of Origin**
- Intra-State: 40%
- Inter State: 60%

**c) Religion**
- Hindus: 90%
- Muslims: 9%
- Christians: 1%

**d) Caste groups**
- ST: 1%
- SC: 6%
- OBCs: 34%
- General: 44%
- Refused to answer: 1%

**e) Gender**
- Male: 38%
- Female: 62%

**f) Age group**
- < 20 Years: 28%
- 21-30 Years: 4%
- 31-40 Years: 31%
- > 41 Years: 37%
3. Key Findings

3.1. Employment and Income

Migration has emerged as an important source of income for many families, especially for those from the disadvantaged communities. A study by Deshingkar et al. (2008) in select villages of Madhya Pradesh found that circular migration accounts for the largest share in income and is twice as important as cultivation. Circular migration earnings also accounted for a higher proportion of household income among the scheduled castes and tribes in the sample. Lack of employment opportunity at places of origin and prospects for better income at the destination centres are known to be important drivers of migration. However, migration often offers employment in informal and vulnerable labour sectors, under difficult working conditions, where labour rights and social welfare policies are least implemented (Deshingkar et al., 2012). Considering these, we explored the importance of migration as a livelihood strategy and the sort of employment security and working conditions it offers.

Although almost ninety percent participants in our survey migrated in order to improve their economic situation, whether they were able to achieve the anticipated better income is questionable. The average monthly income across all categories in our sample was Rs 11217, which translates roughly to Rs 400 a day. Some occupational workers like domestic helps and garment factory workers are paid still less. Workers in construction, hospitality and security services sectors in our sample were paid comparatively better.

Table 1: Average monthly income of migrant workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Occupations/Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction Workers</td>
<td>15225.47</td>
<td>10496.00</td>
<td>14322.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garments Workers</td>
<td>11233.33</td>
<td>8797.16</td>
<td>9151.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security Workers</td>
<td>12503.85</td>
<td>12000.00</td>
<td>12485.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality Workers</td>
<td>12410.31</td>
<td>13666.67</td>
<td>12438.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Workers</td>
<td>9800.00</td>
<td>5550.68</td>
<td>5819.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Income</strong></td>
<td><strong>13292.39</strong></td>
<td><strong>7876.56</strong></td>
<td><strong>11216.87</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average per capita income in India for 2019-20 was Rs. 126968 annually, or Rs 10580 a month. According to the 2017-18 Longitudinal Ageing Study⁴, however, the bottom 20% of the households earn only Rs. 25825 per capita per year. When we compare these two figures, it immediately becomes evident that while in absolute terms the income of

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these migrant workers might seem precarious, relatively they are in a much better place than many of their non-migrant peers.

This finding is supported also by the data on expenditure, disposable income and remittances and also explains why many continue to choose to migrate. Even with a monthly income of Rs. 11,216, after accounting for basic expenses like rent, commute, food and other personal expenses, disposable income on an average was 55% of the total monthly income. This might be because part of living costs are offset by employers. Many of the workers employed in hospitality sector (restaurants) are provided food at the premises. Similarly, workers in construction sector live on the premises, especially when employed in large scale complexes, even though the living conditions there might be deplorable. Thus, the living costs are subsidized to some extent, especially for workers in hospitality and constructions sectors. Thus, migrants in our sample were able to spend roughly 28% of their income on remittances. This explains why migration continues to be an attractive alternative for many.

3.2. Living Conditions

We talked earlier about the living costs for migrant workers being around 45% of the total income even when the income was only around Rs. 11,000 per month. The reason for this being so becomes evident when we look at the living conditions of these workers. There was a difference in the living conditions of the migrants too. Only 10% of our respondents mentioned that they live in spacious accommodations, while 32% of respondents described their living space as congested and 58% described that as manageable.

For those living in shared accommodations, access to amenities such as toilets and bathing space is a concern: 13% used open space for toilets and 55% had access to shared and public toilets. Only 31% respondents had toilets attached to their living space. Similarly, 55% of respondents used open space or shared bathrooms for bathing while 45% had attached bathrooms. Almost 91% of the construction workers, 83% of domestic helps and 60% of hospitality workers used open space or shared toilets. The proportions were only slightly better in the case of garment factory workers (53%) and security services workers (48%).

It’s important to note that while the average income of construction and hospitality sector workers are relatively better than the other sectors, it does not reflect in better living conditions. This may be because of the fact that in these sectors, the employers sometimes provide the accommodation. It might also be because single male migration from other states is more prevalent in these two sectors and workers in these sectors try to spend minimally on their living costs so that they are able to send money home.
3.3. Access to Public Services

Low-income migrants are often more vulnerable and have poorer access to social provisions than non-migrants (MacAuslan & Sebates – Wheeler, 2011). This was evident during the lockdown when migrant workers were unable to access food through PDS because of lack of documentation in their destination locations as reported widely in media. A few studies have also indicated that access to antenatal care and maternal health was definitely weaker among the migrant population (Kaur et al, 2015 and Gawde et al, 2016).

However, migrants’ access to other public services such as educational facilities, health facilities, public transport and recreational spaces have not been rigorously studied. While migrants are not barred from using these facilities, there are multiple barriers, including unfamiliarity with language and conflict with the native population, which might hinder effective access. Additionally, even when migrants are formally entitled to social provisioning, they have unequal access for various reasons and thus a rigorous understanding of access must examine not only formal rules of entitlement, but also the distributional mechanisms through which that entitlement is provided, as well as the negotiations and bargaining that take place around those rules (MacAuslan & Sebates – Wheeler, 2011).

We tried to explore the access to public services that migrant workers have in Bangalore. From the data in the table below, it can be seen that for most of the public services, except for public transportation, access for migrants is quite low. Access for intra-state migrants is only slightly better in case access to food supplies through the Public Distribution System (PDS).

Table 2: Access to Public Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Those who have access to (%)</th>
<th>Intra-State</th>
<th>Inter-State</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health insurance</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public parks</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Distribution System (PDS; uncooked food at subsidised rates)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Hospital / Doctors / Clinics</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Hospital / Health Centres / Clinics</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public transportation</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can also be seen that access to services that are open access without the need for any documentation (transport, health clinics), seems to be better as compared to those that need documentation (health insurance, PDS). Inter-state migrants have less access to
most of these but the difference is not as stark as the exclusion of all migrant workers from certain services. This also means that knowledge of local language and belonging to the same state play only a limited role: migrants, as a group, remain vulnerable, because of the lack of access to public services and social security schemes.

Lack of awareness of services / benefits available, lack of documents such as address proof and communication difficulties due to language barrier emerged as the biggest issues that are hindering access to public services for migrants. Labour card and health card were some of the requirements most mentioned by workers as the benefits they would like to have but can not get. Thus, it is evident that migrants continue to struggle with establishing their identity as citizens at the destination centres.

### 3.4. Generational Mobility: Status of Children’s education

The relationship between internal migration and educational outcomes is important to understand as education is perceived to be a pathway for inter-generational mobility. It has been found that within the context of migration, uncertain contexts of mobility and poverty and the way the cycles of migration and annual educational calendars overlap usually affect educational opportunities of internally migrating children adversely (Smita, 2008; Dyer and Rajan, 2020). While migrant remittances can positively influence education access and gender gap of ‘left-behind’ children, ‘accompanying’ migrant children are likely to drop out of school or engage in child labour (Jha and Jhingran, 2006; Schapiro, 2009). At the same time, migration might also result in exposure to more urbane environments and a ‘better’ lifestyle which might have impact on aspirations for a better life.

The diversity of languages in different states of India also implies that the language of instruction in the destination location might be different than the language of the migrant family and might create a barrier in access to public low-cost educational facility at the destination. The nature of impact on children’s education will also be different based on whether the children are migrating with the parents or are being left behind.

Thus, the channels through which migration can affect education are multiple. Remittances from migration can help families spend more on education and thus may lead to better educational outcomes. Migration can also help develop aspirations for a better life which might lead to greater educational investment. On the other hand, migration can also have a detrimental impact on educational outcomes due to children being absent from school when they migrate seasonally or due to lack of parental guidance and attention when the children are left behind while parents migrate.

Considering these factors, we explored the status of migrants’ children’s education, both for children who had migrated along with their parents as well as children who stayed behind at the place of origin while one or both the parents migrated. There were
499 children in our sample of which 384 were children of school going age groups. 77% of these children were in-school at the time of our survey. There was, however, variation in terms of proportion of in-school children among different groups (Figure 2). While most of the children in the primary school attending age group (6-13) were in school, the proportion was least for pre-school (3-5) and higher education (17-18). Most of the children who were in school, attended government schools (72%).

Figure 2: Status of Children’s Education

We also analysed the data considering place of origin (intra-state and inter-state) and place of stay for the children (with parents and left behind) to see if any differences exist in terms of remaining in school. For place of origin, the difference was not was significant. 79% of children of intra-state migrants were in school whereas the percentage for children of inter-state migrants was 76%. Similarly, 78% of children who migrated along with parents were in school versus 74% of children who stayed behind at the place of origin. The difference was starker for girl children. 80% of the girl children who migrated along with their parents were in school as compared to 73% of the girl children who stayed behind at the place of origin.

3.5. Impact of Covid – 19 Pandemic

3.5.1. Loss of Employment and Income

While Covid-19 and lockdowns imposed have had a devastating impact on the lives of workers in the informal sector across India, the impact on migrant lives has been even greater because of the absence of social support systems and the suddenness of lockdown that left them stranded at their workplaces (Kumar and Choudhury, 2021). Among our survey participants, 49% mentioned that they lost the jobs they held during the lockdown imposed during the first wave of the pandemic. Of those who lost their jobs, the losses were greater in the hospitality (36%) and construction (33%) sectors. In our sample, none of the respondents mentioned loss of employment during the second wave of the pandemic. Though this might be because we conducted the interview in
Bangalore immediately after the second wave and thus only those migrant workers were there who had not lost their jobs and thus were in Bangalore. This might also be because the lockdown imposed during the second wave was not as stringent as that during the first wave. Especially big construction projects were allowed to function if the workers were housed onsite. Similarly, restaurants were allowed to function with takeaway deliveries after a few days.

11% of migrant workers experienced a reduction in wages after the first lockdown while 2% did so after the second wave. Of those who experienced a loss in income, most (33%) were from the garment sector followed by the workers in construction (28%) and hospitality (24%) sectors.

3.5.2. Problems faced and coping mechanisms adopted

We also tried to understand the problems faced by the migrant workers during the lockdowns and the coping mechanisms adopted by them. As we see from table 3, relatively higher proportion of workers mentioned experiencing problems such as lack of food and lack of money to meet basic expenses during the first wave. Loss of employment was also higher. In contrast, however, more respondents mentioned adopting coping mechanisms such as borrowing money in the second wave. This might be because higher proportion (30%) of people left for their native places during the first wave as restrictions began to be eased a little as compared to the second wave (17%). Most people adopted selling off assets such as vehicle, jewellery as a coping mechanism during the first wave.

Table 3: Problems faced and Coping Mechanisms Adopted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems faced during lockdown (%)</th>
<th>Coping Mechanisms Adopted (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st Lockdown*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of sufficient food</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of money to meet basic</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expenses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat of eviction due to</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inability to pay rent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of employment</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others***</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, as we surveyed these migrants in Bangalore, it is evident that they had chosen to come back once the situation improved. Primary reasons for their choosing to return to Bangalore were lack of any employment at their native places (45%) and availability of better payment in Bangalore (47%). This shows the precariousness of migrant’s existence at destination centres where any economic shock has the potential to upset the stability and security they have gained through years of struggle. However, faced with the pressure on scarce resources in their native places, they often have no option but to pursue such employment.

3.5.3. Impact on children’s education

Around 19% of our respondents mentioned that their children have been attending online classes during the pandemic, which is similar to what other studies have reported regarding children’s ability to access online education in rural India (CBPS, 2020). Only 8% mentioned that they are not able to attend classes because of various problems such as lack of a device or internet network. 15% mentioned that their child has been engaged in studying on their own during the period of school closure. However, 45% also mentioned that their child has spent time simply roaming around or doing nothing when their schools/colleges are closed. This poses a real risk, as these children are highly vulnerable to trafficking or abuse (Global Fund for Children, 2019).

3.5.4. Support received during the lockdown

Many of our respondents mentioned receiving support from government as well as civil society organizations during the lockdown and pandemic. The support received was mostly in the form of cooked meals or ration kits / food materials. 30% of the respondents received cooked meals or ration kits from the government during the first wave of the pandemic while 33% received these from non-government sources.

The support from government was, however, much lesser during the second wave of the pandemic. Only 2% received help from government during this time while 27% received help from non-government sources. This might have been because the public health crisis was much more evident during the second wave of the pandemic and most of the government efforts were diverted to manage the situation.

Between 75-80% of our respondents mentioned receiving food supplies through PDS during this time. Many mentioned receiving supplies even though they did not have access to ration cards in Bangalore.
4. Conclusion

In Summary, we see that while most of the migrant workers migrate in search of better employment and income prospects, they continue to lead a precarious existence at the destination centres with poor living conditions, lack of access to public service and in absence of social support mechanisms. Data from our study also clearly indicates that their circumstances might be somewhat better than what they have access to ‘back home’ in terms of the income they earn and the disposable cash they have. Hence migration will continue to be one of the sought after strategies adopted by the poor and disadvantaged to better their prospects. This was evident when migrants chose to come back to the city despite having faced innumerable problems during the pandemic.

It is also evident that the security gained through migration is vulnerable to economic shocks. There are systemic barriers that keep those living in poverty excluded from accessing social security, further enhanced by cultural and language differences, making migrant lives insecure and vulnerable. 49% of our respondents lost their jobs during the pandemic and many reported facing problems such as hunger, threat of eviction and lack of money to meet basic expenses. We also saw that the access to public services was especially low for migrant workers as a whole.

Public policy and governance in such a situation need to take these unique vulnerabilities into account. Public housing, access to free medical care and education are basic entitlements that must be addressed. India and its cities are at a juncture when both the cities and the migrant workers need each other. Taking cognisance of the unique needs of migrant workers and addressing such needs to make public services including education more inclusive is imperative.

While doing so, there also needs to be a realization that migrant workers are not a homogeneous entity. There exists a huge diversity within the migrant population considering their place of origin, age, gender and occupational categories. These differences should be accommodated within the policy prescriptions to the extent possible.

Kerala has been one of the states in India, which has taken some initiatives to address the challenges faced by migrant workers. While offering amongst the highest wages to migrant workers in India, it has also taken several measures for inclusion of workers and was able to effectively respond to their distress during the national lockdown (Peter, Sanghvi & Narendran, 2020). It was the first Indian state to enact a social security scheme for migrant workers. The Department of Education in the state has been engaged in promotion of inclusive education for children of migrant workers since 2008 and educational volunteers who speak the mother tongues of the migrant children have been appointed by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in select schools in areas with high concentration of migrant children. Peters, Sanghvi and Narendran (2020) outline many other such initiatives which have been instituted in Kerala with an objective to
promote inclusion of migrant workers. The initiatives in Kerala shows the feasibility and potential of such initiatives.

While taking care of the basic needs of migrant workers and providing them with a social support mechanism at the destination centre is of utmost importance, it is also important to consider their needs for a dignified life. Recognizing migrant workers cultural identities will be of great importance in facilitating a sense of belonging in them at the destination centre. Initiatives such as ‘Atithi Devo Bhava’ of the state of Kerala are some of the exemplary initiatives in this direction.

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4 Atithi Devo Bhava was a migrant welfare project that was launched in 2017 under the National Health Mission. Under this umbrella initiative, many programmes including special health care initiatives, single window facility to address various needs of migrant communities (Inter-State Migrant Welfare Office) have been instituted. While the name of this initiative has rightly also been criticized as promoting ‘othering’ of migrant workers by naming them as guest workers (Peters, Sanghvi and Narendran (2020)), the initiatives aim at facilitating the lives of migrant workers and recognizing their contribution to the economy of Kerala.
References


