

## Return Migration amidst a Pandemic: Reflections on Kerala's Gulf Migration

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### Introduction

Over the past few months, there has been a profusion of discussions and debates, in digital as well as print media, regarding the grim impact of COVID-19 on Kerala's Gulf expatriates—a community of 2.1 million in the petro-monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE (Rajan and Zachariah 2018). As the novel coronavirus made its way into the Gulf states, the latter had no option but to join the bandwagon of nations that followed the standard protocol of lockdown and social distancing. However, for the Gulf states, the situation turned out to be a double whammy as they had to deal with an underperforming economy and the crashing down of the value of its major export, i.e., oil (Arezki et al. 2020). Considering that a large chunk of their state revenue comes from the sale of petroleum and related products, the West Asian states are staring at a bleak future, at least in the short-term future.

During this period, over five lakh expatriate *Malayalis* (named after Malayalam, their mother tongue) had expressed a desire to return to their homeland (Nidheesh 2020; Gosh 2020). Considering Kerala's heavy dependence on its Gulf migrants, with foreign remittances comprising 35 per cent of the state GDP and over 90 per cent of it coming from the Gulf states alone (Premkumar 2020; Rajan and Zachariah 2018), a mass exodus brought on by dwindling economic opportunities would indubitably prove detrimental to its society. The scenario of almost 25% of Malayali expatriates expressing the desire to come back had led many to predict the end of Kerala's gulf dream (Paul 2020; Babu 2020; The Indian Express 2020).

However, a careful reading of Kerala's migration story reveals a different reality. While the current scenario undoubtedly puts excessive strain on Kerala's migrant-dependent society,

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we cannot dismiss this long-standing circular movement between Kerala and the Persian Gulf states as over. Utilising secondary data and observations from an ongoing ethnographic study of the Mappila Gulf-migrants in Kerala's northern migration belt, this paper argues that Kerala's migration story retains its unique robustness for several reasons.

### **Changes in Kerala's Migration Demographics**

Over the years, Kerala has recorded significant changes in the overall numbers, educational levels and job statuses of its Gulf migrants (Rajan and Zachariah 2018). While at one point, almost 50 per cent of migrants to the Gulf states from India were Malayalis—a vast majority of them being unskilled, manual labourers—the number has come down drastically over the years (Srivasta 2017; Prakash 1998, 3210). Currently, the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan send more migrants to West Asia than Kerala (Calabrese 2020). The series of migration surveys conducted since 1998 by the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) records a significant improvement in the educational levels of Malayali emigrants and the nature of their jobs. Currently, 37.8 per cent of the emigrants hold at least a higher secondary education certificate as their primary qualification, and almost 30 per cent are degree holders (Rajan and Zachariah 2018). While similar data from other leading migrant-sending states are rarely available, the overall trends suggest that Kerala sends more skilled migrants to the Gulf states than any other state in India. As per ECR (emigration check required) data from the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, the number of unskilled workers migrating to the Gulf countries from Kerala has plummeted by over 90 per cent – from 1,63,737 in 2008 to 14,496 in 2018 (Dutttagupta 2019; eMigrate GOI). Thus, a large section of Kerala migrants is now working in the skilled sector, with the unskilled sector being dominated by emigrants from northern India and neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh (The Asian Foundation 2013; Rajan and Saxena 2019).

Furthermore, Irudaya Rajan argues that although around 5,00,000 emigrants have registered with the NORKA-ROOTS portal to come back, it should be read as a panic-reaction in the wake of the pandemic (Ethiraj 2020). In fact, based on his yearly estimate of 'Gulf-return' migrants to Kerala, Rajan claims that only up to 3,00,000 would be returning (Rajan 2020). Of this, one-third would have come back even in normal circumstances (Rajeev 2020). Additionally, the total number would also consist of many who have visited the Gulf states on a visit visa (or free visa as it is known in Kerala) to find jobs. Since many Gulf states have announced amnesty to undocumented migrants, the returning migrants would also consist of visa defaulters and illegal migrants (Tabrez 2020; Hareesh 2020). Professor Rajan centres his predictions based on the migration trends he has been observing and documenting as part of the periodic Kerala Migration Surveys for more than two decades.

Moreover, it has been observed that unskilled/low-skilled migrants are more at risk of losing their jobs than skilled migrants and professionals (UN News 2020). The former are often

employed as contract labourers in the informal sector — in construction, transportation and hospitality, with virtually no job protection and social security (Dito 2015). Further, due to the squalid and unhygienic nature of their dormitories and the overcrowded worksites, unskilled migrants are viewed by the state as ‘particularly ripe for spreading the novel coronavirus’ (Sorkar 2020). In contrast, skilled migrants are assumed to be living in an environment where they can practice social distancing and are often allowed to work from home. With an increasing number of skilled migrants moving to the Gulf from Kerala, these developments suggest that the state’s job loss and return migration scenario is not as bad as it might have appeared.

### **The Cultural Basis of Kerala’s Gulf Migration**

It has often been the case that while arguing about Kerala’s migration story, we tend to discount the time-honoured nature that has made it part of the local culture (Chanda and Gupta 2018). Over the years, it has become customary to link the Gulf emigration to the oil boom of the 1970s, when, in fact, the oil-related migration of Malayalis started as early as the beginning of the twentieth century (De Bel-Air 2018). When the newfound oil wealth of the Arabian Peninsula brought about massive infrastructural investments and development programs, the Malayalis, along with the British and Americans, were part of the emigrant labour force right from the beginning (Ilias 2018).

If the initial movement of Malayalis was orchestrated by the British Raj and mostly consisted of skilled labourers from the southern part of Kerala, the oil-induced economic development in the Gulf states soon also required large numbers of unskilled workers (AlShehabi 2015). When the people from Kerala came to know, possibly through fellow Malayalis working in the skilled sector, of the growing demand for workers beyond the local labour market’s capacity to provide, they sensed a golden opportunity. The urge to cross the ocean was further strengthened by the extreme unemployment that had become characteristic of the Kerala economy (Prakash 1998). Hence, the period between the 1940s and 1960s witnessed a steady movement of unskilled labourers, mostly from the northern part of Kerala, who even resorted to illegal means to smuggle themselves—often using wooden passenger fleets called *uru*—to the oil-rich states (Karinkurayil 2020). Working possibly in every sector of the economy, the Malayalis gradually became an integral and inseparable element of the West Asian economy following the oil-booms of the 1970s and 2000s (Madampat 2016).

Notwithstanding the current ubiquitousness of Gulf migration in India, what keeps Kerala’s migration story apart is the temporal aspect and its social nature (Osella 2014). Early migrants from Kerala, who had risked their lives by traversing the treacherous waterways of the Indian Ocean, often through illegal means, were largely successful in capitalising on the social connections they had previously established with the local Arabs. These connections were a sociocultural by-product of the commercial connections that had existed for over a

millennium between the Arab states and the Malabar coast (Ilias 2018). As the labour migration continued, there emerged new networks of relations—manifested most vividly in the form of familial, caste-based and religious networks, and weak and strong friendship ties not only with fellow migrants but also with the local Arabs—that connected different aspects and elements of this transnational movement (Osella and Osella 2009). These links also connected the Malayali emigrants in the Gulf states with potential migrants in Kerala. The subsequent generations of migrants drew abundantly from this valuable social capital (Osella 2014).

Personal networks and connections (*wasta* in Arabic) also made many entrepreneurial opportunities available to the Malayalis (Osella 2007). Under the strict sponsorship system (known as *kafala*), connections became the *sine qua non* for business in the Gulf states (Jureidini and Hassan 2019; Ramady 2016). Currently, Kerala's wealthiest businessmen are mostly self-made entrepreneurs who started their journey from the Persian Gulf (Osella and Osella 2011). Thus, it is still not uncommon to see prospective emigrants actively invoking and productively utilising their social connections—often primordial ties such as family relations/kinship and friendship—while searching for jobs in the Gulf. Perhaps this also explains why instances of Malayalis succumbing to the crude tactics of unscrupulous agents—a practice that has otherwise become synonymous with Gulf migration—are rare, in contrast to migrants from other regions of South Asia (Deshingkar et al. 2019; Rajan and Zachariah 2018).

For emigrants from Kerala, social ties and personal networks bring down the direct costs associated with emigration and ease the discomfort and difficulties of settling down in a strange and faraway land. The solidarity among the Malayalis manifested itself in the formation of umpteen social organisations throughout the Gulf states—both formal and informal along different walks of life—that not only are emblematic of their social connectedness but also work as a robust and secure support mechanism for migrants, prospective migrants and return migrants.

### **The Enduring 'Gulf Dream' of Malayalis**

By adapting to the global market's vagaries and building a strong network base, the phenomenon of Kerala's emigration to the Gulf has showcased its robustness and resilience over the years. Unlike many other regions that now dominate the Gulf migration scene, Malayali emigrants have withstood many storms, including the periodic price fluctuations in the value of oil (such as the 1980s oil glut and the great plunge in oil prices post 2014), wars and domestic turmoil (such as the Iraq-Kuwait war, Arab Spring, Saudi-Yemen conflict and the Qatar blockade), global economic depression (such as the financial crisis of 2007–2008), diseases (such as MERS) and the economic nationalisation policies put in place in the region (such as *Nitaqat*, Emiratisation and *Tanfeedh*) (Rajan and Zachariah 2019; Gause 2013; Zachariah et al. 1997)

Furthermore, the data collected as part of an ongoing ethnographic study of the Mappila migrants by one of the authors of this paper suggest that the strong solidarity and social connections that became characteristic of the Kerala-Gulf migration can indubitably act as a safety net during contingencies. As Fajas, a Malayali accountant in Oman puts it:

*“The ‘muthalali’ (owner) of my company is from Kerala. In fact, most of the accountants here are from his region – Malabar. He knows many of us personally. So, even though the sales are down, and there is increasing pressure from the government to implement Tanfeedh rules, we did not lose our jobs.”*

Beyond the labour market logic of demand and supply, the social connections nurtured and maintained by the Malayali emigrant community make sure that their economic interests—in the form of jobs and businesses—are generally protected. This is further exemplified in the statement of Zunaid, who works for a Dubai-based company:

*“The Malayalis know the ins and outs of the Gulf. After having been here for many years, we know the pulse of this region. Even if we lose our jobs, it would not be that difficult to find decent work here. You will get help from someone. That’s how it works. Gulf Malayalis have a strong sense of solidarity.”*

The strong network base thus provides Malayalis with ample social capital to withstand market failures and political contingencies. It helps them prepare for the accidental, the unexpected and the unforeseen. While COVID-19 and the resultant stagnation of the Gulf economy may negatively affect many Malayalis’ mobility aspirations in the immediate future, a larger exodus of return migrants, we argue, is highly unlikely.

## **Conclusion**

Indeed, social embeddedness is what sustains Kerala’s gulf-migration. The Malayalis have successfully built and maintained a strong network base through multiple forms of interactions and reciprocal engagements between migrants, prospective migrants, and return migrants. Such connections have become institutionalised over time. Moreover, this transnational labour movement’s increasingly ‘skilled’ nature keeps Kerala’s strong migrant community intact. While the pandemic and the uncertainties it brings forth can undoubtedly challenge the status quo, a mass exodus of Malayali emigrants and the subsequent downfall of Kerala’s ‘Gulf dream’, as being predicted by many, remains a far cry.

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