SOCIAL SCIENCE GAZETTEER
Vol 21 (1) January – June 2026
September 2026: pp 64 – 83
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Article History
Received: 15 – 07 – 2026 **Revised: 01 – 09 – 2026** **Accepted: 04 – 09 – 2026**

Gatekeeping Mobility: Differentiated Incorporation, Identity and Welfare in Internal Migration to Kerala

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Abstract: *While interstate migrant workers (IMWs) are, in theory, equal citizens in India, their actual status in the country is far from equal. Mainstream migrant scholarship focuses on varying wage levels, labour demand, and regional disparities. However, these make limited contributions to understand the situation of IMWs once they arrive and the ways in which and why inequalities arise. This study focuses on Kerala to understand how identity, networks, and institutional practices influence the entry, work, housing, welfare, and mobility of IMWs. It was conducted in Pathanamthitta, a non-metro district in Kerala between July and December 2024, using a mixed-methods framework, comprising an interview schedule of 210 IMWs, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews, and non-participant observation.*

By combining these methodologies, it becomes possible to contribute to a broader understanding of diverse social processes and migrant incorporation. The findings reveal how stakeholders, networks, institutional support, and kinship facilitate access to entry, work, welfare, settlement, and mobility. Building on these findings, the study presents the sensitising concept of gatekeeping mobility to explain how migrant incorporation shapes migration outcomes, contributing a nuanced theoretical and empirical understanding to migration literature.

Keywords: Internal Migration, Gatekeeping Mobility, Differentiated Incorporation, Social Networks, Kerala.

Introduction

"Mera chachera bhai pehle se yahan kaam karta tha. Usne phone karke bola, tum aa jao, kaam bhi mil jayega aur rehne ki jagah bhi." (My cousin was already working there). He called and said, Come here. You will receive work and accommodation.)

For many interstate migrant workers, migration to Kerala begins with a phone call from a relative or a labour contractor. Rather than being determined by a consideration of wages or employment opportunities, migration might be decided by trusted social networks that help to settle jobs and accommodation and take away some of the risks and uncertainties involved in moving to a new destination. Not only do networks help migrants reach their destination with some measure of confidence, but also serve to determine their future settlement, labour market prospects, and welfare access. The question then arises as to why interstate migrants in Kerala encounter differences in settlement, welfare, and employment opportunities, despite being entitled to equal status as other Indian citizens under the Indian Constitution. To address this question, this study examines how recruitment shapes occupational allocation, how social networks mediate access to welfare services, and how these processes produce differentiated incorporation.

The growing significance of internal migration provides a broader context for understanding these experiences (Bhagat et al., 2020; Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Tumbe, 2018). Among India's destination states, Kerala occupies a distinctive position owing to persistent labour shortages, an ageing population, and the expansion of its service sectors over the past two decades (Rajan and Mishra, 2020; Rajan and Zachariah, 2018/2020). IMWs have, therefore, become indispensable to the state's economy and society. Yet, their everyday experiences continue to be marked by unequal access to employment, housing, welfare services and so forth.

These contradictory experiences of migration cannot be explained by existing theories that dominate migrant studies. Early migration theories focused on migrants' decisions to move, emphasising the role

of differences in wages, job opportunities, and level of development (Harris and Todaro, 1970; Lee, 1966). Contemporary studies focus on the processes of migration, arguing that social networks reduce the risks associated with migration and facilitate recruitment (Castles et al., 2014; Granovetter, 1985; Massey et al., 1993; Portes, 1995). Studies of internal migration in India also show that relatives, and labour contractors play an important role in facilitating labour migration (Deshingkar and Farrington, 2009; Srivastava, 2020). However, little is known about migrants' social reintegration and adaptation processes in Kerala and how exactly they interact with the host population.

Studies from Kerala have consistently shown that IMWs face unequal access to welfare services despite their contribution to the state economy (Peter et al., 2020; Rajan et al., 2020). The capability approach by Sen (1999) can be applied to explain how migrant workers' social groups lack the power to convert their citizenship rights into actual opportunities. Even though they enjoy the same constitutional rights as other Indian citizens, their social category often denies them opportunities to access welfare and institutional benefits (Jayal, 2013; Khera, 2011). However, migrant workers' problems stem from a combination of factors and discrimination is only one of them. They continue to face barriers in employment, welfare, and social status based on their caste, ethnicity, language, religion, and regional affiliation (Anthias, 2013; Deshpande, 2011; Raghuram & Sondhi, 2020; Thorat et al., 2021; Xaxa, 2019). For instance, Anthias (2013) explains that migrants constantly negotiate their identity based on their employment in the new location, while Thorat et al. (2021) demonstrate how social categories intersect with institutional discrimination to create barriers. Therefore, Eisenstadt's theory of differentiated incorporation can be applied to migration studies, as it explains how migrants' citizenship rights often depend on their social categories, resulting in various levels of incorporation.

To explain how the migration process produces these inequalities, this study presents the concept of gatekeeping mobility. Rather than treating recruitment, employment, settlement, welfare, and mobility as separate domains, gatekeeping mobility understands them as interconnected processes through which migrants gain or are denied

access to opportunities after arrival. It highlights the role of specific actors, relationships, and institutional practices that shape migrants' pathways into work, welfare, and settlement, and, in turn, their incorporation into the host society. In doing so, this paper extends the discussion on differentiated incorporation by focusing on migrants' access to various resources and explaining how migration outcomes can differ for migrants with the same citizenship. Thus, this study offers gatekeeping mobility as a heuristic framework for understanding differentiated incorporation among IMWs in Kerala.

Theoretical Framework: Gatekeeping Mobility and Differentiated Incorporation

Understanding migration requires shifting the analytical focus from "why" people migrate to "how" they are incorporated after migration. Migration scholarship has predominantly focused on explaining push–pull factors and intervening obstacles during the journey (Harris and Todaro, 1970; Lee, 1966). However, migration studies have paid less attention to the "how" – how migrants are incorporated after migration. This study explores migration as a social process during which migrants negotiate access to employment, housing, welfare, and mobility opportunities after migration.

The importance of social networks in generating opportunities and minimising the risks of migration has already been established. However, Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness offers an outstanding opportunity to interpret migration from the perspective of networks. Basically, this theory posits that economic activity is embedded in networks of social relations. Migration researchers have demonstrated that employment and settlement are dependent on social networks. These social ties also shape how migrants engage with institutions and local communities at the destination. Notably, the theory of embeddedness suggests that social networks do not provide equal opportunities to all migrants.

Migration can be both integrative and disjunctive, determined by various factors. As IMWs interact with employers, welfare agencies, and labour market institutions in the destination, they gain new social and economic networks. However, they often experience differential incorporation based on their social identities like caste, gender,

ethnicity, regional affiliation etc. (Anthias, 2013; Deshpande, 2011; Raghuram and Sondhi, 2020; Thorat et al. 2021; Xaxa, 2019). Anthias (2013) explains that migrants' access to welfare and employment depends on their ability to negotiate their social identities. Migration, therefore, entails crossing borders but not social barriers, as migrants navigate new social and institutional environments during their settlement and incorporation in the new location.

These unequal patterns of incorporation are further explained through the concept of differentiated citizenship. Because they move between states, some people face different treatment even though the law sees them as equal. While official status might be identical across India, what someone can actually reach jobs, aid, schools, help depends on who they are and where they live. Instead, belonging plays out unevenly, shaped more by how welcome a person feels and where they stand socially than by paperwork alone.

While different forms of citizenship suggest unequal access to rights and institutions, Sen's (1999) capability approach explains how these inequalities shape migrants' ability to convert available resources into meaningful opportunities. From this perspective, incorporation is based not only on the availability of job opportunities, welfare access, education, but also on people's capability to gain access to and utilise them. For instance, Eisenstadt's (1954) theory of differentiated incorporation provides insight into how migrants, refugees, and expatriates can be incorporated into the host society in different ways despite being granted equal legal status. Accordingly, migrants' incorporation is not only dependent on their access to resources but their capability to utilise them to gain new opportunities.

From these ideas, a new lens emerges *gatekeeping mobility*. It weaves together existing theories, such as migration networks and the capability approach, instead of replacing them. Opportunities after crossing borders how they spread take shape under this view. What unfolds next leans on this blend to probe how migrants settle into new settings.

Investigating Gatekeeping Mobility: Research Design and Methods

A sequential mixed-methods design guided by exploratory and descriptive research objectives was adopted to examine migrant incorporation by integrating quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Fieldwork was conducted in Pathanamthitta, a non-metropolitan district in Kerala, from July to December 2024. The district was purposively selected because, although it hosts fewer interstate migrant workers than metropolitan centres such as Ernakulam, it remains an important yet understudied destination, with migrants employed across the construction, manufacturing, plantations, and other service sectors. The district also has well-established networks of employers, contractors, and NGOs that facilitate migrant recruitment and settlement, making it an appropriate setting for examining migrant incorporation in a non-metropolitan context. This focus extends the existing scholarship, which has largely concentrated on metropolitan centres. Accordingly, this study examined the opportunities and welfare challenges experienced by interstate migrant workers in a non-metropolitan setting, providing insights relevant to similar contexts across Kerala.

Using purposive and snowball sampling, 210 interstate migrant workers employed in major sectors were recruited to participate in the survey. These sampling techniques were adopted because interstate migrant workers are a mobile group without a well-defined and readily identifiable sampling frame. Using purposive sampling allowed for the recruitment of participants with different social, economic, professional, and cultural backgrounds. Snowball sampling, in turn, allowed the inclusion of additional potential candidates by relying on the participants' professional and social networks. Data were collected from all respondents using a semi-structured interview schedule. The qualitative phase involved migrant workers and key stakeholders. Data were collected through 22 FGDs with migrant workers and 18 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, such as employers, contractors, and local government officials. The FGDs explored migrant incorporation through recruitment processes, social networks, workplace relationships, welfare access, and opportunities for mobility. The stakeholder interviews provided the perspectives of key

stakeholders on migrant incorporation and welfare provision. In addition, non-participant observation provided a first-hand and objective perspective on the issues affecting migrant workers.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, and the findings informed the subsequent qualitative analysis of interview transcripts and field notes. Interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was conducted iteratively, allowing themes to develop through repeated engagement with the data. An inductive approach was adopted, with codes and themes developed directly from the data. The analysis was nevertheless informed by gatekeeping mobility as a sensitising framework. The investigation focused on the five pillars of gatekeeping mobility: recruitment, work, settlement, welfare, and mobility. Additional themes also emerged, including the role of social networks in recruitment, unequal access to welfare services, opportunities for mobility, and workplace exclusion. Finally, qualitative and quantitative findings were triangulated to ensure that the themes accurately reflected the patterns of migrant incorporation. Triangulation enhances validity by integrating evidence; statistics showed repetition, while personal accounts gave meaning. There are limitations that need to be considered while interpreting these results.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 210)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age (Years)	18–25	38	18.1
	26–35	97	46.2
	36–45	52	24.8
	Above 45	23	11.0
State of Origin	Bihar	67	31.9
	West Bengal	55	26.2
	Assam	36	17.1

	Odisha	31	14.8
	Jharkhand	21	10.0
Marital Status	Married	153	72.9
	Unmarried	57	27.1
Educational Level	No Formal Schooling	15	7.1
	Primary	36	17.1
	Secondary	92	43.8
	Higher Secondary	48	22.9
	Graduate and Above	19	9.1

Source: Field Survey (2024)

First, this study was conducted in one district with a cross-sectional design, which reduces the extent to which these results might be generalisable. Therefore, the proposed framework of gatekeeping mobility should be considered contextually dependent and not necessarily applicable to other settings. Second, using a snowball strategy might have recruited participants who were more socially integrated, which might explain why some states had fewer respondents. Third, the interpretations of the qualitative results might have been biased, as the researchers aimed to remain subjective while analysing the data. However, these limitations were mitigated by using mixed methods, aiming for diverse participant categories, and engaging in reflexive dialogues while analysing the results. This study followed established ethical principles. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interviews. The interviews were held in the participants' preferred language and then translated into English. Given the vulnerability to their housing and work, particular care was taken to minimise any risk arising from their participation.

Findings

Arrival in Kerala marks the beginning rather than the end of the migration process. After reaching their destination, migrants continued to navigate work, housing, welfare, and everyday mobility. At every stage, access to jobs, housing, and welfare depended on the relationships they built with recruiters, employers and co-workers. Together, these stages show how mobility was progressively shaped and often constrained by everyday social relationships.

Recruitment: Networks and the Organisation of Migration

For most respondents, migration began with a phone call rather than an independent search for work. A relative, friend, or labour contractor already living in Kerala invited them to come, often arranging both employment and accommodation. Instead of entering an unfamiliar place alone, migrants relied on trusted personal connections that eased uncertainties about work, housing, and everyday life.

The respondents' profiles reflect this pattern (Table 1). Most were young workers from Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, and Jharkhand with secondary education or less. Their accounts consistently show that migration was rarely driven by independent job searches. Instead, relatives, friends, and other trusted contacts connected them to employment in Kerala. As one mason from Bihar recalled,

"Mera bhai pehle se yahan kaam karta tha. Usne phone karke bola, 'tum aa jao, kaam bhi mil jayega aur rehne ki jagah bhi.' Maine Kerala ke baare mein kuchh nahi jaana tha. Main sirf us par bharosa karke aa gaya." (My brother was already working there. He called and said, 'Come here. You will receive work and accommodation.' I knew nothing about Kerala. I came simply because I trusted him.)

Trust facilitated not only the migration process but also the integration of migrants into the Kerala labour force. It created a network of private employment agencies that mediated the placement of immigrants and influenced the working conditions and opportunities open to them. As one daily-wage labourer from Jharkhand explained,

"Hum akele nahi aaye. Hamare gaon ke paanch log pehle se yahan the. Unhone contractor se baat ki, phir hum sab ek saath aa gaye." (I

did not come here alone. Five people from my village were already present. They spoke to the contractor, and then all of us came together.)

These networks reduce migration uncertainties, but they also narrow migrants' choices. Because employment was secured through existing social ties, workers were typically channelled into particular employers and occupations rather than exploring other opportunities. Recruitment, therefore, acted as the first stage of gatekeeping, shaping workers' position in Kerala's labour market long before they experienced settlement, welfare, or mobility.

Work: Occupational Allocation and Unequal Opportunities

Recruitment continued to shape migrants' working lives after they entered Kerala's labour market. Most workers entered jobs through existing social ties and were assigned tasks according to employers' labour needs and their previous skills. Few had much choice over the work they performed.

Table 2: Employment Profile of Survey Respondents (N = 210)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Occupation	Construction	88	41.9
	Manufacturing	44	21.0
	Hospitality	32	15.2
	Retail & Services	25	11.9
	Other Informal Occupations	21	10.0
Length of Stay in Kerala	Less than 1 year	44	21.0
	1–3 years	84	40.0
	3–5 years	50	23.8
	More than 5 years	32	15.2

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The occupational profile reflected this pattern (Table 2). Construction accounted for the largest share of employment, followed by manufacturing and hospitality. Most respondents had also lived in Kerala for less than three years, suggesting that many were still in the early stages of their working lives in the state. IMWs were usually assigned occupations based on their existing skills and experiences. As one construction worker from West Bengal explained,

"Jab pehli baar aaye the, jo kaam mila wahi karne lage. Baad mein bhi wahi kaam milta raha. Contractor bolta tha ki tum log isi kaam mein achhe ho." (When we first arrived, we did whatever work was available. Thereafter, they continued to give us the same work. The contractor argued that people like us were good at specific tasks.)

If and when mobility occurred, it depended less on their skills than on earning the employer's or contractor's trust. As one migrant who later became a supervisor recalled,

"Pehle mazdoor tha. Dheere dheere malik ka bharosa bana. Phir unhone zimmedari badha di." (Earlier, I worked as a labourer. Gradually, the employer began to trust me more. Consequently, he gave me a bigger responsibility).

Thus, occupational mobility was possible but uncommon. While a few workers advanced after gaining new skills and their employers' trust, most remained in the same roles with limited prospects for advancement. Work, therefore, became another stage of gatekeeping, shaping not only earnings but also migrants' subsequent access to housing, welfare, and mobility.

Settlement: Housing, Language, and Everyday Incorporation

Work also shaped where and how migrants lived after they arrived in Kerala. Most lived in employer-provided accommodation or labour camps, sharing rooms with co-workers in housing arranged through their employers. Because accommodation was tied to employment, migrants' daily lives revolved around employers and co-workers, with limited interaction beyond the workplace. Settlement, therefore, became another stage of gatekeeping, concentrating everyday life

within workplace relationships while limiting engagement with banks, welfare offices, and other public institutions.

Table 3: Settlement Characteristics of Respondents (N = 210)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Living Arrangement	Shared Labour Camp/Hostel	130	61.9
	Shared Rented Accommodation	59	28.1
	Living Alone	21	10.0

Source: Field Survey (2024)

This pattern is shown in Table 3. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents lived in employer-provided labour camps, while most of the remainder shared rented accommodation with others. Only one in ten participants lived alone. Dependence on employer-provided housing meant that losing a job often meant losing accommodation. As one worker from Assam explained,

"Kaam chhuta toh kamra bhi chhut jayega. Dono saath hi milte hain." (If I lose my job, I lose my room as well. The two always come together.)

Housing therefore provided security, but only as long as employment continued. The same relationship that enabled settlement reinforced migrants' dependence on their employers.

Regarding language and communication, these created a different barrier. Although many migrants learned enough Malayalam for everyday work within a few months, communicating with government offices, hospitals, and banks remained difficult. In the words of one respondent,

"Malayalam samajhna mushkil hai. Jab baat samajh nahin aati, toh darr lagta hai ki kahin galat kagaz par sign na kar dein." (Malayalam is difficult to understand. When we do not understand what is being said, we fear that we might sign the wrong document.)

Limited language proficiency increased migrants' dependence on employers, co-workers, and community networks when accessing public services. Formal rights, therefore, remained difficult to exercise independently, even after migrants had settled in Kerala. Despite these challenges, most respondents viewed Kerala as offering better living and working conditions than their home states.

Welfare: Network-Mediated Access to Social Protection

Most migrants turned to employers first, not government offices, when they needed medical care or help. Connections made during work often opened doors to aid in times of need or emergency. Help sometimes also came through temples or local groups active in daily life. These ties shaped who got support and how easily. One construction worker described this dependence as follows:

"Agar malik saath na jaaye, toh hospital mein bhi mushkil hoti hai. Woh Malayalam bolte hain, hum nahin bol paate." (If the employer does not accompany us, even going to the hospital becomes difficult. They speak Malayalam, while we cannot.)

Employers often translated documents, explained procedures, and accompanied workers to hospitals and clinics. In practice, access to healthcare depended less on formal entitlements than on the availability of someone who could navigate local institutions on migrants' behalf. One vegetable shop worker from Odisha noted,

"Corona ke samay me mandir ke logon ne pehle khana diya, phir doctor ke paas le gaye. Sarkari madad baad mein mili." (During the corona period, people from a nearby temple first gave me food and then took me to a doctor. Government assistance came much later.)

This account shows how community organisations often filled gaps when state support was delayed or difficult to access. Welfare was, therefore, experienced less as a universal entitlement than as a resource mediated through social relationships. Access depended on who migrants knew, as much as on the formal services available to them.

Mobility: Unequal Trajectories of Incorporation

Most respondents believed that migration had improved their financial circumstances compared with their lives in their home states. Regular employment provides greater economic security, but rarely translates into occupational mobility or long-term social security. Migration, therefore, improved livelihoods without necessarily expanding opportunities.

These differences became most visible in migrants' working lives. Construction workers, for example, often remained in the same roles for years, with few opportunities to move into more skilled work. As one worker from Assam explained,

"Roz kaam mil jaata hai, lekin saalon se wahi kaam kar raha hoon. Zindagi chal rahi hai, badal nahi rahi." (I get work every day, but I have been doing the same work for years. Life goes on, but it is not changing.)

Yet many respondents viewed migration as a long-term investment and hoped to improve their position by learning new skills. In the words of one respondent from Bihar,

“Main pahle mishtri ka helper tha, phir tile lagane ka kaam sikh liya, ab main sirf tile ka kaam karta hun aur adhik paise bhi milte hai”. (Earlier I used to to work as a mason’s helper, then I learned tiling work, now I am a tile worker and gets more money.)

For many respondents, mobility extended beyond their working lives. Migration was also an investment in their children's future, particularly through education. In the words of one respondent from Odisha,

"Jo kaam main yahan karta hoon, woh bachchon ko kabhi na karna pade, yahi sapna hai. Isi ke liye paisa jod raha hoon." (My dream is that my children should never have to do the work that I do here. I am saving money for that.)

Respondents hoped that their children would avoid the low-paid and insecure work that characterised their own lives. Mobility was, therefore, understood not only as higher earnings but also as the possibility of expanding opportunities across generations, echoing

Sen's (1999) conception of development as the expansion of capabilities.

Discussion

This study explains interstate migration by shifting attention from migration decisions to opportunities available after migration. Rather than treating mobility as a one-time decision, it conceptualises migration as an ongoing process in which social and institutional relationships shape opportunities for incorporation into the host society. Migration studies has traditionally explained migration in terms of economic motivations. However, this study shows that recruitment processes also shape migrants' recruitment, settlement, welfare, and mobility.

Push-pull theory (Lee, 1966) and the Harris–Todaro model explain why people migrate but offer limited insight into their incorporation afterwards. The migration network explains recruitment by showing how networks reduce search costs (Granovetter, 1985; Massey et al., 1993; Portes, 1995). This study goes further by showing how networks mediate IMWs' access to welfare, employment, and opportunities for social mobility.

Migration does not eliminate the status orders of caste, tribal affiliation, region, or language; rather, these dimensions of stratification are incorporated into new relations of recruitment, employment, welfare, and settlement. While economic factors continue to play a crucial role, migrant resources are invested in networks that facilitate specific employment opportunities and residence in the region. This study explains this phenomenon by applying Anthias (2013) relational belonging theory while building on Eisenstadt's (1954) differentiated incorporation theory. These frameworks are used to interpret the mechanisms through which social affiliation is realised and negotiated in the structural and institutional confines of large-scale interstate migration in India.

Differences in access to welfare, employment opportunities, and social mobility for migrants cannot be explained solely by education, workplace discrimination, or institutional capabilities. Similar opportunities may be available to those who find jobs through different recruitment agencies. Employers often use personal

connections to minimise recruitment risk, thus demonstrating the importance of networks in migration studies. This extends theories of migrant incorporation by showing how gatekeeping mobility shapes access to welfare, employment, and opportunities for social mobility.

The migrant's access to welfare, work, and social mobility is not only determined by formal citizenship and its accompanying rights but also by language, social networks, and procedures. It has to be actively acquired by the migrant in each specific context through their individual and social resources. From this perspective, the migrant's welfare access aligns more with Sen's (1999) capability approach than with the resource-based or recruitment-based approaches. This study focuses on networks as recruitment mechanisms but provides evidence of networks shaping opportunities in various stages of incorporation. Thus, gatekeeping mobility is a conceptual framework for examining how networks and institutions mediate migrants' access to opportunities across different stages of incorporation. It is not a theory of migration but a theoretical lens through which the research explores migration.

Because employers shape many aspects of migrants' lives, policy should promote private rental housing, regulate labour contractors, and strengthen interpretation services within welfare institutions. Support for grass-roots collectives matters as much as cutting reliance on unofficial gatekeepers for access to welfare and public services. What works depends heavily on where it happens, always needing testing across varied setups. Broadly, the results indicate that migrant settlement is shaped not just by individual attributes, but by how personal networks, institutional mechanisms, and the opportunities they generate interact with one another. Thus, gatekeeping mobility offers a conceptual framework for understanding such interactions. Future research should examine how these processes operate in different migration contexts.

Conclusion

This study sought to determine how interstate migrant workers are incorporated into the host society after migration. While most previous studies have attempted to document the reasons for migration, this research focuses on migrant incorporation

opportunities brought about by migration. The study concluded that migrants encounter different incorporation opportunities as a result of social relations and institutional procedures. Existing networks provide employment, welfare service access, and social mobility to migrant workers, while also determining how much they can benefit from these opportunities.

This study contributes to migration research by offering an alternative perspective on post-migration incorporation and provides a basis for understanding how people become integrated into a new society. In this study, migration networks are understood as contributing factors that enable migrants to access employment, welfare, and broader social inclusion after migration. This approach also underscores the role of social identity and institutional processes in explaining urban social inequality, extending existing migration network literature beyond predominantly economic explanations.

These results should be interpreted in light of the limitations of this study. As the analysis is based on cross-sectional data collected in a single district, Pathanamthitta, it is uncertain to what extent similar mechanisms operate in other settings in Kerala. Further research on gatekeeping mobility is needed in different geographical contexts using mixed and longitudinal methods and examining the role of gender, technology, and time in migrant incorporation. Migration processes and incorporation outcomes emerge through the interaction of network and institutional procedures. Gatekeeping mobility is a useful concept for understanding how networks and institutions intersect to shape migrants' opportunities for incorporation into host societies. Future studies could build on these findings by applying the concept of gatekeeping mobility to explore comparable processes in other migration systems.

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