

“Negotiating Belonging: Language, Culture and the Making of Migrant Identity in India”

Manav Goyal

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Abstract

Although scholarship on internal migration in India has focused on labor mobility, economic inequality, and demographic change, comparatively less attention has been paid to the symbolic processes through which migrants negotiate their identity and belonging in host societies. This study examines how language, cultural norms, and everyday social interactions shape migrants' experiences in Kerala, a state widely regarded as an inclusive destination due to its welfare orientation. The study uses a multi-method design conducted in Pathanamthitta, a non-metropolitan district in central Kerala. Data sources include an interview schedule with 210 migrant workers, 22 focus group discussions, and 18 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The findings demonstrate that institutional inclusion can coexist with symbolic exclusion. While migrants gain access to employment and welfare, language, cultural expectations, and spatial segregation continue to condition their sense of belonging. This study argues that belonging is socially negotiated rather than institutionally guaranteed. Symbolic and cultural processes shape migrant identity and extend sociological understanding of internal migration in India. The study distinguishes institutional inclusion from social recognition, showing that economic incorporation does not guarantee belonging.

Keywords: internal migration, belonging, symbolic power, cultural hegemony, intersectionality, Kerala.

Introduction

Every year, millions of Indians leave their homes in search of work opportunities. They cross state boundaries carrying not only their labour but also their languages, cultural practices, memories, and expectations into unfamiliar social worlds. Migration changes where people live, but also how they are seen and how they come to see themselves. Finding employment may take only a few days, whereas finding a sense of belonging often takes much longer. For many migrants, their journeys do not end upon arrival. It continues through encounters in workplaces, neighbourhoods, markets, and public institutions, where acceptance is negotiated rather than assumed.

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- Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of Lucknow.
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Research on internal migration in India has advanced the understanding of labour mobility, regional disparities, informal employment, and migrants' access to welfare and social protection (Institute for Human Development and United Nations Population Fund 24; Srivastava, 411-18; 17). These studies show that migration is embedded in uneven development and economic restructuring. Yet migration is more than the movement of labour. It is also a social process through which migrants negotiate new languages, cultural norms and relationships. Economic incorporation may improve material security, but it does not necessarily lead to social recognition.

This raises a broader sociological question: Why does formal inclusion often fail to generate a sense of belonging? Belonging is a social relationship between individuals and the communities in which they live (Antonsich 645-47; Yuval-Davis, 198-201; Yuval-Davis 35). It develops through everyday interactions that communicate recognition and legitimacy. Migrants may be economically indispensable while continuing to experience subtle forms of exclusion through language, cultural expectations, and routine social encounters. Therefore, belonging is not an automatic outcome of migration but an ongoing social process.

Although questions of belonging and identity have received increasing attention in international migration scholarship (Antonsich; Yuval-Davis, *Belonging and the Politics of Belonging*; Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging*), they remain comparatively underexplored in studies of internal migration in India. Existing research has generated important insights into labour markets, circular migration, and migrant vulnerability (Institute for Human Development and United Nations Population Fund 24; Srivastava, 418; 17). However, the symbolic dimensions of migration have received significantly less attention. Language, cultural legitimacy, everyday recognition, and symbolic boundaries continue to shape migrants' lived experiences, yet remain marginal within the literature. As Lamont and Molnár (Lamont and Molnár 167-70) argue, symbolic boundaries distinguish insiders from outsiders and reproduce the social inequality. This perspective shifts the focus from migration as an economic event to migration as a social process through which belonging is negotiated.

Kerala provides an important setting for examining these issues. The state has become one of India's major destinations for migrant workers because of sustained labour demand, relatively favourable wages, and an extensive welfare infrastructure (Rajan & Zachariah). It is widely regarded as an inclusive destination where migrants enjoy comparatively better access to public services. However, everyday experiences

reveal a more complex reality. Many migrants secure employment and welfare while continuing to experience subtle forms of social distancing. They are institutionally included but are not always socially recognised. This tension makes Kerala a valuable context for examining how belonging is negotiated in a welfare-oriented society.

Drawing on a multi-method study conducted in Pathanamthitta district, this study examines how language, cultural practices, and everyday interactions shape migrants' experiences of belonging. It argues that institutional inclusion can coexist with symbolic exclusion and that identity is shaped as much by everyday processes of recognition as by economic participation. This study makes two contributions. First, it distinguishes between institutional inclusion and social recognition, demonstrating that access to employment and welfare does not necessarily produce a sense of belonging. Second, it shows how language, cultural norms, and everyday interactions reproduce subtle forms of symbolic exclusion even within a destination widely regarded as inclusive. By foregrounding these symbolic processes, the study extends predominantly economic approaches to internal migration and argues that belonging is socially negotiated rather than institutionally guaranteed.

Theoretical Framework

The central argument of this study is that migrants' experiences of belonging cannot be understood through economic incorporation alone. Access to employment and welfare may improve material conditions but does not necessarily guarantee social recognition. To explain this gap, this study draws on three complementary perspectives: symbolic power, cultural hegemony, and intersectionality.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power explains how social hierarchies are reproduced through everyday practices rather than overt coercion (Bourdieu 56-66). Competence in the dominant language functions as cultural capital that shapes recognition, legitimacy, and participation in everyday life. Migrants who lack this capital may experience exclusion despite having access to employment and public services.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony explains why such practices are accepted as the norm (Gramsci 328). Dominant regional norms are the standards against which migrants are judged. Expectations surrounding language and cultural practices appear neutral but privilege host society values, making conformity a condition of acceptance and reproducing exclusion through everyday expectations.

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality highlights how language, class, gender, occupation, and duration of residence shape the uneven experiences of inclusion and

exclusion (Crenshaw 139-42). Therefore, migrant experiences vary according to intersecting social locations that influence both vulnerability and agency.

Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding the sense of belonging as a negotiated social process. Symbolic power explains how boundaries are reproduced, cultural hegemony shows how they gain legitimacy, and intersectionality explains why they are experienced differently by different groups. Rather than treating belonging as an automatic outcome of migration, the framework understands it as a process through which recognition is negotiated within the context of unequal power relations.

Methodology

This study adopted a multi-method research design informed by an interpretivist perspective that views identity and belonging as socially constructed through everyday interactions. Because this study examined both migrants' living conditions and their experiences of recognition and belonging, it combined multiple methods to identify recurring patterns and explore the meanings migrants attached to their experiences. Triangulation strengthened the interpretation of institutional inclusion and social recognition.

Fieldwork was conducted between July and December 2024 in Pathanamthitta, a non-metropolitan district in the state of Kerala. The district was selected because it has experienced a steady increase in interstate migrant workers while remaining largely absent from migration research, which has focused on metropolitan destinations (Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development [CMID]; Rajan and Zachariah). Its welfare-oriented context also provided an appropriate setting for examining whether institutional inclusion translates to social belonging.

Empirical evidence was generated using four complementary methods. An interview schedule was administered to 210 migrant workers to document their migration histories, language use, employment, welfare access, and everyday experiences. Twenty-two focus group discussions explored shared experiences of belonging, while 18 semi-structured interviews with employers, labour contractors, local government representatives, trade union members, and community leaders provided institutional perspectives. Non-participant observations in labour settlements, workplaces, markets, transport hubs, and other public spaces complemented the interview data.

Purposive and snowball sampling ensured participant diversity and facilitated access to informal migrant workers. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in the participants' preferred languages, with translation support where necessary. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Data were transcribed, translated where required, and manually analyzed using thematic analysis informed by the study's analytical framework. Participant quotations were translated into English by the researcher while preserving their original meaning. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study. Given the participants' vulnerability, identifying information was removed, and the data were used solely for academic purposes.

Findings

From Arrival to Belonging: Everyday Negotiations of Inclusion and Exclusion

For most respondents, migration to Kerala began not with employment but with relationships with Keralites. Family members, friends, and fellow villagers who had migrated earlier became primary sources of information, employment, and accommodation. Respondents predominantly came from Bihar (31.9%) and West Bengal (26.2%) (Field Survey 2024), indicating that migration occurred through established social networks rather than individual decisions.

Table 1

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Interstate Migrant Workers (N = 210)

Variable	Category	n	%
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: Author's field survey, 2024.

The interviews showed that migration decisions were rarely made independently. Existing networks reduce uncertainty and create trusted pathways into the labor market. A mason from Bihar recalled:

"My brother was already working here. He asked me to come, saying that I would find both work and a place to stay here. I knew nothing about Kerala at the time. I came simply because I trusted him."

A coconut seller from Odisha described a similar experience.

"Five people from my village were already working here. They spoke to the contractor, and we all came together."

These narratives illustrate that migration was organised through relationships of trust rather than formal recruitment alone. Family and village networks connect migrants with employers, reduce uncertainty, and transform migration into a collective rather than an individual process.

Employment has become the foundation of everyday life in Kerala. Most respondents (40.0%) had lived in the state for between one and three years, while only 15.2 per cent had remained for more than five years (Field Survey 2024), suggesting that many had moved beyond their initial settlement while continuing to negotiate life in the host society.

Table 2

Employment Profile of Interstate Migrant Workers (N = 210)

Variable	Category	n	%
Occupation	Construction	88	41.9
	Manufacturing	44	21.0
	Hospitality	32	15.2
	Retail and 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: Author's field survey, 2024–2025.

Employment provided more than wages. It also shapes housing, mobility, and access to everyday services. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents (61.9%) lived in employer-linked labor camps or hostels, making accommodation dependent on continued employment.

Table 3

Settlement Characteristics of Interstate Migrant Workers (N = 210)

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

Source: Author's field survey, 2024.

A pickle factory worker from Assam explained:

"If I lose my job, I lose my accommodation as well. The two always go together."

Employers confirmed that workers generally depended on them not only for negotiated wages but also for accommodation and assistance in accessing everyday services. Labor contractors similarly explained that additional workers were usually recruited through existing networks in Eastern India, particularly Bihar. Employment therefore became the principal gateway to settlement while simultaneously creating relationships of dependence in which work, housing, and everyday security were closely intertwined.

Language emerged as the most significant challenge once migrants moved beyond the workplace. Limited proficiency in Malayalam restricted their ability to navigate their everyday lives independently. Visiting hospitals, understanding official documents, and interacting with public institutions often require assistance from employers or fellow workers.

A quarry worker from Jharkhand explained:

"Malayalam is difficult for us to understand. When we cannot follow what people are saying, we worry that we might sign the wrong document."

Another participant stated:

"If my employer does not accompany me, even going to the hospital becomes difficult because they speak Malayalam and I cannot."

Across the focus group discussions, the participants consistently described language as extending beyond communication. This shaped their confidence and independence in their daily lives. Even migrants who have lived in Kerala for several years remain hesitant to approach government offices or healthcare institutions alone. While employers and local stakeholders viewed learning Malayalam as part of successful adjustment, migrants often experienced this expectation as a condition for social acceptance. Therefore, language functions as a symbolic boundary separating those who can participate independently in everyday life from those who remain dependent on others.

These boundaries are also visible in public spaces. Field observations showed groups of migrant workers gathering at bus junctions and tea shops while waiting for contractors or employers to allocate work to them. These spaces serve as informal labor markets where migrants exchange information and expand their employment networks. At the same time, they made migrants highly visible, while limiting sustained interactions with local residents.

Stakeholder interviews suggested that these spatial arrangements occasionally generated local tensions. A Panchayat official reported complaints from nearby residents about disturbances around the labor camps, resulting in demands that some camps be relocated. Although involving only a few workers, such incidents contribute to broader perceptions of migrants as temporary outsiders. Physical proximity did not necessarily produce social proximity, and migrants remained socially peripheral despite sharing the same public spaces.

Despite these challenges, migrants have demonstrated considerable agency in negotiating their everyday lives. Many described learning Malayalam, relying on fellow migrants for support, and gradually earning the trust of their employers. One construction worker reflected:

"When I first arrived, I worked as an ordinary labourer. Gradually, my employer began to trust me and gave me greater responsibility."

Others questioned whether hard work alone was sufficient to improve their lives.

"I get work every day, but I have been doing the same work for years. Life goes on, but it does not really change."

Despite these constraints, migrants continue to imagine a different future.

"My dream is that my children should never have to do the work I do. I am saving money to make that possible."

Across all sources of evidence, one pattern was consistent. Migrants rarely described open hostility or systematic discrimination. Instead, they portrayed a quieter experience of conditional acceptance. They were welcomed as workers but remained socially peripheral in everyday life. Employment and welfare reduced material vulnerability, but recognition remained conditional, shaped by language, everyday interactions, and local expectations. Therefore, belonging emerges not as a fixed outcome of migration but as an ongoing negotiation between economic inclusion and symbolic distance.

Discussion

The findings distinguish institutional inclusion from social recognition as two related but distinct dimensions of migrant incorporation. Most respondents had secured employment and varying levels of access to welfare and public services, which improved their material conditions. However, these forms of inclusion do not necessarily generate belonging. Across interviews, focus group discussions, stakeholder interviews, and field observations, migrants consistently described being accepted as workers while remaining socially marginalized. Migrant incorporation, therefore, extends beyond labour market participation and depends on the everyday processes through which recognition is negotiated.

This distinction constitutes the principal contribution of this study. Research on internal migration in India has largely assessed inclusion through employment, wages, housing, and welfare access (Institute for Human Development and United Nations Population Fund; Srivastava 411-18). While these dimensions remain important, the findings suggest that they capture only one aspect of their incorporation. Migrants have become economically integrated into Kerala's labor market but continue to negotiate language and everyday interactions that shape their social legitimacy. Therefore, migrant incorporation should be understood as a multidimensional process in which material inclusion does not necessarily eliminate symbolic inequality.

The findings also show that language functions as more than a medium of communication. It shapes migrants' confidence in public institutions and their capacity to act independently. In this sense, language operates as a form of symbolic capital through which recognition is distributed and social boundaries are maintained (Bourdieu 56–66). The issue is not whether migrants speak Malayalam but whether linguistic competence is a condition for participation in everyday life. Thus, language regulates not only communication but also legitimacy and belonging.

A similar pattern was evident in the operation of the regional norms. Stakeholders often view adaptation to local language and cultural practices as necessary for successful integration, whereas migrants experience these expectations as conditions of acceptance. This reflects (Gramsci's 323-43) notion of cultural hegemony, in which dominant norms are accepted as common sense. Exclusion rarely appeared as overt hostility; instead, it was reproduced through ordinary expectations that distinguished insiders from outsiders. Kerala demonstrates that welfare-oriented settings can reduce material vulnerability while largely leaving symbolic boundaries intact.

The findings also suggest that migrant experiences are not uniform. Length of residence, occupation, access to social networks, and relationships with employers all influenced how migrants negotiated their daily lives. Some gradually acquired greater confidence and responsibility, while others remained dependent on their employers for accommodation, healthcare, and interaction with public institutions. These variations reinforce the value of an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 139–42), which recognises that migrant identity is shaped by multiple and overlapping social locations rather than by migration status alone. Therefore, vulnerability and agency are unevenly distributed across migrant populations.

Overall, this study shifts attention from migration as labour mobility to migration as the negotiation of belonging. This suggests that the central challenge for migrants is not simply gaining employment but securing recognition within the communities where they live. Future research should examine not only whether migrants are included but also the forms of recognition through which inclusion is achieved and experienced. Viewing migration through this lens offers a richer sociological understanding of belonging, identity, and regional inequality in India.

Conclusion

This study examined internal migration in Kerala as a social process through which belonging is continually negotiated rather than automatically achieved. While migrants gained access to employment and welfare, institutional inclusion did not necessarily translate into social recognition. Belonging emerges through everyday interactions shaped by language and local cultural norms. Therefore, the findings demonstrate that institutional inclusion does not necessarily produce social recognition.

By distinguishing between institutional inclusion and social recognition, this study contributes to the sociology of internal migration by extending predominantly economic approaches to migrant incorporation. The findings show that understanding migration requires attention not only to labour markets and welfare regimes but also to the symbolic processes through which identities and boundaries are produced. The findings further suggest that welfare-oriented settings can reduce material vulnerability without necessarily strengthening social belonging.

The study is limited to a single district in Kerala and does not claim statistical generalisability. Nevertheless, the findings offer analytically transferable insights into the everyday experiences of migrants in comparable regional contexts. Future research could extend this work through comparative studies across states and longitudinal analyses of migrant settlements. Viewing migration as both a material and symbolic process offers a more complete sociological understanding of belonging, identity, and regional inequality in contemporary India.

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MANAV GOYAL Email - manavgoyalphd21@gmail.com

Mobile No. -9151313333
