

End of Kerala's Gulf dependency: it is time to rethink

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Abstract

Objectives: To understand the recent trend and magnitude of international migration from Kerala to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and major non-GCC destination countries.

Methodology: The study is entirely based on secondary sources of data. The data is obtained from various sources, which includes Census of India, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and Kerala Migration Survey (KMS), Centre for Development Studies, Kerala. The simple statistical tools like growth rates and percentages are used to analyse the trends and magnitude of migration and various migrant destinations from Kerala. The migration destination countries divided into GCC and major Non-GCC countries.

Findings: The study found that there is a declining trend in emigration from Kerala over the last two decades. The decline in crude oil price and strict localization policies in the Gulf region are found to be the major external (destination) factors. The higher wage rate and decline in the population of migration-prone age-group in Kerala are found to be the internal (origin) factors.

Improvements/Applications: The decline in emigration will directly affect the households depend on the emigrants and the economic stability of the state as well. So policymakers should consider this issue with utmost importance and take appropriate actions to mitigate the adverse effects caused by the emigration decline from the state.

Keywords: Emigration, Kerala, GCC, Remittances, Return emigration.

1. Introduction

Migration is natural and a key factor in the global economy and development [1], and it is the movement of people from one place to another with the hope of gaining advance opportunities, new high standard of living and jobs. In today's globalised world, migration has an impact on the lives of most people, through family ties, economic transfer and cultural connections and it is considered the powerful driver of sustainable development [2]. Particularly, the flow of remittances can result in a chain of development from individuals, through to households, communities and ultimately, countries [3]. It can contribute significantly to development in both countries of origin and country of destination. The migrant workers are helping to address labor market shortfalls and contribute to the human capital in the host countries, [4] and reduce unemployment pressure in origin country [5]. At present, Indian diaspora is estimated to be the largest in the world, as of 2015, around 15.6 million people born in India were living in other countries [6]. As per the estimate of Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India (2016) the Overseas Indians (both Non-Resident Indians and Person of Indian Origin) account over 30 million living in more than 200 countries across the planet [7]. Out of which, the NRIs and PIOs accounted for 13 million and 17.8 million respectively.

The studies on international labour migration from India have focused largely on the southern state of Kerala. The state is a striking instance of the region that benefited enormously from international labor migration and related remittance inflows in India. Since 1998, the number of emigrants from Kerala is estimated by the studies of Centre for Development Studies, Kerala, and named as the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS). Over the past four decades, Kerala experienced the large scale of international migration [8], especially sending labourers to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

Around 50 lakh people in Kerala are dependent on emigrants, and 90% of Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) are working in the Gulf region [9]. According to the study by Reserve Bank of India (2018), the state Kerala receives the highest share (20%) in the total remittances inflow to India, followed by Maharashtra (16.7%), Karnataka (15%) and Tamil Nadu (8%) [10] this might be owing to the fact that Kerala is registering the highest number in emigration, especially the temporary movement of people to Gulf countries for low-skilled and semi-skilled work. For the economy and household level, migration and remittances have both positive and negative effects. The impact of remittances in the case of the Kerala economy was a peculiar topic studied by several researchers and institutions. For India, the inflow of remittances is not as large as a proportion of GDP, but its impact varies at the regional level [11]. The share of remittances to the economy, as compared to India (share of remittances is about 3 to 4% of GDP), Kerala's contribution is very high (30% of NSDP) [8, 12]. The Kerala Perspective Plan, 2030 acknowledges the importance of emigration and remittances in Kerala and notes that 'the inflows of remittances have been larger than even the NSDP contribution of the agriculture and industry sectors and some of the service sub-sectors' [13]. The benefits gained owing to the inflow of remittances, and its spillover effects are visible in every nook and corner of the state than any other central or state government sponsored welfare policies. The opinion of 'migration has contributed more to poverty alleviation in Kerala than any other factor, including agrarian reforms, trade union activities and social welfare legislation' [14]. However, recent studies on Kerala Migration Surveys (KMS) reveal the decline in the rate of emigration from Kerala to Gulf countries. The oil prices down since the last few years and recent localization policies in Gulf countries have posed an uncertain future for the migrant workers, and the households depend upon them.

In this context, the present study based on secondary sources of data attempted to examine the recent migration scenario in Kerala. The secondary sources of data are obtained from Census of India, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and Kerala Migration Survey, Centre for Development Studies, Kerala.

The following are the main objectives of the study;

1. To understand the trend and magnitude of international migration from Kerala to GCC and major non-GCC destination countries.
2. To examine the factors that contributes to the recent decline in emigration from Kerala to the Gulf region.

2. International migration from India

Independent India has witnessed mainly two distinct types of international labor migration. Firstly, during the early 1950s people with technical skills and professional expertise migrate to countries like the USA, Canada, UK and Australia as permanent migrants.

Secondly, during the oil boom in the 1970s and the 1980s, unskilled and semi-skilled workers migrate mainly to oil-exporting countries of the Middle East on temporary contracts [15]. Apart from the economic reforms introduced by the government of India during the 1990s, the revolution of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) generated the spread of Indian migrants all over the world. The economic profile of the migrant workers from India varies significantly across regions. The larger number of blue-collar and contract workers in the Gulf and dominance of white collar and technically skilled workforce in the United States and Europe. The origin of international migrants from India, [16] found that Kerala (9%) ranks first among the households reported international migration followed by Punjab (4.5%), Tamil Nadu (1.6%) and Andhra Pradesh (1%).

From Table 1, it can be seen that GCC countries dominate migration from India. In 2016, the six GCC countries together accounted for 62.8% of total Non-Resident Indians. Within the GCC countries, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) are the most popular destinations for Indians. They together contributed more than 44% of the total Indian migrants. In which, Saudi Arabia accounts 23.1% followed by UAE (21.5%). Outside of the Gulf region, USA (9.8%) occupies the top destination for NRIs followed by Singapore (2.7%) and United Kingdom (2.5%).

Table 1. Estimated stock of Indian emigrants in 2016 (in Lakhs)

Country	NRI Population	Percent
Bahrain	3.1	2.4
Kuwait	9.2	7.1
Oman	8.0	6.1
Qatar	6.0	4.6
KSA	30.0	23.1
UAE	28.0	21.5
Total GCC	81.6	62.8
USA	12.8	9.8
UK	3.3	2.5
Australia	2.4	1.9
Canada	1.8	1.4
Singapore	3.5	2.7
Others	21.9	16.9
Total	130	100.0

Source: Ministry of External Affairs

3. International migration from Kerala

Kerala held the predominant position among the migrant-sending states in India. Among the Indian emigrant workers in the West Asian countries, particularly in the six GCC nations, the majority are from the state of Kerala. In [8] affirm that nine out of every ten emigrants from Kerala prefer the countries of the Arabian Gulf. The major type of migration of workers from Kerala to the Middle-East is the contract type, and they are expected to return home at the end of the contract period.

Table 2. Magnitude and patterns of migration from Kerala, 1998-2016 (in lakhs)

Year	Emigrants	Growth (percent)	GCC Countries	Growth (percent)	Other Countries	Growth (percent)
1998	13.6	-	12.8	-	0.8	-
	(100)		(93.9)		(6.1)	
2003	18.4	35.0	16.3	27.9	2.0	150.0
	(100)		(89.0)		(11)	
2008	21.9	19.3	19.4	18.8	2.5	25.0
	(100)		(88.5)		(11.5)	
2011	22.8	4.0	20.3	4.6	2.5	0.0
	(100)		(89.1)		(10.9)	
2014	24.0	5.2	20.5	0.9	3.3	32.0
	(100)		(85.4)		(14.6)	
2016	22.5	-6.4	20.0	-2.4	2.5	-24.2
	(100)		(89.1)		(10.9)	

Source: Author's calculations based on Kerala Migration Survey (various reports published by the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala)

The trends in the migration from Kerala are shown in Table 2. It indicates that over the years, migration from Kerala to foreign countries especially, Gulf countries have increased tremendously. The first Kerala Migration Survey in 1998 estimated about 13.6 lakh emigrants in Kerala. The number increased to 18.3 lakh in 2003, 21.9 lakh in 2008, 22.8 lakh in 2011 and 24 lakhs in 2014 over the consecutive KMS surveys. However, in 2016, for the first time, the number in the emigration of Keralites shows a sign of decline.

The survey shows that about 22.4 lakh Kerala migrants live in different countries of the world, a massive reduction of nearly 1.5 lakh emigrants within two years. The growth rate of emigrants from Kerala was showing a declining trend from the beginning, and it was negative during the 2014-2016 periods. It was the same for both the destination countries - the negative growth of emigrants to GCC and non-GCC countries during the 2014-2016 periods.

The recent negative trend of emigration is mainly due to the current global economic slowdown. Particularly due to the weak oil prices in the Gulf region, as a result, these economies forced to either stop or reduce many ongoing development projects. So these countries do not need workers from other countries. If the current scenario is sustained one, then the number of job aspirants to outside Kerala would likely to decrease gradually over the coming years. Same like other KMS surveys, there is no wide variation in terms of the destination of Kerala emigrants, around 90% are in the Gulf countries. In the case of emigrants from Kerala to non-GCC countries, it has increased from 0.8 lakhs in 1998 to 3.3 lakhs in 2014 followed by the decline of 2.5 lakhs in 2016. The percentage share of Keralites to the non-GCC countries was highest in 2014, accounted for 14.6%, and it declined to 10.9% in 2016.

4. The destination country of emigrants from Kerala

The destinations of emigrants from Kerala are spread across the world. In terms of their destinations, the Gulf nations have continued to remain the overwhelming favorite for Keralites. A country-wise destination analysis of emigrants from Kerala shows that 9.1 lakhs emigrants are in the UAE and 5.4 lakhs are in Saudi Arabia during 2016. The other destination countries in GCC are Kuwait (1.1 lakh), Bahrain (0.8 lakh), Oman (1.7 lakh), and Qatar (1.9 lakh), collectively contributes 25% of emigrants. The UAE is the favourite destination of Keralites among GCC countries, but during 2008 to 2011 period shows a negative growth rate (-3.8%) of emigrants. The decline might be due to the 2008 global recession which affected the Emirates than any other GCC region. The decline in the last survey period (2014-2016), the country of Bahrain has experienced the highest negative growth rate (-44.7%) followed by Kuwait (-39.9%) (Table 3). Overall, despite the decline in the number of emigrants, the GCC region remains the favourite destination of Keralites.

Table 3. Number of Emigrants from Kerala to GCC countries, 1998-2016 (In lakhs)

Countries	Number/growth	1998	2003	2008	2011	2014	2016
UAE	Number	4.2	6.7	9.2	8.8	9.0	9.1
	Growth (percent)	-	58.8	37.0	-3.8	1.8	0.7
KSA	Number	5.1	4.9	5.0	5.8	5.2	5.4
	Growth (percent)	-	-4.1	2.7	14.3	-9.2	2.9
Oman	Number	1.4	1.5	1.7	2.0	1.9	1.7
	Growth (percent)	-	9.3	9.8	16.1	-3.1	-8.5
Kuwait	Number	0.7	1.1	1.3	1.29	1.8	1.1
	Growth (percent)	-	67.7	13.2	-0.8	43.0	-39.9
Bahrain	Number	0.8	1.1	1.0	1.02	1.5	0.8
	Growth (percent)	-	45.3	-7.3	1.0	47.1	-44.7
Qatar	Number	0.6	1.0	1.2	1.5	1.1	1.9
	Growth (percent)	-	57.1	23.2	21.3	-28.4	82.1
Total	Number	12.8	16.4	19.4	20.3	20.5	20.0
	Growth (percent)	-	27.8	18.7	4.6	0.9	-2.3

Source: Same as in table 2

The percentage share of the country-wise destination of total emigrants from Kerala to GCC countries for the period 1998 to 2016. The UAE retained the first position for the most preferable destination of emigrants in the GCC countries. In 2016, UAE attracted 45.23% of the Kerala emigrants, improved its relative position, which accommodates 33.01% of Keralites in 1998. However, in Saudi Arabia, its relative share declined from 39.8% in 1998 to 27.0% in 2016. This could be due to the implementation of continuous and strict regulatory immigration policies (like Nitaqat, family tax system etc.) towards themigrants than any other GCC countries, reduced Saudi Arabia as the favourite destination. Among the countries outside the Gulf region, the principal destination is the USA followed by the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Except for Canada and USA, all other countries show a negative growth rate of emigrants from Kerala during the last survey period of 2014- 2016. The percentage share of emigrants from Kerala to the United Kingdom has increased up to 2011, followed by a gradual decline in 2014 and then 2016. The emigrant number to the USA was 0.98 lakh in 2003, and it has declined to 0.68 lakh in 2011 followed by a rise in number to 0.94 lakh in 2016 (Table 4).

As compared to the GCC countries, the shares of emigrants to Western countries from Kerala are less because the migration network in those countries is not strong like Gulf countries. The networks inform new migrants about jobs at a destination. Those countries mostly welcome well-educated and highly skilled workers. The major share of migrants to the Gulf inhabits the category of semi-skilled and skilled workers in manual and construction related works. On the other, migration to non-Gulf countries has some distinct features like largely they encompassed of highly skilled labour and somewhat more disconnected from their Kerala roots.

Table 4. Major destinations of emigrants from Kerala to Non-GCC countries (In Lakh)

Countries	Number/growth	1998	2003	2008	2011	2014	2016
USA	Number	0.30	0.98	1.02	0.68	0.70	0.94
	Growth (percent)	-	229.1	4.2	-33.5	2.2	35.6
Canada	Number	0.00	0.05	0.14	0.09	0.11	0.27
	Growth (percent)	-	-	186.7	-30.7	18.1	140.6
United Kingdom	Number	0.00	0.23	0.39	0.45	0.38	0.36
	Growth (percent)	-	-	72.7	14.8	-14.2	-6.2
Australia/ New Zealand	Number	0.00	0.06	0.21	0.25	0.38	0.16
	Growth (percent)	-	-	247.8	14.9	56.1	-59.0
Others	Number	0.54	0.72	0.76	1.03	1.93	0.72
	Growth (percent)	-	34.3	4.5	35.8	88.3	-62.8
Total	Number	0.84	2.04	2.52	2.49	3.51	2.45
	Growth (percent)	-	143.7	23.5	-1.0	40.6	-30.2

Source: Same as in table 2

The percentage share of the country wise destination of Keralites in the major non-GCC countries. A sharp decline in the percentage share of emigrants to the USA has shown up to 2014. During 2003, 48.2% of people among the total emigrants to non-GCC countries prefer the USA as their favorite destination. However, in 2014, it has declined to 19.8%, and it again revived to 38.5% in 2016. During the last KMS survey period, Canada occupied the highest growth of emigrants from Kerala to non-GCC countries, accounted around 141% increase from 0.11 lakh in 2014 to 0.27 in 2016 (an average of 8 thousand per year). Unlike other developed countries, Canada welcomes more immigrants and has many job opportunities for skilled and qualified professionals.

5. Return emigration

Return emigration is considered as the necessary outcome and final stage of the migration process, especially in the case of overseas contract workers. This is particularly true for the Keralites working in the Gulf countries; the process of return emigration begins with emigration.

The study by [17] observed that ninety percent of Kerala emigrants move to Gulf countries on a contract basis for few years, mostly without their families and return to Kerala either the period of contract is over, or the immediate financial needs have been satisfied. Oftentimes, the problems of rehabilitation and re-absorption of the return migrants are considered serious problems for the state economy and the families of the person's concerned.

Until 2008, there was an increasing trend in the arrival of return emigrants in Kerala. While the period of 2008-2011 and 2014-2016, the number of return emigrants decreased, shows a negative trend, which indicates the chance of re-emigration (might be most of the return emigrants could have re-emigrated during this period). The observe that many return emigrants in Kerala try to re-emigrate immediately after their return, but if they fail to re-emigration after staying of few years in Kerala, their chances of re-emigration are relatively small. Thus, re-emigration or trying luck through emigration again is very real among the return emigrants in Kerala. The number of Kerala emigrants who returned to Kerala in 2016 was 10.4 lakh, declined from 12.48 lakh in 2014. The return emigrants number was 11.5 lakh in 2011, 11.6 lakh in 2008 (slightly higher than 2011), 8.9 lakh in 2003 and 7.4 in 1998.

6. Declining factors of emigration

Many factors contribute to the recent decline in emigration from Kerala to the Gulf region. The factors can be classified as on the basis of origin (Kerala) and destination areas (mainly GCC countries).

1. Factors at the origin (Kerala)

1.1. The decline in a population of migration-prone age-group (20-34 age groups)

It is evident from the Kerala Migration Surveys that most of the emigrants were between 20 and 34 years of age at the time of emigration (generally this age group of young population is called migration prone age group). For example, the KMS 2008 shows that around 76% of emigrants was in the young and working age group (20-34) at the time of emigration. The average age of emigrants at the time of emigration is 25 years, and that for return emigrants is 28 years, shows just three years' difference [17]. In Kerala, the number of persons in the age group of 20-34 since 2001, (the majority of emigrants lie in this age group in Kerala). The number of persons in this age group has decreased by 11% during 2001-2011. Almost similar decrease happened among the 0-19 age group (Table 5). It shows a decreasing trend in the overall population of 0-34 age group. This would affect states capability to supply young workers (potential migrants) to the Gulf countries over the coming years.

Table 5. Age-wise Population in Kerala, 2001 and 2011

Age Group	Percent of Population		Growth
	2001	2011	
0-19	35.4	31.3	-11.8
20-34	26.0	23.1	-11.1
35-60	28.0	33.0	17.8
60+	10.5	12.6	19.8

Source: Census 2001 and 2011 (Government of India)
<http://www.censusindia.gov.in/DigitalLibrary/Tables.aspx>

1.2. Dwindling of wage level difference

The wage differential is a critical factor in determining international migration. The monetary benefits achieved by the Keralites have decreased in a large extent during the recent period. A state-wide return migration survey in Kerala (2011) shows around 72% of the informants pointed out that the high wage rate has discouraged the emigration of unskilled categories of persons to the Gulf countries [18].

Kerala pays the highest wage rate in India. The average wage among unskilled workers in Kerala has increased tremendously (A rise from ₹150 to over ₹500 during initial decade of this century), but the corresponding wage in the Gulf does not increase as like in Kerala [8]. Particularly after the global financial crisis in 2008, the wage rate in the Gulf region declined sharply and failed to reverse as it was in the pre-crisis period. A study on employment, wage and working conditions of Indian emigrants in UAE shows that monthly wage for low-skilled labour was ranging between 600 to 1200 Dirham (An average of ₹11000 per month) [19]. One can earn it in Kerala for a 22 day in a month with a daily wage of ₹500. Moreover, recent data on average daily wages of agricultural and non-agricultural occupations in rural India shows Kerala pays the highest wage rate of around ₹600 to ₹800 per day [20]. So, the workers can eliminate the monetary differences by the stay and work in Kerala vis-a-vis Gulf countries. The high wage rate prevailing in Kerala would discourage more migration, especially the low-skilled and semi-skilled categories of workers to the Gulf region.

2. Factors at the destination (Gulf Region)

2.1. Restrictive immigration policies

The GCC region is facing significant problems related to rising rates of unemployment among the indigenous youth amidst slowing economic growth due to the oil price slump during the last few years. Obviously, there arise tough question for the Gulf governments about the continued inflow of foreign labour and the replacement of non-locals with locals. To solve this problem, these oil-rich Gulf countries are now immensely trying to reduce the foreign population by the introduction of more restrictive immigration policies. For example, the 'Nitaqat' localization programme implemented by Saudi Arabia is one of the many policies followed by the Gulf countries to overcome this situation. The motive behind applying the Nitaqat system is to make the appointment of Saudi citizens in the different field of jobs in the private sector and reduce unemployment among the youth in the country [21, 22]. The strict implementation of Nitaqat in Saudi Arabia will result in serious consequences in Kerala, especially for the potential emigrant dreams.

3. The decline in oil prices

Oil is vital to the six GCC states (normally account for more than 80% of GCC government revenues) which have used the windfall of the past few years to spend generously [23], and these economies remain highly dependent on oil price fluctuations. The persistently low oil prices significantly affect oil revenues for the GCC countries, which creates budget deficit and long term construction projects in the region [24]. In [8] observed that unlike the global crisis of 2008-09 which was relatively a short term problem, the latest decline in oil prices could have substantial long term impact on Kerala migration dreams. If the oil prices continue to remain low for the next few years, it is widely expected that some migrants will be unemployed and a lot of return migration. It will severely affect the economies that depend on the remittances from this region. No doubt, state of Kerala will be in the forefront. In this context, it is a clear signal for Keralites that the things are going to change in the Gulf region which would not be affordable for the state. This is the time to diversify the choice of destination for the potential migrants from Kerala; more migrant controlled Gulf countries to migrant friendly and welcome countries like Canada. However, these countries encourage the immigration of well-educated and highly skilled persons. So, the government should take appropriate actions to give proper skills and training, upgrade the existing skills amongst the potential migrants to match the labour demand in the destination countries.

7. Conclusion

The international migration and the inflow of remittances have a significant contribution to the economic development of Kerala. While, it is evident from the recent KMS survey that, for the first time, since the 1970s, the number of Kerala emigrants decreased. This drop in the number of emigrants mainly influenced by both internal (region of origin) and external (region of destination) factors.

The higher wage rate (especially for the low skilled workers) and decline in population (especially the migration-prone age-group) in Kerala are found to be the internal factors. The recent decline in crude oil prices and strict localization policies in the Gulf region are found to be the major external factors. The drop in the emigrant number will directly affect the inflow of remittances (Gulf money) too. The survey warns that the decline in emigrant number and amount of remittances may continue in the coming years.

This would have posed a challenge to the economic stability of the state as well as the households depend upon the emigrants. Once they all returned to Kerala, this will socio-economically affect the state. So, the policymakers should consider this issue with utmost importance, whereby it is possible to mitigate the negative impacts caused by the decline in emigration and remittances flow to the state.

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