

Impact of international migration during COVID-19

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Introduction

Migration from Kerala has a historical perspective, irrespective of international or internal. However, after the 1970s, international migration has had significant importance in the Kerala economy. The labour characteristics have changed over the years with the influx of remittances to the state. Today, remittances play a unique role in many developments, primarily, philanthropic activities in Kerala. But, there are migrants who need support to attain better opportunities for their lives. In this state of affairs, Kerala should know the realities of the situations of migrants who need a support system along with the big investors and businessmen. But in reality, there is no adequate data on the current situation of the migrants amid COVID-19 pandemic and economic recessions.

Kerala migration surveys

According to the latest Kerala Migration Survey in 2018, there were 2.1 million international migrants from Kerala, of which 90 percent reside in Gulf countries (Rajan and Zachariah, 2020). The survey was the 8th round since its inception in 1998, the largest and longest-running survey of its kind in South Asia. This model of the Kerala Migration Survey was replicated in states such as Goa (2008), Punjab (2011), Gujarat (2012), and Tamil Nadu (2015) (Rajan, Zachariah and Ashwin, 2021) and is now is being considered in Telangana and Jharkhand. The survey will provide reliable estimates of international migrants, out-migrants and remittances by districts with other socio-economic variables.

Need for KMS survey in the current context

The economic review of 2021 is not updated with the current events that occurred among the international migrants in Kerala. The aftermath of two floods in Kerala since KMS 2018 and multiple waves of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the migrants and their families. Hence, another round of KMS survey is essential to understand the impact.

Before floods and the COVID -19 pandemic, according to KMS (2018), it was reported there were 2.1 million International migrants. In other words, one migrant supports four people back at home. Through remittances, one-third of the population of Kerala directly benefits from their lives and livelihood, which is close to 10 million. Most of the remittances are directly utilized to pay tuition, meeting daily living expenses, repay of loans, and used as savings. Another one-third of the population of Kerala are indirectly benefitted from the developmental activities in the state using the remittances. For example, a number of airports in Kerala shows the inevitability of the travel benefits not only for the migrants but also for the non-migrants. With a rough estimate based on the previous experience in estimating the remittances using KMS data, about 100000 crores flows to Kerala as remittances. However, more research is needed to understand how these remittances are distributed. We should invest money in understanding migration and the global compact.

A periodic review of the situation of migrants amid the pandemic and economic recession is necessary to undertake appropriate policy changes and to take steps needed for their welfare. The databank of the migrants should alert the government to take any action wherever it is required. For example, before the Russia-Ukraine war, as per the records of the Government of India, only 7000 Indians were in Ukraine. In reality, the Government of India brought 25000 Indians from Ukraine during the war. Also, some of the Indians are still living there, so the migration data is still underestimated. Globally, India still ranks as number one in international migration and remittances. In 2021, 87 billion dollars was remitted to India as remittances, of which one billion dollars can be used to produce reliable quality data.

Return emigrant survey 2021 - A proof of the situation

As per the budget statement by the Finance Minister of Kerala, 14 lakh return emigrants returned through the Vande Bharat mission during the COVID-19 pandemic. As of mid-2022, we still do not have estimates of how many have re-migrated to their current occupation

There is no reliable report on the holistic picture of migration in 2021. However, the study, "Return Emigrant Survey 2021" funded by the Department of NORKA, Government of Kerala, which was conducted from January to May 2021 with a sample of 1985 return emigrants from 1871 households, provide some insights. The survey was conducted by the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) and the International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD) using Computer Assisted Telephonic Interviewing (CATI) method. The sample was randomly drawn from a partial list of expatriates who returned to Kerala from any international destination during April 2020 to November 2020. The study provides a thought into the future of global labour migration governance.

Table 1: Return Emigrants by type and Reason for Return, 2021					
Primary reason for return	Number				
	NREM	DREM	RREM	Others	Total
To Retire	28	0	0	0	28
Missed Family	29	0	0	0	29
Care for Elderly	11	0	0	0	11
Accomplished Goals	13	0	0	0	13
Prefer to Work in Kerala	13	0	0	0	13
Lost Job/Laid Off	0	955	0	0	955
Illness/Accident	0	70	0	0	70
Expiry of Contract	0	89	0	0	89
Scared Due to COVID -19	0	461	0	0	461
Compulsory Expatriation	0	36	0	0	36
Low Wages	0	58	0	0	58
Poor Working Conditions	0	27	0	0	27
Nationalization policy	0	7	0	0	7
Visiting Visa Expired	0	20	0	0	20
Cancellation of Employment Visa	0	28	0	0	28
To re-migrate to another Destination or Same Destination for Different Job	0	0	18	0	18
Others (Specify)	0	0	0	122	122
Total	94	1751	18	122	1,985

Source: S. Irudaya Rajan and Balasubramanyan Pattath 2021.

The survey observed and categorized the return emigrants into three namely, Normal Return Emigrants (NREM), Distress Return Immigrants (DREM) and Return to re-migrate Emigrants (REM) (Table 1). NREM are those who could have returned as pre-planned, whereas, DREM are those who have directly affected the pandemic in various ways and hence forced to back home, and the third, RREM are those who have a plan to re-emigrate to the same country or some other at global. Most of the REM in the sample was DREM, in

which, about 50 percent were lost their job during the COVID-19 pandemic, while 25 percent was returned home due to the fear of the virus spreading and adverse health and social protection conditions of migrant workers during the pandemic. 353 respondents refused to give consent to the survey, among these a number of persons had been re-emigrated as there was travel relaxation at the time of the survey.

While considering the country of destination of the REM, the majority returned from Saudi Arabia followed by United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. On the other hand, the place of origin of most of the REM was in Malappuram and Kozhikode districts and more than half of them were below 39 years of age. When the age group of three categories were considered, NREM was the oldest, DREM was younger and RREM was the youngest. Most of them had valid visas and worked in the private sector. Quite a few of the DREM had an occupation in sectors such as construction, domestic, industrial, and hospitality. More than one-fourth of the REM has spent more than 20 years in their respective destination countries followed by more than one-fifth of the REM who have spent less than 4 years in these destinations. Among the DREM who lost their jobs, more than half falls in 1-4 years duration of stay category.

Expenses during COVID-19

More than half the expenses of quarantine were handled by the REM and almost 38 percent of the expenses for quarantine were provided by the Government of Kerala.

Table 2: Percent of Return Emigrants with Status of Flight Ticket Fare and types, 2021					
Flight ticket fare	Vande Bharat Flights	Chartered Flight	Others	Don't Know	Total
<10000	70.8	20.8	4.2	4.2	100.0
10000-20000	74.4	17.4	5.9	2.3	100.0
20000-30000	60.2	35.5	2.7	1.6	100.0
30000-40000	41.5	57.3	1.2	0.0	100.0
40000-50000	19.5	76.8	2.4	1.2	100.0
>50000	46.0	36.7	7.2	10.1	100.0
Total	53.7	36.1	5.0	5.2	100.0

Source: Same as Table 1

This could have partly been due to the preference among some individuals for their own accommodations or the availability of suitable quarantine facilities for the REM. Several efforts were made by the government to provide not just quarantine facilities but also various provisions in terms of food to the REM during their stay (Rajan and Pattath, 2021). More than half the REM utilized the Vande Bharat flights and the cost incurred for the flights was between Rs. 10000-20000.

Wage theft

Wage theft refers to when an employer pays less than that what is legally owed to the employee, and is prevalent in almost every industry in the world. It also includes the payment of salaries below the minimum wage, non-payment of overtime allowances, non-payment of contractually owed benefits, non-negotiated reduction of salaries as well as the retention of dues upon one's contract termination (MFA 2021).

Table 3: Wage theft in various situations of work during the pandemic, 2021	
Common situations of wage theft	Percentage of the victims of wage theft
Asked to resign	40.9
Advised to travel back without salary	10.7
No extension of work visa	10.9
Work without wages	8.8
Salary reduction	18.2
Threatened to terminate	3.1
Others	7.4
Total	100

Source: Same as Table 1

In the survey, among 47 percent who lost their jobs, 39 percent have reported non-payment of wages, reduction, or dues in wages. Among workers who experienced wage theft, 40.9 percent were asked to resign by their employers, 8.8 percent worked without wages and later lost their jobs and 18.2 percent had a reduction in their wages. The duration of stay in the destination countries and the non-payment of wages had a positive relation, as 61.1 percent of workers did not receive their wages and benefits who had more than five years work experience.

Future plans of REM

In the survey, about 59 percent wanted to re-emigrate to either get a new job or to the same job as before. About 30 percent have a plan to stay in Kerala by seeking a new job while 13

percent wished to start a business. About 50 percent of the DREM are unsatisfied with their migration experience and eager to re-emigrate for employment. About 44 percent of the DREM wished to work in Kerala or start a new business in Kerala.

Conclusion

Most of the return emigrants are distressed REM (DREM) who returned during the COVID-19 pandemic with concurrent problems in their life and employment. More than half of the REM wished to re-emigrate in search of a job for their betterment of life. Many of them had already migrated during the time of the survey. Only 44 percent of the REM wished to reintegrate into the Kerala society as do a job or start a business in Kerala.

Though a sample of 1985, the survey sheds a little light on the migration experience of the people of Kerala who had returned during the pandemic. It is highly recommended that there should be a permanent method to register the information of all emigrants either using the census method or conduct new migration surveys at least once in five years. Around 2000 Keralites died in the Gulf countries during the pandemic. What compensative measures had been taken for the family members of these deceased persons in Kerala is unknown. Also, it is very much important, how the grievances redressal mechanisms could address their concerns. Around three fourth of the respondents in the survey have not heard about MADAD, the grievance redressal platform by the government of India.

Reference

Reported by migrant workers during *Justice for wage theft campaign by Migrant Forum in Asia*. Accessed from http://mfasia.org/migrant_forumasia/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/MFA_Crying-Out-for-Justice_04.12.pdf.

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