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*Lost Across Borders: A study of Urban Informal Migrant Workers and the subnational welfare ecosystems in India*

In the wake of the nationwide lockdown in March 2020 due to COVID-19, approximately 11.4 million migrants in India faced a mass exodus from urban cities, revealing the vulnerability and invisibility of this workforce. The government's decision to close state borders resulted in a stark visibility of informal workers' plight, with many undertaking arduous journeys on foot, suffering from hunger, debt, and illness. This crisis exposed the inadequacy of migrant representation in India's development discourse and underscored the inequality embedded in their status as citizens.

This thesis examines how internal migrant workers in India access and negotiate welfare entitlements across sub-national borders, focusing on Delhi and Kochi as comparative case studies. Broadly examining the state of informal migrant workers' state of substantive citizenship within the country. Through a multi-method qualitative approach, integrating ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and survey data—the study uncovers the structural, relational, and discursive deficits that shape migrants' interactions with local welfare ecosystems. Despite constitutional guarantees of free movement and equal citizenship, internal migrants encounter implicit exclusion in navigating welfare in the destination states.

The research develops the conceptual framework of citizenship deficits to explain how informal migrant workers experience welfare exclusion in destination states. The thesis presents three empirical papers: (1) analysing knowledge gaps and implementation disparities in construction welfare policies across states. Using a comparative lens between Kerala and Delhi, the findings reveal that despite differing policy environments, migrants in both areas face structural deficits in welfare provisioning.; (2) examining the informal negotiation strategies migrants employ, such as intermediaries and informal payments, to access digitising welfare entitlements; and (3) exploring state and migrant narratives of deservingness, revealing how narratives of migrants rights are framed through a lens of goodwill rather than an enforceable entitlement.

By moving beyond dominant discourses where migrants are subsumed within the categories of urban poor and informal workers, this study highlights the distinct vulnerabilities and agency of short-term migrants in India's informal economy. It contributes to three distinct yet interconnected scholarships on migration, citizenship, and informality in the Global South by offering a bottom-up perspective on how migrants navigate fragmented welfare systems. The

findings underscore the urgent need for a migration-sensitive understanding of citizenship to more inclusive and equitable welfare provisioning.