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Identity Formation and the Politics of Belonging: Bengali Migrants in Kerala

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Abstract

This article examines the identity formation and everyday negotiations of Bengali interstate migrants in Kerala through the lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT). Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with migrant families, children, and teachers, it explores how language, work hierarchies, and cultural practices shape processes of belonging and exclusion. A key contribution lies in connecting Kerala's usage of the term "guest worker"—borrowed from Germany's Gastarbeiter experience—to the everyday realities of Bengali migrants, showing how the term embodies both economic indispensability and permanent outsiderhood. Findings reveal that while children's schooling and linguistic adaptation open partial pathways to integration, adult migrants articulate ambivalent forms of identity shaped by sacrifice, nostalgia, and cultural reproduction. Migrants perceive their presence in Kerala as necessary but temporary, producing what may be called "bounded inclusion": visible in the labour market yet excluded from civic and symbolic membership. The study highlights a gap in Indian scholarship on migrant identity formation, arguing for frameworks that move beyond assimilationist logics to recognize hybridity, resilience, and agency as constitutive of Global South childhoods.

Keywords: Migrant childhoods, Bengali migrants, Kerala migration, Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorization Theory, Guest worker discourse

1. Introduction

Migration, Guest Workers, and Out-Grouping

Migration has long been a defining feature of India's social fabric. Before the modern state emerged, people in the subcontinent were constantly on the move—through deforestation, war, and the pursuit of resources (Kosambi, 1964). By 2011, more than 450 million Indians were classified as migrants, and of these, over 54 million were interstate migrants (Aggarwal et al., 2020). Kerala, with its reputation for high

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human development and labour-friendly policies, has become a key destination for these mobile populations.

Within Kerala, the West Bengal–Kerala migration corridor has acquired particular significance. In towns like Ernakulam, Perumbavoor, and Vazhakulam, "Bengali markets" emerge weekly, selling food, clothing, and services that recreate the textures of home. Yet the term "Bengali" itself has become a flattened label: in local parlance, any migrant worker—whether from Bihar, Odisha, or Assam—is often called a "Bengali." This linguistic shorthand erases diversity and renders migrants as a singular out-group, echoing what Tajfel and Turner (1979) described in Social Identity Theory as the creation of broad "them" categories to stabilize the in-group's identity.

Kerala also employs the term "guest worker" (athithi thozhilali) to describe these migrants, a borrowing from Germany's Gastarbeiter program in the post-war decades. In Germany, Gastarbeiter were invited to rebuild industries but were never offered permanent belonging. The term encoded a paradox: recognition of economic indispensability alongside a refusal of citizenship. Kerala's usage mirrors this contradiction. Migrants are essential to the plywood factories of Mudickal, the quarries of Vazhakulam, and the construction sites of Kalamassery, yet they are discursively fixed as guests—always temporary, always outsiders.

This discursive framing interacts with everyday practices of belonging. Parents narrate migration as compulsion and sacrifice; teachers frame migrant children as simultaneously "affectionate" and "undisciplined"; children navigate multiple linguistic worlds, shifting between Bengali, Malayalam, and Hindi. Taken together, these dynamics produce what I call "bounded inclusion": migrants are integrated into Kerala's economic life but excluded from full civic, cultural, and symbolic membership.

This paper explores these processes ethnographically, situating them within SIT, SCT, and postcolonial critiques of childhood.

Negotiating Belonging in Everyday Life

Home and Family

Migration, for most parents, was rarely described as a choice. Ruma (34, Kuttikatukara, 10 years in Kerala) explained bluntly:

"We are poor, that is why we came here. Life in Murshidabad had no work. Here at least we can eat."

Fathers spoke of long shifts in plywood factories, municipal plastic work, or construction. Mothers narrated the double burden of wage labour and domestic responsibilities. Noor (40, Mudickal, 13 years in Kerala) reflected:

"The Bengali women will make food, go to work, come back, cook again, wash clothes of ourselves and husbands and kids. Here we don't get any rest like women in Kerala."

The everyday rhythms of migrant households are saturated with sacrifice. Parents situate their suffering as the price of children's futures, echoing what migration studies describe as "instrumental migration"—mobility not as aspiration but as compulsion.

Children occupy a liminal role within families. They often mediate between parents and institutions. Sadiya (12, Kuttikatukara, 10 years in Kerala) explained:

"When teacher says something, I tell Ma in Bengali at home. Ma does not understand Malayalam, only I do."

Here, Social Identity Theory is visible in practice: parents remain anchored in the Bengali in-group, while children acquire bridging capital through Malayalam schooling, positioning themselves as translators and negotiators.

School and Language

Schools emerged as contested spaces of belonging. Teachers frequently praised migrant children's enthusiasm while simultaneously highlighting deficits. Deepthi, a ROSHNI volunteer (Kandanthara, March 2023), remarked:

"They are affectionate, they like maths and Hindi. But at first, they don't respond, they get angry, they fight. After training, they become like others."

"Training" here meant assimilation into Kerala's monolingual, middle-class norms. Migrant children's struggles were interpreted not as structural barriers but as deficiencies.

Language played a central role. Hindi was introduced in classrooms as a mediatory language, but for many children, it only deepened exclusion. Jeet (10, Kalamassery, 2.5 years in Kerala) described:

"Teacher speaks Hindi but I don't know it. In Bengal we never learned Hindi. Malayalam also is hard. Only some words I know."

Teachers themselves often lacked fluency in Hindi, creating a double gap: children were asked to learn through a language unfamiliar to both them and their instructors. Parents, meanwhile, worried that their children's growing fluency in Malayalam came at the expense of Bengali. One mother reflected:

"My son speaks only Malayalam now. At home I have to remind him—speak Bengali, don't forget."

This "language dilemma" (Zacharias, 2018) encapsulates the ambivalence of migration: integration through language simultaneously risks cultural erasure.

Neighbourhood and Everyday Belonging

In neighbourhoods, Bengali migrants often adopted what Noor (Mudickal, 13 years in Kerala) described as a strategy of humility:

"We have come to their place, so we need to make ourselves small and live here. We cannot live the way we used to back in our native place."

Such statements reflect the internalization of guest-worker logics: belonging is conditional, dependent on migrants keeping themselves unobtrusive.

Children, however, demonstrated more fluid adaptations. Raju (16, Kandanthara, 12 years in Kerala) shared:

"In the playground we all play together—Malayalam, Bengali, no matter. But if there is fight, they call us 'Bhai class. 'We don't like it. We have names."

Nicknames such as "Bhai class" reproduce out-grouping even in spaces of play, showing how linguistic and cultural difference remains visible.

At the same time, households consciously preserved cultural practices as acts of identity. Food, festivals, and religious observances were central. Rina (Vazhakulam, 5 years in Kerala) explained:

"We are still a Bengali family, so we don't eat Malayalam food… we make Bengali food according to our wish."

Initially, migrants struggled to procure ingredients, but over time they recreated culinary environments that reinforced in-group solidarity. These practices were not mere habits but symbolic acts of resistance against cultural erasure.

The Paradox of Bounded Inclusion

The narratives above point to three intertwined paradoxes.

First, economic indispensability coexists with civic exclusion. Migrants are central to Kerala's labour market yet remain excluded from voting, benefits, and political participation. As one father remarked:

"Here, these people think we are outsiders—videshi. So why should we get any benefits? We will always be videshis to them."

Second, language is simultaneously a bridge and a barrier. Children's Malayalam fluency opens pathways to schooling, but parents fear cultural erosion. Teachers 'reliance on Hindi creates further dissonance. Language thus embodies both integration and loss.

Third, resilience is valorized and misread. Parents view children's adaptation as proof that their sacrifices are worthwhile; teachers interpret the same behaviours as coping mechanisms. Both perspectives neglect resilience as relational and socio-ecological (Ungar, 2007), shaped by networks of peers, families, and institutions.

Finally, nostalgia underscores these dynamics. Many migrants framed their presence in Kerala as temporary, contingent on financial security or children's education. "We will go back after our children's education is over," one respondent said. This affective disintegration reveals that integration remains functional, not symbolic.

Together, these processes create what I call **bounded inclusion**. Migrants are present, visible, and productive, yet symbolically excluded from deeper belonging.

Discussion and Conclusion: Rethinking Migrant Childhoods in the Global South

The ethnography demonstrates that Bengali migrants in Kerala negotiate identity not as straightforward assimilation or erosion but as continual reshaping under conditions of exclusion. SIT and SCT help illuminate how in-group solidarity and out-group stereotyping structure these negotiations. But postcolonial critiques are equally necessary to show how discourses like "guest worker" encode systemic marginality.

For children, identity is hybrid and fluid—navigating multiple languages, friendships, and places. Yet adults 'perceptions, institutional arrangements, and state discourses often lag behind this fluidity, clinging to static notions of culture. Parents valorize sacrifice and fear loss; teachers frame assimilation as success; the state provides welfare but embeds it in assimilationist logic.

This chapter contributes conceptually by advancing the notion of **bounded inclusion**. Migrants in Kerala embody paradox: indispensable to the economy yet denied full belonging; visible as workers and students yet invisible as citizens. Childhoods in this context are not passive states of vulnerability but sites of negotiation, resilience, and cultural translation.

Policy implications are clear. Educational initiatives must move beyond deficit logics to asset-based pedagogies that value multilingualism and cultural hybridity. Welfare programs like ROSHNI should shift from assimilationist models toward frameworks that validate diversity. And recognition of migrants as full civic members—beyond the "guest" label—is essential.

Ultimately, migrant childhoods in Kerala reveal the contradictions of Global South migrations: childhoods marked by resilience and creativity but constrained by systemic exclusion. Understanding these lives requires listening not only to children but also interrogating how adults, institutions, and states construct the boundaries of belonging.

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