

Reimagining Language Policies in Schools of Kerala: Listening to Migrant Parents Envisioning Their Future Amid Current Precarity

Ganga S¹ 



Abstract

Interstate migrants in Kerala, India, are marked by their temporary movement. This “temporariness” is often viewed as a micro decision of the household to diversify income and thereby reduce risk. The precarity of migrants in the destination state plays a crucial role in reinforcing this pattern, which is often overlooked. The term “guest workers” reveals the state’s attitude toward establishing a temporary relationship with the migrant. The reduced capability of the migrants provides a context for analyzing and reimagining their children’s schooling decisions.

The study is framed in the context of integrating migrant children into the public schools of Kerala, where Malayalam is the medium of instruction, while native children increasingly move to English-medium private unaided schools. The paper visualizes the schooling demands of migrant parents based on the medium of instruction rooted not just in the instrumental, but also in the intrinsic relevance of the language. This shifts the focus from binaries of helplessness and neoliberal aspirations prevalent in the discourses on schooling quality. An improvised framework of the capability approach analyzes the structural constraints that deprive migrant parents of accessing quality education, thereby questioning a discourse that reduces them to being distress-driven. The study includes narratives from migrant parents and interviews with relevant state actors in migrant schooling across the Ernakulam district of Kerala. The study proves useful as migrant children are filling up public schools in Kerala.

¹ National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, Delhi, India, ganga@niepa.ac.in, <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8735-128X>

Keywords

language policy in schools, migrant parents, precarity

Introduction

India undertook the universalization of elementary education in the 1990s, with active state intervention driving the expansion of schools and enrollment. The discourse set education as a public good, strongly advocating for public investment in schooling and resisting privatization (Boissiere, 2004). As the nation continues to focus on ensuring effective access in government schools, there has been an increasing number of private schools and a rise in enrollment, revealing a different trend in demand from parents.¹

The choice of private schooling has been primarily driven by the demand for English-medium instruction, which essentially translates to the English-speaking skills necessary in the labor market (Varghese, 2015). Parents who chose private schools were portrayed as utilitarian entities with mere instrumental ends. The schooling decisions of parents, based on the medium of instruction (MoI), are termed neo-imperialism from below (Mathew, 2018). When the children of marginalized parents access low-cost private unaided schools due to failures in government school provisioning, these choices are often termed “uninformed”, as the parents are portrayed as having no awareness regarding the quality of the transaction (Lahoti & Mukhopadhyay, 2019; Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2022). The aspirations of marginalized parents to access English-medium education are shamed, and they oscillate between being portrayed as helpless or having instrumental needs, with no true agency (Mathew, 2018).

The study considers the schooling demand of parents through the lens of the MoI, not just for its instrumental value, but also for its intrinsic nature. This helps break the public/private binary in the schooling quality discourse (Kumar & Saranapani, 2004). It highlights the necessity of having a new framework for situating the voices of marginalized parents in schooling decisions. This shift is relevant as evidence shows how parental concerns about quality schooling precede their decision to send their child to school (Pandey & Gautam, 2015; Wortsman et al., 2024).

¹ According to the UDISE 2023–24 report, India currently has 69.14% of schools that are government-run, with 51.4% of students enrolled, while private schools constitute 22.5% and hold 36.3% of the student population.

As the number of interstate migrant families increases in Kerala, their schooling decisions are a matter of concern. The MoI remains a major point of contestation both in integrating migrant children from culturally diverse backgrounds and in parental concerns for quality education. The economic discourse portrays migrants as passive recipients of integration measures at the destination; their movement and decision-making do not go beyond the traditional narrative of “helplessness”. The analysis of schooling demand through the capability approach highlights the “permanent impermanence” of migrants at the destination (Triandafyllidou, 2022). This removes the temporary/permanent binary in migration, facilitating an analysis of their decision-making across regions. Migration is thereby seen more as a process (Bitschnau & D’Amato, 2023).

Review of Literature

Providing a New Platform to Discuss English Education: English medium education and English as a subject in schools have often been points of contention in India. While the elite upper-caste population accesses English through private unaided schools, the deprived sections are confined to vernacular education. Deprived children are affected by casteist language policies in schools, promoted under the guise of improved learning (Acharya, 1982). Vernacular education in state-run schools is perceived by elites as a resistance against English, which symbolizes imperial power. Ambedkarite discourse, in turn, highlights the emancipatory potential of the language in breaking the shackles of the caste system in India. This is evident in the works of Kancha Iliiah and the teachings of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule. As government schools witness widespread closures and declining enrollment (Kingdon, 2020), there arises a necessity to publicly invest in English education. The adaptation of current discourse in promoting English among marginalized students highlights only the instrumental value of the language.

The Adoption of the Capability Approach to Consider the Voice of Marginalized Parents: The capability approach provides the conceptual foundation for considering the voices of marginalized parents. It is a normative approach that goes beyond income poverty to see if a person has the real freedom to live a life of their choosing. It provides a framework for understanding whether a person has substantial freedom to fulfill their “doings” and achieve their “being” (Sen, 1999). The discussion of the agency of marginalized parents, and how they navigate amidst vulnerability, shifts the discourse on parents being “helpless”. The approach inculcates not just

the parental demand for English education from an instrumental view (future labor market skills) to an intrinsic view (the emancipatory power of English). Discussions on parental capability reveal the parental relationship as intrinsic in nature, while pursuits in improving the future of children are instrumental in nature. However, intrinsic and instrumental well-being are not mutually exclusive (Hartas, 2014).

Capability Approach in Migration Studies: The government of Kerala addresses interstate migrants as “guest workers”, wrapped in the guise of hospitality (Cherian & Rajan, 2024). Discourses on migration portray migrants as either helpless individuals fleeing from poverty, unemployment, war, or climate change, or as undertaking migration for instrumental ends (de Haas, 2021). This creates directionality and hierarchy in the analysis between origin and destination, portraying migrants as solely distress-driven in nature. The use of the capability approach reveals the structures of advantages and disadvantages that accompany such a narrative (Eichsteller, 2021).

Language Policies in Schools and Integration: In most cases, migrant children are assimilated into the educational system rather than being fully integrated. Low-quality schooling is often masqueraded as an equity measure (Nambissan, 1996). In the specific case of Kerala, marginalized children fill the public schools, while the native population leaves for private, unaided English-medium schools. This creates a schooling hierarchy with differential demand, wherein the migrant children occupy the “uneconomic” schools or “schools with fewer students” (Retnakumar & Arokiasamy, 2006). Integration measures that focus on the learning of language at the destination need to be analyzed in this context. The adoption of the capability approach helps to question measures of assimilation that are disguised as those of integration.

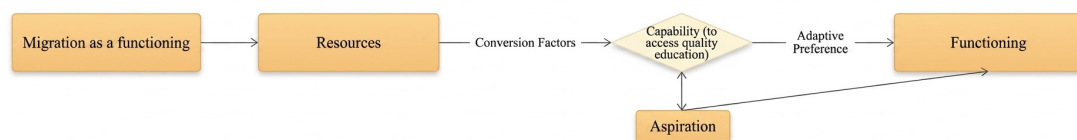
Conceptual Framework: Robeyns (2005) developed a non-dynamic representation of the capability approach. Resources and goods are converted into functioning through conversion factors, which include personal, social, and environmental factors; the person’s ability to convert the resources determines their capability. Preference adaptation, which is tuned to the person’s capabilities and determined by the individual’s personal and social context, adjusts one’s choices to achieve functioning.

Adaptive preferences in Sen’s capability approach neither explain the individual’s value formation nor address the dynamic nature of the process (Leßmann, 2024). Aspirations, in addressing the above problem, have been modeled either as a navigational capacity or a meta-capability (Ray, 2006; Hart, 2016; Zimmermann, 2024). Appadurai (2004) provides a cultural explanation for an individual’s capacity to aspire. De Haas (2021) has developed an aspiration-capabilities framework

in the context of migration by integrating Appadurai, wherein he points out that it is development in low-income countries, and not poverty, that boosts internal and international migration.

The destination state opens just enough to fill its gaps in blue-collar jobs but excludes migrants from settling down or building a career. The precarity of migrants can be both temporal and relational; institutions and society are structured in a way that keeps migrants temporary, with unstable work and reduced capabilities to access healthcare, education, housing, and other basic rights (Hung et al., 2024). The reduced capabilities result in declining aspirations, which often lead migrants to rely on their communities at the destination or origin to build their future.

Fig 1: Conceptual framework for the study



Research Objective

Though the absolute number of long-term migrants is rising in Kerala, the proportion relative to the total population remains very low. The projections report a decline in permanent migration to Kerala in the future (Parida & Raman, 2021). This aligns with the state's treatment of interstate migrants as "guest workers", which restricts them to unskilled or semi-skilled labor with no possibility of occupational mobility or permanent settlement. The structural disadvantage, perpetuating precarity, affects the schooling decisions of migrant parents.

The study analyzes the parental demand for schooling among interstate migrants from Kerala based on the medium of instruction. In light of the above analysis, the study problematizes the measures of integration in the public schools of Kerala.

Methodology

The state of Odisha has been selected as it is the first significant population to arrive in Kerala². Domestic remittances constitute 50%–60% of Odisha's state

² The state of Kerala currently witnesses a heavy flow of interstate migration, amounting to 3.5 million workers from the northern and eastern states of India. These migrants mostly come from SC/ST-dominating districts in their origin states, and their migration is established as distress-driven in nature (Peter et al., 2020).

income, demonstrating that migration is a major livelihood option (MoSPI, 2016). Ernakulam district has been chosen because it houses the largest number of inter-state migrants in Kerala. The selection was also based on the literature regarding Odia migrants and the availability of Odia NGO workers in the district.

Table 1: Profile of migrants considered for the study

Profile of Migrants	Percentage of household/migrants
Caste (% of household)	
SC	66.3%
ST	21.4%
General	3.1%
OBC	9.2%
Religion (% of household)	
Christian	44.9%
Hindu	55.1%
Migration details (% of household)	
Single migrant (with at most one migrant in Kerala)	54.1%
Family migrant (with at least two migrants in Kerala)	45.9%
Migration details (% of household members w.r.t the child)	N=439
Migrant father	98.9%
Migrant mother	46.4%
Migrant children	31.7%
Educational qualification of father	
Finished 12th grade	9.3%
Enrolled but never finished	70.0%
Never enrolled	20.6%
Educational qualification of mother	
Finished 12th grade	3.1%
Enrolled but never finished	62.8%
Never enrolled	32.9%
Type of school of child (% of enrolled children)	
Govt English medium	10.0%
Govt Malayalam medium	15.5%
Govt Odia medium	64.4%
Private English medium	9.7%

Note. All percentages derived from household survey.

The fieldwork was conducted from May 2024 to November 2024. Open-ended interviews with migrant parents were undertaken with the aid of questionnaires. The researcher adopted snowball sampling with strong (peer researchers) and weak ties (friends, family, and acquaintances) to reach the widely distributed population in the district (Parker et al., 2019). Observation of migrants at multiple sites helped in understanding precarity in employment, housing, and societal belonging. An interview schedule covered the history, working principles, current activities, and challenges of various state actors in migrant school provisioning; these include headmasters of public schools with a high number of migrant children and heads and volunteers of Project Roshni.

These migrants are involved in various occupations, including the plywood industry, construction, the hollow brick industry, fishing, gardening, house help, the timber industry, the food processing industry, the garment industry, the copper industry, and daily labor work. The field is spread over 23 migrant pockets across four taluks in Ernakulam district, including Kunnathunaadu, Aluva, Kanayannur, and Kochi. The interviews were conducted in Hindi, a bridging language for both the migrants and the researcher. The duration of each interview averaged 45 minutes. A brief profile of the migrants is provided as follows.

The researcher's positionality, as a native of the destination, was closely aligned with the discourse on migration as distress-driven. This compartmentalizes the decision-making of migrant parents completely to their origin, denying the agency of the migrant household across borders. The selection of both single and family migrants indicates the researcher's reflexivity, fostering a process-oriented analysis of migration.

Findings and Discussion

Migration as a Functioning: The initial functioning of "being able to migrate" opens the discussion of the migrant from just being helpless in nature or pushed/pulled by economic forces. The instrumental nature of migration involves the movement to higher-wage destinations, often driven by the lack of employment opportunities, meager wages, unprofitable farming, and erratic rainfall in Odisha. The movement of people from Odisha to Kerala as part of a structural change in both states provides a platform to discuss the migrants' aspirations to provide good-quality education for their children. Reasons such as a favorable climate, peaceful working conditions, and the ability to practice one's faith show how intrinsic well-being is factored into

the economic reasons. This information is passed on through the social networks of friends and families, facilitating further migration.³

“I could not continue the work in Surat. With all the night shifts, I could not sleep. Here, I can work and sleep well.” (Nettoor, male, construction worker, single migrant)

Non-economic reasons, such as the desire to explore new cultures and lands, eloping with friends, and the possibility of personal growth, demonstrate the intrinsic nature of migration for many.

“My father is still calling me back to do work in the agricultural fields. I do not want to. Agriculture is meant for older people. I want to live in a more developed place.” (Kathirikadav, male, construction worker, stays with family)

“My father had a grocery shop in Orissa⁴. I used to help him. But I could not continue doing it and ran away with the rest of my friends. I tagged along with them to Gujarat, and later I traveled alone to Kerala.” (Perumbavoor, male, manager of a plywood factory, stays with family)

This functioning also discusses the agency of the migrant in deciding to move (or not move) with his or her family to the destination. This contrasts with family migration as a distress measure (Smita, 2008). They consider collective well-being, including their wish to stay together and the parental desire to send the kids to schools in Kerala.

“I initially came to Kerala with a friend to a church-run school in Palakkad. I was amazed by the educational system here. So, I went back to bring my family...I did not move to Kerala for work. We had enough to live [on] back home. I wanted my children to have a good life.” (Perumbavoor, male, pastor, stays with family)

“I brought my family so that my child can learn well. Now I am taking him back to be admitted to a school in Orissa. He is in 4th standard, and he can hardly write A, B, C, D. But I will come back to Kerala after leaving my family in Orissa. I like my stay here.” (Chembarakky, male, hollow bricks factory, stays with family)

³ The shifting trajectory of migration from Surat to Kerala to escape caste discrimination has been explained in Nag et al. (2023).

⁴ The official name of the state was changed from Orissa to Odisha in 2011. The term „Orissa” is retained in the interview quotations to preserve the original phrasing and terminology used by the respondents during the fieldwork.

Resources/Assets:

Increased Income: Migrants from Odisha receive varying levels of income based on their occupations. In daily wage occupations involving construction, daily labor, or gardening work, the migrants receive a daily average of 1,000 rupees. In the factories of plywood and hollow bricks, the migrants are paid a weekly average of 4,000 rupees. In larger companies such as KITEX⁵ or in the Cochin Special Economic Zone (CSEZ⁶), or as house helps, they earn an average monthly salary of 10,000 rupees. In occupations like fishing, the migrants are paid a piecemeal rate depending on the success of the catch. For single male migrants in Kerala, remittances sent back home range from 2,000 rupees per week to 15,000 rupees per month. In the case of family migrants, the remittance is more uneven and depends on the number of family members left behind in Odisha. Either way, the increased income of migrant households facilitates the parents' access to quality education.

Public Schooling: The universal elementary education in India ensures free access to schools, with neighborhood primary and upper primary schools located within 1 km and 3 km, respectively. The RTE (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009) ensures that migrants have flexible access to public schools. A specialized language and learning program, Project Roshni, facilitates access and learning for migrant children in Kerala. English-medium education is provided as a parallel stream to Malayalam medium education in many public schools in Kerala.

Conversion Factors:

Personal Factors

The educational level of the parents, their attitude toward educating the child, the order of birth of the child, the child's gender, and the child's age determine the parents' ability to access quality education.

"I teach my children in our village school. We do not know if the education is good or not. We have not gone to school ourselves." (Manjapra, male, construction worker, stays alone)

⁵ Kitex Garments Ltd (NSE: KITEX) is the world's second-largest manufacturer of cotton and organic cotton garments for infants and children. Based in Kerala, the company has recently undergone a major geographical shift in its investments.

⁶ Cochin Special Economic Zone (CSEZ) is a multiproduct Special Economic Zone in Kochi, Kerala. It attracts both Malayalis and interstate labourers.

"I am a Bengali woman married into an Odia household. I am often treated differently since I do not know the customs and traditions at my in-laws' place. I have two girls. I want them to study well, but more importantly, I want them to learn the rituals of our household. They are taught these in schools back home." (Kizhakkambalam, Female, KITEEX, stays with husband)

"I could not properly teach my eldest son. We did not have any money then. He is illiterate. So, after I migrated to Kerala, I wanted to teach the rest of my children here. I decided to stay." (Malayidamthuruth, male, hollow bricks company, stays with family)

Structural Factors

Stability and Security in the Employment of Migrants: The Odia migrants work in a state of constant insecurity, even when they receive a higher daily wage compared to their previous work sites in Mumbai, Goa, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu. These workers stay in Kerala for seven to eight months and leave home for a month or two, only to find themselves under a new employer upon their next arrival. In the case of migrants who have moved up the career ladder or have been consistently working in the same industry, the insecurity substantially declines. However, for most migrants, they have come to terms with the constant sense of insecurity, which intensifies as the number of migrants moving into Kerala increases.

The unstable job/income affects educational investment in the long run. The neighborhood school in Odisha remains the obvious choice for migrants. The decision to access quality education is confined to Odisha, resulting in the choice of far-away schools or private schools within the state. Schooling in Kerala becomes a temporary decision for many family migrants, as their employment remains uncertain. For migrant parents who decide to navigate this "temporariness" in employment to access education in Kerala, they emphasize "sacrifice", "hard work", and a "thrifty lifestyle" to advance in Kerala.

"Only my wife is working now. I have not had any work for the past two weeks. Life is becoming difficult here. We are putting our younger children here in public schools only for the time being. We will soon shift them, along with the older kids, to Orissa." (Chembarakky, male, daily labourer, stays with family)

"I had earlier brought my family here, and we stayed here for over five years. I schooled the kids here. But we could not afford it anymore. Now, I stay here alone." (Palissery, male, currently unemployed and previously worked in a quarry, single migrant)

"I see a lot of my Odia fellow migrants not taking up work because it is low-paying. They only take up work when the pay is as high as 1,000 rupees. I say you should take up every kind of work, even if it pays you only 300 rupees. That is how you should work here." (Puliyanam, female, house help, stays with family)

Housing Condition of Migrants: Insecure employment is complemented by the temporary nature of the housing for migrants. Male migrants either live in dormitories or at their worksites in cramped conditions, with unclean surroundings, facing the demeaning attitudes of the owners, and lacking access to clean water. The migrants identify their current living conditions as indecent, unfit for a long stay or for families. Except for a few, families of four or more often live together in a single room with no separate kitchen; a single house is shared by one or more migrant families. These housing pockets are often segregated from the Malayali population. Female migrants express feelings of isolation and weak networks of socialization in these housing spaces, expressing a desire to reunite with their families back in Odisha.

For migrants who envision a permanent stay in Kerala, their decision is often backed by better housing, supportive homeowners, and a strong network of Odia and Malayali neighbors. This not only provides a sense of security for the migrants, but also facilitates their access to quality education.

"Let them peacefully stay back home. Kerala is not a place fit for families. Here, our women might go astray. Back home, they are safe. The children can also play around and have a good childhood." (Nettoor, male, construction worker, single migrant)

"We had lived in many homes before moving into this one. There were a lot of bad experiences. Here, we live along with the Malayali owners in the same house. They treat us well and even take care of our kids. Now, we can peacefully work. They were the ones who suggested the schools for our children." (Kathirikadav, male, construction worker, stays with family)

Environmental Factors

Information Regarding Schools: The single migrant parents chose the neighborhood government school in Odisha for its proximity. The selection reflects the decisions of neighbors, relatives, and villagers (which are further mediated by caste and religion). There are cases where the parents' decisions are driven by their own experiences with the neighborhood school. In cases where they access private schools

or distant government-aided schools in Odisha, information is mostly obtained from better-off villagers, relatives, or institutions like the church.

In Kerala, family migrants from a specific area send their children to the same schools and follow a similar pattern for higher levels of schooling. These decisions are usually mediated by the state (public school teachers, headmasters, and multilingual volunteers). Barriers, including documentation and language, hinder migrants from accessing the state schooling system directly. Migrants with a stronger network (including employers, homeowners, Malayali neighbors, and Malayali spouses) exercise their agency in selecting schools.

“I am married to a Malayali woman. Our child studies in a private school in Perumbavoor. Children from as far as 20 km come to this school. My wife selected the school; she also studied in a private school.” (Perumbavoor, male, manager of plywood factory, stays with family)

“I have not admitted him to school yet. I still do not have all his documents with me. He is soon going to be 10.” (Eachamukku, Female, factory worker in CSEZ, stays with son)

Kinship Care: In the literature, the extended family is seen as responsible for the care of migrant children in the absence of their parents. Odisha parents often entrust their child’s education to more learned members of the extended family as they shuttle back and forth between their destination and origin. This arrangement also serves as an alternative in cases where hostel facilities are unavailable for accessing the migrant school of choice. Family migrants in Kerala often lack such support systems, leading their decisions to be “enough for now”.

“My father-in-law is a learned man. He did not allow us to take our daughter along with us to Kerala. My sister-in-law, a doctor, helps her out with her studies. They are sending her to a private school.” (Chembarakky, female, worker at hollow bricks company, stays with family)

“I have tried for hostel facilities for my elder child in Orissa. But in my village, Christians of SC background are discriminated against. The hostels are available for Hindu children of SC/ST. So, my son stays in my relative’s house.” (Chembarakky, female, worker at hollow brick company, stays with family)

Institutional Factors

Hostels for Children: Residential hostels in Odisha are institutional alternatives to kinship care. They provide the option for migrant parents to access better-quality, faraway schools. Hostels run by Christian missionaries are attractive to many migrants from the Kandhamal district, as they believe that hostel life imparts discipline and spoken English to the children.

“My wife and I have been working in Kerala for over 15 years now. We are working so hard to give a good quality education to our children. I have admitted all three of my children to hostels so that they would not face a break in their education. One of us visits the children every now and then. Since then, my wife holds a more stable job, it is mostly me.” (Perumbavoor, male, construction worker, stays with wife)

“I admitted my children to faraway schools to get a good education. They stay in hostels run by the seminary/convent. At home, they will loiter around with the village kids. We can hardly take care of them.” (Manjapra, male, construction worker, single migrant)

There are very few state-run or charity-based hostels in Kerala, with many reportedly having been closed over time. The discrimination in existing hostels deters parents from admitting their children.

“We wanted to put our child in the hostel in Aluva since we have long working hours and can hardly take care of our son. But my friend’s son was badly beaten up by the Malayali kids, so we chose not to.” (Palissery, male, worker at a timber factory, stays with family)

“Our children stayed in the CWC hostel near the school. Though the school is nearby, we admitted them to the hostel. But they refuse to go there anymore. They do not like the food. So now, we drop them off daily at the school.” (Mambra, male, daily laborer, stays with family)

“I came to Kerala to teach my children. Both my elder children were admitted to hostels near the school, even when we stayed in Kerala. Since their education was taken care of, we toiled in various jobs. My wife and I worked in various manual jobs. Now, both of them study in college.” (Perumbavoor, male, pastor, stays with family)

“The elder kids are enrolled in hostels in Odisha, while the younger ones are studying here in Kerala. For now, this is enough for the younger ones. Soon, I will shift them too to the hostels.” (Chembarakky, female, house help, stays with family)

School Admission: The public schools in Kerala and Odisha admit migrant children in a lower grade for “picking up” previous lessons, contradicting the RTE provisions. The lack of flexibility between these two systems of education makes it necessary for migrants to confine their children’s education to one system to ensure continuity throughout the learning period.

“My daughter was schooled in Kerala till the 5th standard. After going to Orissa, she was again put in 1st standard. She lost so many years of schooling. We also had to give her private tuition to catch up.” (Palissery, male, currently unemployed, single migrant)

“We put the children in this school because there are other Odia kids here. But the teacher enrolled us in a lower grade. We lost a year because of it.” (Malayidamthuruth, female, housewife, stays with family)

Teaching Quality: Even when many migrant parents choose the neighborhood schools for their physical and social proximity, they are often dissatisfied with the quality of teaching at these schools. The parents report poor teaching and a lack of accountability as the primary problems in government schools. They either distance themselves from the village schools by blaming the apathy of the government or find these schools “good for the poor”. Few parents have shifted their kids to private schools for the above reasons.

“The teachers hardly teach in government schools. Even in our times, it was so. There would be one teacher during the entire schooling who would care for us. My daughter studies in a private school now. The teachers are far more responsible. I am more satisfied now.” (Allapra, male, worker at a plywood factory, stays with wife)

“There are not enough teachers in government schools. In some schools, there are just four teachers for over 100 students. In private schools, there are more teachers.” (Manjapra, male, welder, single migrant)

For family migrants who wish to teach their kids entirely in Kerala or those who want to settle down in Kerala, the school quality in Kerala is often perceived to be much better than that of Odisha. For some migrants, government schools remain a lesser choice even in Kerala, which is why they desire English medium education in private unaided schools. They compare their child’s learning to that of other privately educated Malayali children in their locality.

“I want my children to complete their education in Kerala. I may go back to Odisha after some time, but I will make sure my kids complete their education here. We receive an education that matches that of private schools in Odisha.” (Kizhakkambalam, female, KITEX, stays with family)

Private Tuition: Private tuition not only provides continuity between school and home, but also becomes a cheaper substitute when parents cannot afford quality education. Private tuition engages children in learning during after-school hours, which parents claim would otherwise be spent “playing around”. It also serves as a means for parents to instill English skills in their children, with some parents spending as much as two thousand rupees per child for English education. Family migrants in Kerala mostly have no access to private tuition, mainly due to the high cost of living with family and the lack of information regarding such private facilities. Initiatives by SSA (around 40 Special Training Centers in Ernakulam) and NGOs aim to engage children during after-school hours, ensure their safety, and integrate them into the public schooling system. However, none of the interviewed migrants seem to take advantage of these resources. The migrants in Kathirikadav, under the banner of the Odia cultural association, have established weekly Odia classes at the nearby school. The parents find this necessary, as their stay in Kerala is temporary.

Capability to Access Quality Education: Quality education translates to schooling decisions based on the MoI, specifically English medium education. Even when the parallel sections of government schools in Kerala provide English medium education, the ability of most migrant parents to access it is strained by personal, environmental, structural, and institutional factors. Most single and family migrants navigate their quality concerns, putting aside education in the English medium for higher grades of schooling to access elementary schools in Odisha in the vernacular medium. The schooling decision reflects how parents ensure continuity in their child’s learning, away from their temporal precarity. In very few cases, parents have expanded their capability set to access English medium education in private schools, indicating a failure of the governmental system.

Aspirations and Adaptive Preferences: The migrants, according to their capability to access quality education, aspire to a future that is both temporal and relational in nature. Instances from the parents’ childhood show their difficult past and their desire to push their children ahead in life. As they continue their stay in Kerala to finish their child’s education or permanently settle in the state, they hope for their kids to explore new lands and find better jobs. Set against the background of many

English coaching institutes and international migration facilitation centers, the improved capabilities have developed a capacity to aspire among the migrant parents.⁷ The migrants find Malayali kids to be ignorant of the Malayalam language while excelling in English. Some of the single migrants also express their desire to move to Kerala to improve their lives.

“Back in my days, children hardly went to school. We were taken to the fields to carry the mud. We would be given a very small amount as pay. Even now in Odisha, I can see children going to work after school hours. This is why I want my children to be completely schooled in Kerala. Here, we get public education, which can match the private education in Orissa.” (Eachamukk, female, CSEZ, stays with family)

“I am paying a hefty amount in tuition fees for my children in private schools in Kerala. I want them to study well and go abroad.” (Kathirikadav, male, construction worker, stays with family)

“Pranav (changed name) works with Indigo in Bangalore. My elder son has taken similar courses and will soon follow Pranav’s footsteps. Pranav and my son have studied at the same schools. Almost all the Odia kids in the locality follow the same pattern.” (Kadavanthara, female, housewife, stays with family)

“I work in a flat near Kaloore. The kid in that family hardly knows Malayalam. He cannot read or write Malayalam.” (Kathirikadav, female, house help, stays with family)

“I have studied till 12th standard and I can pick up some English. The family whom I work for often speak in English. And I try to learn some English in between. I want my kid to speak like that.” (Puliyannam, female, house help, stays with family)

“My wife is currently studying in her 11th standard through distance mode. My kid is enrolled in a private school. I have heard much about the education in Kerala. I am searching for a house near that flat. If I get that, I will move my family to Kerala. But even then, I will only send my kid to a private school here.” (Kathirikadav, male, construction worker, single migrant)

⁷ Kerala is the state with the highest international out-migration in the country. Initially, the out-migration was primarily unskilled or semi-skilled labor toward Gulf countries, but it has slowly shifted to skilled employment in European countries. Many students also migrate internationally for educational purposes.

The migrants who wish to soon shift their child's schooling to Odisha have adjusted their aspirations to fit a future in their home state. Though the migrants blame the Odisha government for their current life situation, most of them expect high-paying jobs to be plentiful and accessible with proper education. They are also hesitant about the job opportunities in Kerala, opining that even Malayalis find it difficult to get employment there. The adaptive preferences of these family migrants reflect those of the other single migrants and villagers back home. Many migrants report that although migration enabled them to send their children to schools, it has hardly affected their perception of their children's education. The villagers back home shame migration and the migrant life at the destination, leading them not to want to associate their child's life with Kerala. The migrants are treated with a great deal of disrespect by Keralites as well, ranging from name-calling to instances of physical harm.

"How will our stay in Kerala have any influence on the schooling decision? We are treated as 'zero' here. So, how will it make any changes in our thoughts?" (Vattakattupady, male, worker at plywood factory, single migrant)

"We rest our heads on water. We never stay long enough on the land to know anything about the education here." (Munambam, male, fisherman, single migrant)

"I cannot work like this anymore; I can have another five years of hard work in me. After that, I will surely go home to my family. Migrants have no value even back home. It is difficult for migrant men to find girls for marriage alliances. It is all because we do dirty jobs. We inhale a lot of dust here." (Cheruvellikunn, male, worker at plywood factory, single migrant)

"I have heard other migrants express their disinterest in teaching their kids in Kerala. I work as a pastor, and I encourage many families to stay in Kerala. I find that many of the migrants lack foresight in their lives." (Perumbavoor, male, pastor, stays with family)

Functioning: The seasonality in the work of migrant parents often affects their children's schooling both at the origin and destination (Smita, 2008). There is very limited institutional support, with low-quality measures often creating an alternate stream of schooling. These equity measures do not meet the quality concerns of the parents, which, in turn, affects their schooling decisions. However, the parents are blamed for having no interest in their child's education (Rajan, 2021). Quite

contrary to the perception of the state, schools, and other non-state actors, all the migrant parents considered for the study understand the importance of education in their child's life. Some of the migrants clearly stated that they would not push their child into labor. Even among children who have dropped out of school, the parents declare that they have tried their best to bring the child back to school.

Education is seen as necessary for future job opportunities for the child. However, this cannot necessarily be reduced to an instrumental end. The parents' urge to protect the child from the hardships they faced constitutes a significant reason to emphasize the intrinsic nature of their demand. It is also a way to successfully break the cycle of poverty. The parents connect it to their lack of knowledge of the world and their own desire to study more, which was met with no support from their homes. They aspire for the child to work in an office rather than in the dirt. Some parents have narrowed their aspirations to opportunities in the army, government offices, and nursing. The parents believe that education would earn their child respect in society. It is also a matter of personal development and survival, where children develop their thoughts well. The parents find education necessary to facilitate a shift in attitude in one's thinking. The following response from an Odia mother, who works in a garment factory and lives with her family in Kerala, sums up the entirety of the parental attitude.

"Even if we don't have anything to eat, we should teach our kids." (Kizhak-kambalam, female, worker at garment factory, stays with family)

Integration of Migrant Children in Kerala: Though most public schools in Kerala have parallel English medium instruction, this is not available if the schools are "uneconomic" or have "fewer students".⁸ (VMFT, 2024). In the migrant-dominated schools considered for the study, two had parallel English-medium sections, and the third school uses English-medium textbooks due to parental demand. The former two were previously uneconomic schools, and the third is still in that category. These schools were deserted by the Malayali population in favor of English-medium

⁸ GO (Ms) 156/12/G.Edn., dated Thiruvananthapuram, 22nd May 2012, is a circular from the Kerala Education Department. It states that at least one Malayalam division is necessary to start an English division. Since the 1970s, public schools in Kerala have faced declining enrollment, primarily in primary schools. The English-medium instruction in private unaided schools has caused this decline, resulting in differential demand for schooling.

private unaided schools and are currently stigmatized for being a “Bhai school”.⁹ The inflow of migrant children into these schools has saved them from closure, and many of these schools see migrant children as a strategy to keep the school running. In this context, the quality of English medium instruction becomes questionable.

Project Roshni, a discourse-oriented pedagogy for integrating migrant children, functions in around 40 migrant-dominated schools in Ernakulam. The project primarily focuses on imparting Malayalam learning to migrant children with the aid of multilingual volunteers. Although the project has been successful in improving the learning of migrant children in Malayalam, it works contrary to parental concerns regarding the medium of instruction. Even the volunteers of Project Roshni and headmasters mention the parents’ specific request to enroll their children in English-medium education. With the Kerala government pushing toward the compulsory enforcement of Malayalam as the first language in schools,¹⁰ the various integration measures garner more support.

Conclusion

The study shows how the capabilities of migrant parents are deprived at the destination, restricting their effective access to English medium government schooling in the state. Few family migrants possess the adequate ability to convert resources into achieving their desired functioning, enabling the parent to aspire further. In cases where migrants are deprived of the capability to access quality education, they adjust their preferences to their community in Odisha. In these instances, migrants still wish to rise above non-migrant households by accessing faraway or private schools in Odisha. Vernacular instruction becomes a choice for parents to build a life away from their current precarity. Few parents move away from the governmental system as it fails to provide quality education.

Even when the state introduces parallel English medium sections in government schools to attract migrant parents, the temporary nature of migrants at the destination constrains them. Kerala ranks highest in terms of the Interstate Migration Policy Index (IMPEX), with welfare legislation (Interstate Migrant Welfare

⁹ “Bhai”, which literally translates to “brother” in Hindi, is used in a pejorative manner to address the interstate migrants in Kerala.

¹⁰ Malayalam Language Bill, 2025

Scheme)¹¹, a housing scheme (Apna Ghar project), health insurance (Aawaz), literacy programs (Project Changathi), and other facilitation (apps for migrant laborers, Shramik Bandhu centers). However, most of these welfare initiatives are still limited to a very small segment of the migrant population, leaving the rest at the mercy of the whims of the informal sector.

The development of a safety net for migrants needs to be carefully drafted, considering the needs of family migrants as well. As the state continues to push for Malayalam medium instruction in its public schools, the needs of migrant parents remain neglected. Language policies in the schools of Kerala, when analyzed in the context of the capability approach, appear to be measures of assimilation. Even though the rising number of migrant children in public schools saves many from closure, these children are merely considered to be transitory in nature. A careful understanding of the precarious conditions of migrant parents will aid in a better formulation of their language policies.

The voices of migrant parents need to be heard in the framing of the state's educational policies by theoretically reconsidering migration as a part of social change and development. The study highlights the continuing importance of the capability approach as a normative framework for understanding the voices of marginalized populations. As the left government continues to frame language policies in light of the decolonial narrative, Ambedkarite discourse offers a novel understanding, especially in the case of marginalized parents.

Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to my PhD supervisor, Dr. Suman Negi, for helping me navigate the study. I would like to thank all the Odia migrants who participated in my research. I extend special gratitude to my fellow researchers, Veerender and Supriya.

Research Ethics Statement

The work, which is part of my PhD thesis, was approved by doctoral committees during the data collection and tool construction phases.

Funding

Not Applicable

¹¹ GO (MS) No.46/10/LBR dated 29.03.2010

Conflict of Interest Statement

Not Applicable

References

- Acharya, P. (1982). Abolition of English at the primary level in West Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17(4), 124-128. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4370605>
- Appadurai, A. (2004). The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition. In V. Rao & M. Walton (Eds.), *Culture and public action* (pp. 59-84). Stanford University Press.
- Bitschnau, M., & D'Amato, G. (2023). Continuum, process, and dyad: Three readings of the migration-mobility nexus. *Migration Studies*, 11(4), 631-649. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnad023>
- Boissiere, M. (2004). *Rationale for public investments in primary education in developing countries*. World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/553151468141871075>
- Cherian, A. P., & Rajan, S. I. (2024). Migrant vulnerabilities: 'Guest workers' in Kerala. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, 18(1), 120-134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09737030241254254>
- de Haas, H. (2021). A theory of migration: The aspirations-capabilities framework. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(8), 1-35. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4>
- Eichsteller, M. (2021). Migration as a capability: Discussing Sen's capability approach in the context of international migration." *Social Inclusion*, 9(1), 174-181. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i1.3587>
- Hart, C. S. (2016). How do aspirations matter? *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 17(3), 324-341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2016.1199540>
- Hartas, D. (2014). *Parenting, family policy and children's well-being in an unequal society. A new culture war for parents*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hung, S. L., Lai, C. Y., & Fung, K. K. (2024). A systematic review of migrants' non-employment precarity: Conceptualizations by scholars and migrants' narratives. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 12, 58. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-024-00418-8>
- Kingdon, G. G. (2020). The private schooling phenomenon in India: A review. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 56(10), 1795-1817. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2020.1715943>
- Kumar, K., & Sarangapani, P. M. (2004). History of the quality debate. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 2(1), 30-52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097318490400200103>
- Lahoti, R., & Mukhopadhyay, R. (2019). School choice in rural India: Perceptions and realities in four states. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 54(49), 51-57. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2019/49/special-articles/school-choice-rural-india.html>
- Leßmann, O. (2024). Putting Appadurai's "capacity to aspire" and Sen's capability approach into dialogue. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 25(4), 556-574. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2024.2398990>
- Mathew, L. (2018). Aspiring and aspiration shaming: Primary schooling, English, and enduring inequalities in liberalising Kerala (India). *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 49(4), 72-88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12234>

- Ministry of Law and Justice. (2009). *Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009* (No. 35). https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/RTE_Section_wise_rationale_rev_0.pdf
- Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation (MoSPI). (2016). *The impact of remittances from migrant workers on their families and local economy development*. https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Report_The_Impact_of_Remittance.pdf
- Mousumi, M. A., & Kusakabe, T. (2022). Private school choice among Muslim parents: The public-private school decision in Delhi, India. *London Review of Education*, 20(1), 25. <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.20.1.25>
- Nag, M., Peter, B., & Varma, D. (2023). Surat or Kerala: Exploring caste dynamics in labour migration across two key interstate labour migration corridors from Odisha's Ganjam district. *Odisha Economic Journal*. 55(1), 113-130.
- Nambissan, G. B. (1996). Equity in education? Schooling of dalit children in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31(16/17), 1011-1024. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4404063>
- Pandey, A. K., & Gautam, A. (2015). Quality of education, child labour and child protection structure: Interrogating the status of child rights in Uttar Pradesh. *Social Change*, 45(1), 24-44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085714561835>
- Parida, J. K., & Raman, K. R. (2021). *A study on in-migration, informal employment and urbanization in Kerala*. State Planning Board, Government of Kerala. <https://spb.kerala.gov.in/sites/default/files/inline-files/In-migrationEmployment.pdf>
- Parker, C., Scott, S., & Geddes, A. (2019). Snowball Sampling. In P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J. W. Sakshaug, & R. A. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036831710>
- Rajan, V. (2021). Migration children and 'free' education in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 56(48), 18-21.
- Ray, D. (2006). Aspirations, poverty, and economic change. In A. V. Banerjee, R. Bénabou, & D. Mookherjee (Eds.), *Understanding poverty* (pp. 409-422). Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195305191.003.0028>
- Retnakumar, J. N., & Arokiasamy, P. (2006). Explaining school enrolment trends in Kerala, India. *Journal of South Asian Development*, 1(2), 231-248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097317410600100204>
- Robeyns, I. (2005). The capability approach: a theoretical survey. *Journal of Human Development*, 6(1), 93-117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/146498805200034266>
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Smita. (2008). *Distress seasonal migration and its impact on children's education*. University of Sussex. Report. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23313065.v1>
- Triandafyllidou, A. (2022). Temporary migration: Category of analysis or category of practice? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(16), 3847-3859. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2028350>
- Varghese, N. V. (2015). State, markets and changing household demand for education in Kerala. In A. N. Roy & G. Mathew (Eds.), *Development, decentralisation and democracy* (pp. 299-317). Orient Blackswan Publications.

- VMFT. (2024). *Separate and unequal? Language, curriculum and management in Kerala's school education system with comparative lessons from Finland*. Vakkom Moulavi Foundation Trust. <https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/VMFT-Separate-Unequal-Final-Web-Spreads.pdf>
- Wortsman, B., Bhattacharya, J., Lim, J., Tanoh, F., Shaheen, S., Ogan, A., & Jasińska, K. (2024). Accelerating progress towards eradicating child labour (SDG8.7) with quality education (SDG4): School quality is linked to reduced child cocoa labour in Côte d'Ivoire. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 19(3), 321-351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17454999241255182>
- Zimmermann, B. (2024). The capability to aspire: An agentive model. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 25(4), 518-536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2024.2407379>