

Migration of Traditional Fishers from the Sundarbans to the Kerala Coast: Preliminary Insights from an Exploratory Enquiry

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Abstract

This paper studies migration of traditional fishermen from the Indian Sundarbans in the state of West Bengal to the marine fishing harbours of north Kerala mainly to work in mechanized vessels including trawlers. Large scale destruction of mangroves, repeated onslaught of cyclonic storms, recurrence of extreme climate events and rising sea level have kept the eco-region of Sundarbans in a perennial state of crisis. With livelihood opportunities being limited just to rainfed paddy cultivation and fishing, the outcomes of which are erratic and unpredictable, migration has emerged as the only strategy left for the households in the coastal blocks to reduce vulnerability and sustain household incomes. Migration to Kerala started somewhere around the 2000s, though the pace has accelerated in the 2010s in response to the heightened demand for cheap labour by boat owners. The paper demonstrates how the vulnerability of these workers is reinforced by informal work arrangements, non-standard forms of wage payment, lack of proper amenities like housing and sanitation, and near absence of state initiatives to protect their rights and entitlements.

Keywords: migration; fishermen; Indian Sundarbans; Kerala

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Sundarbans



A fisher household

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Sundarbans

Introduction

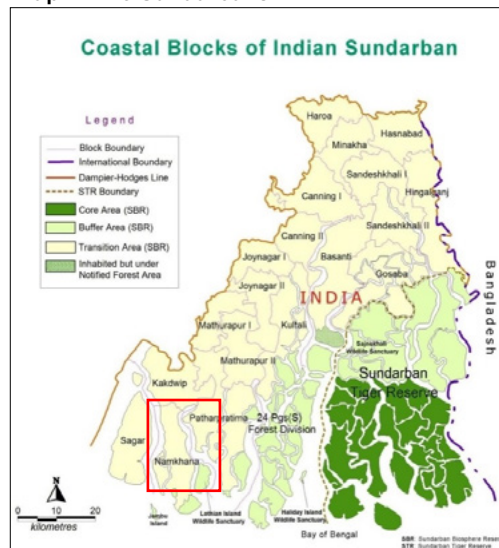
The southern Indian state of Kerala has emerged as an important destination for migrant workers from across the country. Since the 1970s, Kerala has been receiving migrant labourers from the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka to work in its plantations, brick kilns and construction sector. Workers from Odisha, Assam, Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand have followed suit since the 1990s (Chakraborty et al., 2020). As per an estimate made in 2013, Kerala had a migrant labour force of 2.5 million workers. An estimated 235,000 new workers were found to migrate to the state every year (Narayana et al., 2013). Extending this estimate further, it was assessed that Kerala had a migrant labour population of 3.5 million in 2018. As Peter et al. (2020) point out, this number appears to have been underestimated as only those migrants coming into Kerala by long-distance trains were counted in this exercise. Those who travelled to the state through other routes and means, especially from neighbouring states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, were excluded from the estimate. The shortage of skilled and unskilled native workers in Kerala and resultant higher wage rates along with the lack of adequate earning opportunities in the source regions are considered as the pull and push factors respectively, that drive increased migration into the state (Narayana, 2013).

This paper attempts to explore labour migration from West Bengal to Kerala. It may be noted that Kerala receives fisher migrants from other coastal states like Odisha (Puri, Khorda, Cuttack and Baleswar districts), Andhra Pradesh (Srikakulam and Vizianagaram districts), Karnataka (Udupi district) and Tamil Nadu (Kanyakumari, Cuddalore, Thoothukkudy and Ramanathapuram districts) too (Peter and Narendran 2017). In fact, migrant workers are found in almost all the harbours across the state. This paper specifically focuses on migration of traditional fishermen from the Sundarbans region of West Bengal to the harbours of Ponnani and Beypore in Kerala. This migration corridor has developed over the past couple of decades. The paper discusses the working and living conditions of migrant fishermen on Kerala's coasts including terms of employment at the destination and access to housing and other basic amenities.

Methodology

The study was carried out during October-December 2021 in both source villages and destination harbours. The study villages (Kakdwip, Namkhana, Frazerganj, Patbunia, Mosuni Island, Pather Prathima and Diamond Harbour) were selected from the Kakdwip, Namkhana and Pather Prathima community development (CD) blocks in the Kakdwip subdivision of the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal (Map 1). These villages are situated in the Ganges delta and administered by the Sundarban Affairs Department of the West Bengal government. Two specific destinations in the north of Kerala are chosen for the study – the harbours of Bepore and Ponnani in Kozhikode and Malappuram districts respectively (Map 2). Migration along this corridor appears to have started somewhere around the 2000s, though the pace of the same accelerated in the 2010s. Data from migrant workers was collected mainly with the help of in-depth interviews. In addition, key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with boat owners, traders and union leaders in both the states. In West Bengal, detailed interviews were also undertaken with academicians in the fields of geography and fishery sciences.

Map 1: The Sundarbans



Map 2: Fishing Harbours in Kerala



Source: https://efc.silpasathi.in/documents/district_profiles/district_profile_SUNDARBAN.pdf;
<http://www.hed.kerala.gov.in/index.php/component/content/category/80-about-us>

The Sundarbans: An Overview

The deltaic ecosystem of the Sundarbans is a part of the lower deltaic plain of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river basin in the Bay of Bengal and extends over India and Bangladesh. It is home to the largest mangrove forest in the world and is a biodiversity hotspot.



A fisher's house in the Sundarbans



Women of fisher households

The delta is a rich assemblage of mud flats, islands, water bodies and arable land mass, interconnected by creeks, channels and tidal creeks. Subsistence agriculture, fishing, woodcutting, honey extraction, and crab collection form the sources of livelihood for the inhabitants who subsist on areas around the protected ecological habitat of the Sundarbans. The climate is tropical in nature with long spells of dry (November to April) and wet seasons (May to October). The region witnesses massive rainfall for four months between June and September and is affected by tropical cyclones, floods, tidal erosion and wind damage that severely disrupt the lives and livelihoods of communities.

Danda et al. (2020) point out that ecological degradation in the Indian Sundarbans eco-region started somewhere in the late 18th century with large scale destruction of mangroves by the colonial rulers to make way for settled agriculture. Repeated onslaught of cyclonic storms has kept the region in a perennial state of crisis. The recurrence of extreme climate events and rise in sea level has meant loss of cultivable land parcels to an 'inundation of brackish water or erosion or submergence' in addition to decreased fish production (Danda et al., 2020). Collection of forest products is restricted by the government as a protective measure to safeguard the already emaciated mangroves (Sahana et al., 2021). With livelihood opportunities being limited just to rainfed paddy cultivation and fishing, the outcomes of which are erratic and unpredictable, migration has emerged as the only strategy left for the households in the coastal blocks to reduce vulnerability and sustain household incomes.

General Profile of Migrant Fishermen

Most of the migrant fishermen in Kerala were found to be in the age group of 18-50 years. They move to Kerala usually with the help of friends and acquaintances who have already been working in the fisheries sector of the state. Typically, migrant fishers bring other workers along when they return from their trips back home. There are also cases where the owners use migrant workers' contacts and networks to recruit more workers from the latter's native villages to manage labour shortage. While the number of migrant fishermen staying throughout the fishing season in Kerala is quite high, the inflow of short duration migrants has risen of late. This shorter-term outmigration from the Sundarbans is mainly caused by the depletion of fish stock in the delta region. June-October are the most productive fishing months in the Sundarbans and the winter season, the least. Several boat owners in the delta prefer to engage their boats in fishing for about five months only in the peak season. During the lean period, the fishermen migrate to Kerala only to return when the season resumes in June.

In comparison, both Ponnani and Beypore harbours in Kerala have witnessed an intensification of fishing activity. New entrepreneurs have begun to invest in mechanized fishing crafts. Continuous in-migration of workers has been a major factor that seems to have helped boat owners increase their fleet size. The number of registered trawlers and medium fishing boats has significantly increased in both the harbours over the last few years. Currently, majority of the labour force in these harbours is constituted by migrant fishermen.

Migrant fish workers following both Hindu and Muslim religions are found in Kerala. As mentioned earlier, many of them hail from families that had already sent workers to Kerala. Most of the migrants have relatively larger families back in their villages. Larger families, often having many female children, force men to migrate to earn enough to get their daughters or sisters married off. It is common that multiple members from the same family migrate to Kerala to ensure enough income for the maintenance of life in source villages. There have also been several instances of children dropping out of schools and colleges because of the pressure on them to start earning.

Employment Relations at the Destination

The employment relationships in the fisheries sector in Kerala are informal in nature, with no written contracts between boat owners, i.e., the employers, and the migrant workers. In the fishing harbours we studied, wages paid to boat workers take three different forms: (1) a *bata* (or daily wages) paid at the end of each trip; (2) a share in the profit, split equally between the *srank* (captain) and the crew; and (3) the earnings received from the sale of *kachra* (waste) of fish stock that goes into the making of fish meal and poultry feed. The amount paid as *bata* varies with the boat size – Rs. 400 per day for smaller boats to Rs. 500 per day for bigger boats at the time of the survey. According to the fishermen we talked to, the highest *bata* is paid in harbours such as Kollam, Beypore and Munambam.

The monthly income of the migrant workers depends on the fish catch. In Ponnani, for instance, on an average, a fisherman earns Rs. 10,000 a month through *bata* and sale of *kachra*. However, the part of income that comes as a share in profit fluctuates considerably. They do not receive any share when the catch is poor. If the catch is good, they may earn more than Rs. 25,000 a month through all three modes of remuneration. The workers in Beypore are found to earn a higher income mainly because they work in the larger mechanised 'China Boats' that stay out longer in the sea during fishing expeditions. The fishermen in this harbour are able to earn as much as Rs. 40,000 per month if the catch is good.

It may be noted that the employment agreement followed in West Bengal too is verbal in nature, though the mode of wage payment is different. Owners of bigger trawlers operating from harbours such as Kakdwip recruit captains or Majhis through a process of bidding. The bids would normally range between Rs. 10 lakhs - Rs. 12 lakhs. The Majhi, thus chosen, receives the entire amount which he uses to recruit other workers for the trawler. The average remuneration paid to a worker is around Rs. 40,000 in most cases, though it may go up to Rs. 70,000 in exceptional circumstances.

During the interviews, it was reported that in Kerala, workers in trawlers are given an advance at the beginning of the season and are paid extremely low wages per fishing trip. Some bigger trawlers pay the workers as little as Rs. 2,000 per head at the end of every fishing trip, which usually lasts 15-20 days. The share in profits, if any, is either given at the end of six months or when the accounts are closed at the end of the season. Thus, most of the fishermen end up earning hardly anything for a good part of the year. Boat owners do not report the actual profits earned from each fishing trip. The fishermen reported that the share in profits that they receive is often far lower than what they are promised – 40 to 50 per cent - as part of the verbal agreement. Further, prior to the distribution of profits, 5-10 per cent is deducted as commission by the Majhi.



Living in boats

Living Conditions in the Harbours

Beyport is a large harbour and the bigger boats spend as many as 15-20 days in the sea. In such a situation, having an accommodation outside the harbour premises is not a viable option for the migrant fishermen. Rents are also high and can typically go up to Rs. 500 per day. Hence, the fishermen prefer to live in their boats while on shore, though the boats do not have any sanitation facilities. During the fishing trips, a part of the food expenses is borne by the owner. This is later deducted from the share that the fishermen receive. The new migrants sleep in the open until they find employment. This is particularly so in Beyport, the harbour that receives a large number of migrant fishermen regularly.

Ponnani, in comparison, is a smaller harbour. Fishing expeditions last anywhere between a few hours to just over a couple of days. Hence, unlike in Beyport, only a handful of the migrant fishermen live on the boats in Ponnani. Ample accommodation facilities are available to them in and around the harbour. In most cases, old lodges have been refurbished to create staying facilities for the migrants. Newly constructed housing has been coming up lately as the inflow of migrants is steadily increasing. The monthly rent per head starts at Rs. 1,000, exclusive of utility charges. Most of the rooms have a small portion designated as cooking area. Some of them have attached bathrooms while others have to share the facility.

The extreme weather events that affected Kerala in recent years have had a far-reaching impact on the fisheries sector and in turn, on the livelihoods of the migrant fishermen employed. The floods in 2018, for instance, rendered them unemployed for several weeks together. Even in 2021, frequent depressions in the Arabian Sea and the subsequent heavy rainfall in the state led to a loss of more than 15 fishing days between August and November alone. Due to warnings by the government, there have been instances of ships returning early from their fishing expeditions with little to no catch. They were not offered any support or relief for the loss in income in such exigencies. Further, excessive migration during the lean season also leads to an oversupply of labour in the market. As mentioned earlier, to cope up with uncertainties and lack of adequate work, a small fraction of migrant fishermen has started to diversify their employment options into other sectors such as construction in nearby towns such as Nilambur, Manjeri, Perinthalmanna, and Kozhikode.

During the first wave of the lockdown in 2020, the migrants in Ponnani remained in their local accommodation till train services commenced. During this time, some of the owners took care of the migrants and helped them financially to support their families back home. The municipal administration distributed ID cards to the migrants and ensured that free ration was made available to them throughout the time that they had no work. As the 'Shramik trains' started, buses were arranged for them to reach the railway station. With the lockdown in place followed by a ban on trawling in the months of June and July in Kerala, the migrants ended up being unemployed for over 5 to 6 months.

Overall, migration to Kerala has led to an improvement in the living conditions of migrant families back home. Migration has helped them increase food security, invest in assets like housing and land or set up small shops or enterprises. However, to what extent such improvements can be sustained in the long term in a region that is characterised by a vulnerable ecosystem and prone to frequent climate shocks remains a looming concern.

Conclusion

Migration of traditional fishermen from the Indian Sundarbans in the state of West Bengal to the marine fishing harbours of north Kerala has a relatively shorter history starting around the 2000s. Large scale destruction of mangroves, repeated onslaught of cyclonic storms, recurrence of extreme climate events, rapid coast line erosion and rising sea level caused by climate change have kept the eco-region of Sundarbans in a state of constant flux. Further, livelihood opportunities are limited to paddy cultivation, fishing and a few forest based activities. These are seasonal occupations with low, irregular and unpredictable income streams. Hence, migration is the only viable livelihood strategy for a majority of households. However, as the paper demonstrates, migration has not reduced the vulnerability of workers as they face informal work arrangements, non-standard forms of wage payment, lack of proper amenities like housing and sanitation, and a near absence of state initiatives to protect their rights and entitlements.



Pucca house built with remittance from Kerala



A living quarter in Ponnani



Poor housing amenities in the harbour

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