



Affirmative Action in Practice: Kerala’s Policies for Inclusive Education of Migrant Workers’ Children

Athira K¹, and Prof. (Dr.) Happy P V²

¹Research Scholar, Institute of Advanced Study in Education (University of Calicut), Thrissur, Kerala

²Principal, Institute of Advanced Study in Education (University of Calicut), Thrissur, Kerala

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17136337>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 22-08-2025

Published: 10-09-2025

Keywords:

Migrant Workers’ Children, Inclusive Education, Kerala Education Policies, Affirmative Action, Social Integration, Educational Equity

ABSTRACT

Migration has become a defining feature of India’s socio-economic landscape, with millions of workers moving across states in search of better livelihoods. Kerala, a state renowned for its literacy and social development achievements, has attracted a large share of these workers, bringing with them the challenge of educating their children. This paper examines Kerala’s affirmative action measures aimed at ensuring educational inclusion for migrant workers’ children. Drawing on policies, welfare programs, and case examples, the study highlights five key dimensions: access to schooling, language and pedagogy, social integration, welfare support, and policy innovation. Initiatives such as the Roshni Project, Jyothi Project, and Aawaz Scheme demonstrate how Kerala has sought to overcome barriers related to mobility, language, and socio-economic vulnerability. Beyond enrolment and retention, the paper underscores the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and dignity among migrant children. While challenges persist such as teacher preparedness, uneven coverage, and high student mobility Kerala’s approach represents a dynamic model of inclusive education that blends constitutional commitments with practical innovations. The findings suggest that Kerala’s policies can serve as a replicable framework for other states,



reinforcing education as both a tool of empowerment and a vehicle of social justice.

Introduction

Migration is one of the most defining social realities in contemporary India. Millions of workers move across states in search of better employment opportunities, carrying with them their families and, importantly, their children. Kerala has emerged as one of the most attractive destinations for migrant workers within India, drawing laborers from across the country in large numbers (Peter et al., 2020). Estimates suggest that around 3.1 million interstate migrants are currently employed in the state, including both long-term settlers and short-term workers (Parida et al., 2021, p. 11). Over time, they have become an essential part of Kerala's economy. A Planning Board report highlights their significant economic footprint—spending nearly ₹10,000 crore annually on living expenses within the state while also remitting about ₹7.5 billion to their home states each year (2021). The majority of these workers are employed in informal and often insecure sectors such as construction, agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, and marine fishing.

Kerala, however, presents an interesting case. Known for its high literacy rate, robust public education system, and emphasis on social justice, Kerala has made deliberate efforts to include migrant children in its schools. These efforts reflect not only a commitment to universal education but also a broader philosophy of affirmative action—where proactive measures are taken to ensure that the most vulnerable are supported. This paper explores Kerala's policies and initiatives through five thematic lenses: access to schooling, language and pedagogy, social integration, welfare support, and policy innovations.

The progress of any nation is deeply connected to how well it educates its people. Recognising this, international initiatives such as *Education for All* were launched to make sure that every person, no matter where they live, can benefit from education. In India, despite the many hurdles faced as a developing country, consistent efforts have been made to bring education to all children. The National Policy on Education (1986) was a turning point, as it gave momentum to the idea of universal elementary education. Later, with the 86th Constitutional Amendment in 2002, the right to education was formally recognised as a fundamental right. This commitment was further strengthened when the Right of



Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) came into effect in 2009, ensuring that every child between the ages of 6 and 14 has access to free schooling (Zacharias & Vinil, 2018).

While the Act covers all children, it also acknowledges the unique difficulties faced by those from disadvantaged groups, especially children of migrant workers. To bridge this gap, the law places responsibility on local authorities to make sure these children are not left out (Chandrasekhar & Bhattacharya, 2018). More recently, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was introduced—the first major education policy of the 21st century. It reflects India’s commitment to the global education agenda under Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aspires to provide inclusive, equitable, and quality education for everyone, along with lifelong learning opportunities, by 2030.

Narayana and Venkiteswaran (2013) of the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation provided one of the earliest scientific estimates of Kerala’s domestic migrant workforce, placing the figure at over 25 lakh workers. Later, Parida and Raman (2021) conducted a district-level study that suggested the number had risen to about 31 lakhs by 2017–18. A large share of these workers come from some of India’s most economically disadvantaged states—such as Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Odisha—seeking jobs mainly in construction, small industries, and other low-paid informal sectors. What draws them to Kerala is the promise of comparatively better wages and improved living conditions (Sunny et al., 2020).

For many, migration is not a solitary journey. Workers often bring their families along, including young children. This, however, brings forth one of the most pressing challenges linked with migration: ensuring that the children of migrant workers have access to continuous and meaningful education. Access to Schooling – Enrolment and Retention Kerala has introduced several innovative programs to ensure the educational inclusion of migrant workers’ children. The Roshni Project (2017) in Ernakulam provides bridge courses and language support for migrant students (Government of Kerala, 2017). Similarly, the Jyothi Project in Perumbavoor offers evening classes in multiple languages to help children adapt to local schools (Hamilton, 2013). Under the Aawaz scheme, educational support is extended alongside health benefits for migrant families (Devine, 2013). To overcome language barriers, the state has also developed multilingual primers and appointed teachers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. In addition, bridge courses and special training centres are organized with the support of local governments and NGOs to mainstream children who are out of school (Thomas & KS, 2024).



Language Inclusion and Pedagogical Adaptation

Language is one of the most significant barriers to migrant children's education. A child from Bihar or West Bengal entering a Malayalam-medium classroom is suddenly confronted with an unfamiliar language, making learning not only difficult but also intimidating. Kerala's approach has been to bridge this gap rather than forcing children to sink or swim. Bilingual instructors, volunteers, and even peer-mentoring practices have been introduced in select schools to support migrant children (Zacharias & Vinil, 2018).

Further, NGOs in collaboration with the education department have developed multilingual bridge materials and storybooks that incorporate familiar words from Hindi, Bengali, or Odia alongside Malayalam (Bhor, 2020). These resources help children gradually acquire the local language without losing connection to their own. Such practices demonstrate that affirmative action in education is not only about access but also about pedagogy meeting children where they are rather than expecting them to conform instantly.

Social Integration and Sense of Belonging

Inclusion cannot be measured only in terms of enrollment numbers or academic performance. True inclusion also requires that children feel a sense of belonging in their new environment. Migrant children often face subtle discrimination, social isolation, or even bullying because of their language, dress, or cultural practices (Saxena, 2024). Kerala has attempted to respond by building a culture of acceptance within schools.

For example, cultural exchange programs are organized where migrant children are encouraged to share their songs, stories, and festivals with local students. This not only validates their identities but also fosters mutual respect. The 'Roshni Project' in Ernakulam district is a noteworthy model where NGOs work alongside schools to create safe spaces for migrant children, offering counseling, extracurricular activities, and parental engagement. Such initiatives highlight affirmative action as a form of social integration ensuring that education is not just about academics but also about dignity and identity.

Support Systems and Welfare Measures

Educational inclusion cannot be separated from the broader socio-economic conditions of migrant families. Many migrant workers live in crowded, informal settlements with limited access to healthcare,



nutrition, or financial stability. Their children often arrive at school hungry, tired, or without basic supplies. Kerala's welfare-oriented approach has been to extend its strong social support systems to migrant children as well. Midday meal schemes, free uniforms, textbooks, and scholarships are all made accessible to children of migrant workers (Arun 2020). Health check-ups and nutrition programs are regularly conducted in schools to ensure that children's basic well-being is not compromised. Additionally, collaborations between NGOs and local authorities provide counseling and remedial classes for children struggling academically. These interventions represent affirmative action as compensatory justice recognizing that equality of opportunity requires addressing material inequalities head-on.

Policy Innovations and Challenges

One of the unique aspects of Kerala's approach is that it does not segregate migrant children into separate schools or streams. Instead, it insists on integrating them into the mainstream public education system. This inclusive model avoids the creation of parallel systems that could reinforce segregation. At the same time, Kerala has experimented with innovative collaborations between government departments, NGOs, and local communities to sustain these efforts (Nihad, 2024).

Yet, challenges persist. Teachers often feel unprepared to handle multilingual and multicultural classrooms. The frequent mobility of families means that even after enrollment, children may drop out when parents move to a new worksite. Moreover, most programs are concentrated in urban centers such as Kochi, while migrant populations in rural and semi-urban areas remain underserved (Mukherjee, 2023). These realities remind us that affirmative action is not a one-time solution but an ongoing process that requires constant adaptation and resource allocation.

Conclusion

Kerala's initiatives for the education of migrant workers' children provide a rich example of affirmative action in practice. By removing structural barriers to enrollment, adapting pedagogy to linguistic diversity, fostering social integration, and extending welfare support, Kerala has created a model that other states can learn from. The success lies not only in policy design but also in the underlying philosophy that education must serve as an instrument of justice, ensuring that no child is excluded because of circumstances beyond their control. Before Kerala can fully realize the vision of inclusive education, addressing the needs of migrant workers' children remains a crucial step. The state has experimented with a range of innovative interventions to bridge language barriers, mainstream out-of-school children, and ensure equal access to learning. These efforts reflect Kerala's commitment to



translating constitutional guarantees and global goals into practice. A summary of key programs is presented below:

| Program/Initiative | Year/Area | Key Features | Source |
|--|---------------------------|---|--|
| Roshni Project | 2017, Ernakulam | Bridge courses, language support, trained teachers for inclusion | District Administration, Ernakulam, “Roshni Project,” official website |
| Jyothi Project | Perumbavoor | Evening/multilingual classes (Hindi, Bengali, Odiya) for migrant children | Department of Women and Child development, Government of Kerala |
| Aawaz Education Scheme | Linked to Aawaz Insurance | Education support for registered migrant families | Department of Labour and Skill, Government of Kerala |
| Literacy Programme for migrant labourers (Changathi) | Statewide | Multilingual primers, teachers from diverse language groups | Kerala State Literacy Mission Authority, n.d. |
| Community Skill Parks and the Additional Skill Acquisition Programme (ASAP Kerala) | High migrant areas | Reintegrating dropouts and never-enrolled children into schools | ASAP Kerala, n.d. |

While the challenges of mobility, resource limitations, and teacher preparedness remain, Kerala’s experience demonstrates that affirmative action in education must be holistic and dynamic. It is not merely about opening school doors but also about ensuring that once inside, every child can learn, grow, and belong. In this sense, Kerala’s policies represent an evolving commitment to both social justice and human dignity.

References

Arun, P. A. (2020). Migrants and the Inclusive Policy Framework: Has Kerala Set the Precedent for Others to Emulate. *Rajagiri Journal of Social Development*, 12(2), 51-75.



- ASAP Kerala. (n.d.). *Language development & life skills*. ASAP Kerala. Retrieved August 31, 2025, from <http://asapkerala.gov.in/sector/linguistics-lifeskills/>
- Bhor, N. (2020). Linking Education with Health: Lessons from Children of Migrant Construction Labourers in India. *SOCRATES: Vol. 8 No. 1 (2020): (Special Issue) June, Sustainable Development Goals 2030: Ideas and Innovations for Better Tomorrow*, 8, 54.
- Govt. of Kerala. (2021). Annual Report on Education Initiatives for Migrant Children. Department of Education.
- Joseph, M. L. (2023). Student Migration from Kerala, India to Destinations in the Global North: Analysis and Policy Implications.
- Kanwar, S. Ensuring Inclusive and Equitable Education for Migrant Children: Overcoming Barriers and Creating Solution.
- Kerala State Literacy Mission Authority. (n.d.). *Literacy programme for migrant labourers – Changathi*. Literacy Mission Kerala. <https://literacymissionkerala.org/en/services/literacy-programme-for-migrant-labourers-changathi/>
- Kumar, A. (2014). *Interstate Unskilled Migrants of Kerala, South India: The Push and Pull Factors of Long Distance Migration Within the Country*. Retrieved from Semantic Scholars: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Interstate-Unskilled-Migrants-of-Kerala%2C-South-The-Kumar/1f8da43834b7a90390c34115a3f7fef88c2df0fc>
- Kumar, K. (2017). *Routledge Handbook of Education in India*. Taylor & Francis.
- Mukherjee, S. (2023). Addressing Educational Needs of Migrant's Children. In *Education of Socio-Economic Disadvantaged Groups* (pp. 186-197). Routledge India.
- Musthafa, M. N. Psycho social and educational issues of children of migrant workers in Kerala A phenomenological exploration.
- Nihad, M. (2024, September 10). *Inclusive welfare policies and inter-state migrant workers in Kerala: An insight for India*. In CDPP. <https://www.cdpp.co.in/articles/inclusive-welfare-policies-and-inter-state-migrant-workers-in-kerala-an-insight-for-india>



Sreena, A. Psycho social and educational issues of children of migrant workers in Kerala A phenomenological exploration.

Thomas, D. R., & KS, S. (2024). Education of Migrant Labourers' Children (MLC) in Kerala: A Qualitative Study. *Educere BCM Journal of Social Work (ISSN 2249-1090)*, 20(2), 25-43.

Tschurenev, J. (2019). Inequality, difference, and the politics of education for all.

UNESCO. (2021). Global Education Monitoring Report: Non-state Actors in Education. Paris: UNESCO.

Varghese, N. V., & Mangalagiri, a. Quality and inclusion in education.

Zacharias, S., & Vinil, K. V. (2018). The human rights issues related to right to education of the children of migrant labourers in Kerala. *National Human Rights Commission: Project No DONO*, 7(04).