

Return of Keralite Emigrant Workers from GCC Countries due to COVID-19 Crisis: Activity Status of Returnees and Impact on Labour Market¹

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ABSTRACT

Due to COVID-19 and pandemic related disruption nearly 14.71 lakh Keralites emigrants returned from the GCC countries viz. United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain. Of this, a sizeable share of returnees are not able to return to the country of return so far. The study based on a sample of 404 Keralite return emigrant workers belonging to five districts in Kerala examines activity status of return emigrant prior and after return and impact of it on return emigrant households and local labour market. The study found that majority of the sample returnees returned on leave were not able to go back and stranded in Kerala due to a number of reasons. The households which used to receive sizeable amount as remittances from the emigrant workers on regular basis lost their source of income and pushed to acute economic distress. The local labour market experienced excess supply of labour force, increase in unemployment rate and created gloomy prospects for remigration of return emigrant workers and fresh migrants.

Introduction

India has the largest number of emigrants in the World and the major share (53.5 per cent) lived in Gulf Co-operation Council countries (GCC) viz. United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain in 2020¹. Due to the spread of COVID-19 pandemic and related disruption, 40.24 lakh Indian emigrants were returned as per Vande Bharath Mission up to 30th April 2021 from GCC countries². Available evidence suggest that the total stock of Keralite emigrants in the GCC countries will be in range of 25 to 30 percent

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of total stock of Indian emigrants in midyear 2020 (23.9 lakh and 28.7 lakh)³. According to Department of Non-Resident Keralites Affairs (NORKA), of the 14.71 lakh Keralite emigrants returned due to COVID-19 and related disruption, 96 per cent returned from GCC countries to Kerala⁴. A major share of returnees have already returned to GCC countries and the rest remain in Kerala at the time of our survey.

The return has created serious issues. A large number of Keralite emigrants, who returned from GCC countries prior to the spread of the COVID-19 and after on leave, could not return to their country of return. The returnees are faced with situation of either finding a job in the local labour market (mostly as casual labourer or self-employed) or remigrate to a foreign country incurring substantial cost. The loss of remittances received on a regular basis due to return, lack of other sources of income, or income earning assets have pushed many returnee households to economic distress. In this context the study examines the activity status of the return emigrants prior to return and after return and impact of return on migrant households and labour market. Data for the study is collected through a sample survey of 404 return emigrants who are stranded in Kerala due to COVID-19 disruption belonged to five districts in Kerala⁵.

Labour migration to Gulf countries belonged to the category of contract migration and we use this theoretical framework for the analysis. Contract migrant workers are persons working in a country other than their own under contractual arrangements that set limits on the period of employment and on the specific job held by the migrant⁶. This is temporary migration and return is an essential part of the migration. Usually during the stay in foreign country, the migrant workers leave their families behind in their home country and for supporting their family, the emigrants used to send remittance on a regular basis which is spent by the households. The economic impact of this spending will be substantial on migrant households, local labour market and local economy of migrant origin countries.

Activity status prior to return and causes of return

Of the 404 sample return emigrant workers, except two all of them returned from GCC countries. Among the two persons, one returned from Afghanistan and another from China. Of the total returnees, 50 percent returned from Saudi Arabia, 19 percent from UAE, 11 percent from Qatar, 7 percent each from Oman and Bahrain and 6 percent from Kuwait. Of the returnees, nearly 79 percent of the returnees are in the age group below 50, belong to working age group and require jobs. An educational status of the return emigrants showed

that 80 percent have an educational qualification of Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) and above.

The period of the return of the sample return emigrant workers is classified into four. In the first period, the pre-pandemic period between December 2019 and February 2020, when no restrictions were there for mobility or international travel, 17 percent returned. Second period is the peak period of COVID-19 mobility and international travel restrictions i.e. between March 2020 and July 2020 and 31.4 percent returned. During the third period between August 2020 and December 2020, when there were some relaxations in mobility or international travel were implemented, 29.2 percent returned. Another 22.3 percent returned during the last period between January 2021 and July 2021.

Of the total returnees, 30 percent worked as sales workers, 13 percent as drivers of motor vehicles and 8.2 percent cleaners and helpers in houses, hotels, and offices. The other major category of workers are waiters and bartenders; mining, manufacturing and construction supervisors; painters and builders; and cooks. Majority of sample return emigrants (59 percent) reported that they received a wage ranging between Rs 30,000 and Rs 50,000 prior to return. The emigrants who got the highest range of wage (above Rs 50,000) account only 11 percent of the total emigrants.

Remittances sent prior to return

It is reported that 30 percent sent an average monthly amount below Rs 12,000 to their families and another 48 percent told us that they used to send an amount ranging between Rs 12,000 and Rs 20,000 per month (Table 1). Thus monthly remittance sent by 78 percent of the sample emigrants can be put in the category of small or medium range and the amount is mainly spent for consumption and other household expenditure.

Table 1
Average monthly remittance sent by sample return emigrant workers prior to return
(Percent)

No	Remittance sent per person (Rs)	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Oman	Kuwait	Qatar	Bahrain	Others*	Total
1	Below ₹ 5,000	1.0	-	-	-	4.4	-	-	1.0
2	₹5,001 to 8,000	7.5	14.5	13.8	8.3	13.3	7.4	-	9.9
3	₹8,001 to 12,000	19.0	19.7	20.7	12.5	15.6	29.6	-	19.1
4	₹12,001 to 20,000	56.0	35.5	48.3	37.5	44.4	44.4	-	48.1
5	Above ₹20,000	16.5	30.3	17.2	41.7	22.2	18.5	100.0	21.8
Total		100.0							
Number of sample return emigrants		200	76	29	24	45	27	2	403**

* Afghanistan & China

**one person forced to return within months and not send any remittances

On an average a household at the lowest range of remittance received an amount of Rs. 1.47 lakh and upper range Rs 2.32 lakh per year. This means that the 403 sample return emigrant households received an amount ranging between Rs. 591 lakh and Rs. 934 lakh a year.

Causes of return

The returnees have reported five major causes of return. Majority returned by availing eligible leave or with the permission of employer to go to native place for a short period (54 percent). Another 32 percent returned due to closure of companies and business units which they worked (Table 2). Reduction in salary and non-renewal of work permit are the other causes of return (8.7 percent). Of the total returnees, only 5 percent was voluntarily returned to Kerala permanently due to personal reasons.

Table 2
Causes of return of sample return emigrant workers (Percent)

No	Causes of return	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Oman	Kuwait	Qatar	Bahrain	Others*	Total
1	Loss of job due to closure of company/business units	26.5	34.2	27.6	36.0	42.2	51.9	-	31.9
2	Reduction in salary	1.5	9.2	13.8	-	2.2	3.7	-	4.0
3	Non-renewal of work permit	6.0	5.3	3.5	8.0	-	-	-	4.7
4	Availing leave**	58.5	47.4	51.7	52.0	53.3	44.4	100.0	54.2
5	Voluntary	7.0	3.9	3.5	4.0	2.2	-	-	5.0
6	COVID-19 fear	0.5	0	-	-	-	-	-	0.2
Total		100.0							
Number of sample return emigrants		200	76	29	25	45	27	2	404

* Afghanistan & China

**Availing eligible leave or with the permission of employer to go to native place for a short period.

Returned on leave but stranded in Kerala

A major finding of the study is that most of the emigrant workers returned to Kerala on leave from GCC countries were not able to return and stranded in Kerala. A good number of emigrant workers availing eligible leave or with the permission of employer returned to Kerala prior to the spread of pandemic and imposition of travel restrictions. But they were stranded in Kerala due to unanticipated developments such as sudden spread of COVID-19 pandemic, mobility and travel disruption and denial of employers to rejoin duty and closure of the units in which they worked.

The prolonged stoppage of international flights between the destination countries and India also contributed to this. The abnormal increase in the air ticket fare, the additional cost associated with quarantine requirements in five star hotels in GCC countries, need to travel through circular routes to reach the GCC countries due to travel restrictions had resulted in substantial increase in cost of travel. Many returnees find it difficult to afford the extra cost of travel. As the returnees were not able to return to their host countries on the stipulated time, their visa period expired and they were denied permission of entry. The difference in vaccination policy perused in India and individual GCC countries also created much difficulty for the return emigrants. The non-recognition of Covishield for entry in the initial phase had prevented the sample emigrants to enter the GCC countries. Those who returned

by availing leave were not allowed to go to host countries due to refusal of visa renewal by employers.

In the vacancies arise due to the return of emigrant workers on leave, the employers in GCC countries resorted to the practice of recruiting emigrants available in GCC countries belonged to Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal etc, who were prepared to work at low wages. The employers in GCC countries used this opportunity to replace the Keralite emigrants by recruiting the above categories of emigrant workers. The abnormal increase in fee to GCC countries especially in Saudi Arabia to renew work permit and resident permit also discouraged the return of Keralite emigrant workers. It is reported by the sample returnees that the amount required for renewal of Iqama (residence permit) is 12,000 Saudi Riyal or about Rs. 2.40 lakh per year in Saudi Arabia.

Activity Status of Return Emigrant Workers After Return

The activity status of the return emigrants is classified into three viz. (1) employed, (2) unemployed and (3) not in labour force. Employed are defined as persons who engage in remunerative or income earning activities, at least a few hours in any one of the days in the previous week of the survey. The unemployed is a person who remained without any income earning work or activities throughout the previous week of the survey, but seeking or available for work. The important impact of the return is that 71 percent of sample return emigrant workers remained unemployed without any income from work at the time of the survey (Table 3). Only 29 percent are employed. Of the unemployed, nearly 78 percent belong to the age below 50 and are in the active working group.

Table 3
Activity status of sample return emigrant workers after return

No	District	Number			
		Employed	Unemployed	Not in labour force	Total
1	Kannur	10	75	1	86
2	Kozhikode	53	57	1	111
3	Malappuram	33	113	-	146
4	Pathanamthitta	11	33	-	44
5	Thiruvananthapuram	9	8	-	17
	Total	116	286	2	404
		Percentage			
1	Kannur	11.6	87.2	1.2	100.0
2	Kozhikode	47.7	51.4	0.9	100.0
3	Malappuram	22.6	77.4	-	100.0
4	Pathanamthitta	25.0	75.0	-	100.0
5	Thiruvananthapuram	52.9	47.1	-	100.0
	Total	28.7	70.8	0.5	100.0

Of the 116 employed, 90 are working as casual labour and 26 engaged in self-employment (Table 4). The casual work is highly irregular and a worker may get 6-10 days of work per month at the maximum. With an average wage of Rs. 690 per day⁷, a male worker may get a wage for 6 days is Rs. 4140 and a wage for 10 days is Rs. 6900 per month. This is in contrast to Rs. 12,219 and Rs. 19,315 received per month as remittances by a household. This indicate that compared to the net remittances received by the household, the wage earned by the casual workers was in the range of 34 percent to 36 percent. Among the 26 sample return emigrants, who engaged in self-employment, 18 are engaged in own business and small trade and 8 autorikshaw owner cum drivers. The informants have not given the income earned from their self-employment.

Table 4
Category of employment of sample return emigrant workers

No	District	Number		
		Self-employment	Casual labour	Total
1	Kannur	5	5	10
2	Kozhikode	9	44	53
3	Malappuram	10	23	33
4	Pathanamthitta	-	11	11
5	Thiruvananthapuram	2	7	9
	Total	26	90	116
		Percentage		
1	Kannur	50.0	50.0	100.0
2	Kozhikode	17.0	83.0	100.0
3	Malappuram	30.3	69.7	100.0
4	Pathanamthitta	-	100.0	100.0
5	Thiruvananthapuram	22.2	77.8	100.0
	Total	22.4	77.6	100.0

Loss of remittances and increase in poverty

The sample returnees told us that their households have some what a sound financial situation prior to the return of them. The households had been receiving remittances sent by them on a monthly or regular basis. They had received an annual amount ranging between Rs 1.47 lakh and Rs 2.32 lakh. Due to the return of emigrant workers, the flow of regular remittances had stopped in 404 households. This is a great loss for the households who mainly relied on the remittances for meeting their household expenditure. This loss of remittances have shattered the finances of all the sample returnee households.

Of the total sample returnee households, 21 percent belonged to the BPL⁸ (Table 5). Among the sample returnee households in northern Kerala, the share of BPL households is found high in Malappuram district. Some of the return emigrants told us that they have changed the above the poverty line (APL) cards to BPL after returning from GCC countries. Due to the loss of remittances, most of the returnee households have lost their main source of income and pushed to poverty. It is likely that about two thirds of the 404 sample returnee households become poor due to the return of emigrants.

Table 5
Category of ration card of sample returnee households

No	District	Number			
		Non-Priority (APL)	Priority (BPL)	Nil	Total sample households
1	Kannur	68	14	4	86
2	Kozhikode	85	21	5	111
3	Malappuram	109	34	3	146
4	Pathanamthitta	40	4	-	44
5	Thiruvananthapuram	6	10	1	17
	Total	308	83	13	404
		Percentage			
1	Kannur	79.1	16.3	4.6	100.0
2	Kozhikode	76.6	18.9	4.5	100.0
3	Malappuram	74.7	23.3	2.0	100.0
4	Pathanamthitta	90.9	9.1	-	100.0
5	Thiruvananthapuram	35.3	58.8	5.9	100.0
	Total	76.2	20.6	3.2	100.0

Asset possessed by the returnee households

Regarding possession of land, we feel that the returnees have given an underestimate figures. It is reported that 78 percent of the households possess land and 22 percent do not possess land. The area of land possess ranged between below 10 cents and above 40 cents. The survey findings suggest that 98 per cent of the returnee households owned a house. Of the total houses, the return emigrant own 63.4 percent, parents of the return emigrants own 34.9 percent and rest is rented houses. Data on possession of motor vehicles by sample return households show that 91 percent returnee households owned motor vehicles and 9 percent not owned any motor vehicle. Of the total motor vehicles, two wheelers account for 80.2 percent, car 17.8 percent and autorikshaw 1.8 percent. All the motor vehicles are used for travel of the members of the households except the 8 autorikshaws and one mini bus.

Debt of the households

Data on the debt of the households show that 98 percent of the sample households have borrowed money and have debt. The major purpose of borrowing was construction of house, purchase of vehicles, purchase of land, medical treatment, education of children etc. It is reported that the amount of debt ranged between 2 to 14 lakhs. Due to the return of emigrant workers and loss of remittances, the returnee households will find it difficult to repay the loans. Loss of remittances will also force households to effect a cut in expenditure on consumption items such as food, consumer durables, clothing etc.

Impact on local labour market

In practice, the definition of a local labour market is established on the assumption that its key characteristics is that the bulk of area's population habitually seek employment there and that local employers recruit most of their labour from that area. The area of local labour market comprises of an area of local government in which the returnee live (Grama Panchayat or Municipality) and its surrounding places or the places accessible from the residence of the returnees. The data collected from the sample return emigrants show that the employment structure in the local labour market is characterized by casual and self-employment with very few regular employment. According to our survey, 78 percent of the returnees worked as casual labourers and the rest were engaged in self-employment in the local labour market (Table 5). Jobs having regular nature or monthly wages are scarce and no sample return emigrant is able to get it. In this context 116 returnees newly joined to the local labour market and began to share the existing jobs among the local workers and the returnees.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption arise due to it have the following impact on the local labour market. (1) The COVID-19 pandemic induced crisis and the fall in remittance of the migrant workers have resulted in recession in local economy, reduction in secondary and tertiary sector jobs and fall in employment opportunities. (2) Return emigrant workers who lost jobs are stranded in Kerala, began to seek jobs in local labour market and added to the work force. (3) There has been an increase in excess supply of labour force of all categories, both local workers and return emigrants. (4) Severely restricted the international labour mobility and emigration of the prospective emigrants. All these have resulted in increase in unemployment rate.

Table 6
Increase in unemployed persons due to return of sample emigrant workers

No.	District	Unemployed persons in the sample households	Unemployed persons added due to return of emigrant workers	Total number of unemployed persons	Growth Rate (%)
1	Kannur	51	75	126	147.1
2	Kozhikode	37	57	94	154.1
3	Malappuram	81	113	194	139.5
4	Pathanamthitta	9	33	42	366.7
5	Thiruvananthapuram	9	8	17	88.9
	Total	187	286	473	152.9

Bleak labour market and remigration

A major finding of the survey is on the views of the return emigrants about the labour market situation prevailing in Kerala. The returnees firmly believe that the labour market situation and prospects of regular and remunerative jobs are bleak in Kerala. The returnees, who had regular jobs and earning monthly wages in GCC countries prior to return, are frustrated in the new labour situation in Kerala. They believe that remigration is a better option than finding a job in their locality. Regarding our question on the issue, 88 percent of the sample returnees told us that remigration is a better option than finding a job in Kerala. They have a strong preference for the remigration because they feel that through emigration, they can get a regular job, assured monthly income, assured monthly savings, assured monthly or periodical remittance and economic stability of their families.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic disruption in GCC countries had resulted in unprecedented exodus of Indian emigrants from GCC countries. The factors other than COVID-19 disruption affected the exodus of migrant workers are steep fall in oil prices due to the COVID-19 crisis and the shift in the migration policies of GCC countries to promote indigenization of labour and discourage unskilled and less skilled category of foreign migrant workers. The survey findings suggest that, of the total sample returnees, 50 percent returned from Saudi Arabia, 19 percent from UAE, 11 percent from Qatar, 7 percent each from Oman and Bahrain and 6 percent from Kuwait.

Due to COVID-19 pandemic and related disruption, the contract category of Keralite emigrant workers employed in GCC countries, who used to send sizeable amount as remittances to their households on regular basis, forced to return to Kerala due to loss of jobs and other disruption, those returned on leave were unable to return and the return emigrant households experienced total loss of remittances and acute economic distress. It is estimated that the average amount received by the sample returnee households as remittance range between Rs 1.47 lakh and Rs. 2.32 lakh per year prior to return. The return has resulted in total loss of remittances received by the households on regular basis, shattered their finances, increase their debt burden and pushed them to acute economic distress.

Majority of the returned emigrants who availed leave and came to Kerala could not return to GCC countries and stranded in Kerala due to unanticipated developments such as imposition of mobility and travel restrictions, closure of units in which they worked and denial of employers to re-join duty. The inability of return emigrants to return within the stipulated date, the disruption in international travel, the difference in vaccination policies followed by India and GCC countries, filling the vacancies arise due to return of Keralite emigrants on leave with emigrants from other countries, large increase in fee for renewal of work permit and resident permit, deliberate policy perused by Saudi government for curtailing the number of foreign workers etc have prevented their return to GCC countries.

Due to return, most of the emigrant workers became unemployed, remain without income, faced high uncertainty to find employment and pushed them to poverty. The return of emigrants have pushed about two thirds of sample returns to poverty.

The local labour market experienced fall in employment due to pandemic induced recession and loss of remittances on the one hand and increased demand of labour arising due to entry of return emigrants in labour market, excess supply of labour and restricted international labour mobility on the other, resulting in increase in unemployment rate. The return emigrant workers feel that the labour market situation and prospects of getting regular and remunerative jobs are bleak in Kerala and they have a strong preference for remigration to secure a regular job, assured monthly income and to achieve economic stability of their families.

Notes

¹ The total stock of international migrants in the World, estimated by the UN population division was 2805.9 lakh in 2020. The stock of Indian emigrants was estimated as 178.6 lakh or 6.4 percent of total stock of global migrants. The total stock of Indian emigrants in GCC countries was estimated as 95.68 lakh (53.5 percent) in 2020. The country wise stock of Indian emigrants in GCC countries are as follows: 34.71 lakh in UAE, 25.02 lakh in Saudi Arabia, 13.75 lakh in Oman, 11.52 lakh in Kuwait, 7.02 lakh in Qatar and 3.65 lakh in Bahrain (United Nations, Population Division

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock.>)

² According to a Loksabha unstarred question No. 234 dated on 04/08/2021, the number of repatriated Indians under Vande Bharat Mission up to 30 April, 2021 was 55.93 lakh. Of this the number of Indians returned from GCC countries was 40.24 lakh (71.9 percent). Of the total repatriated Indian emigrants of 55.93 lakh, the number of Keralite emigrants was 14.10 lakh.

³ The UNDESA estimate on total stock of Indian emigrants in GCC countries, its growth and Keralite emigrants returned due to COVID-19 crisis indicate that, the total stock of Keralite emigrants in GCC countries will be in the range of 25 to 30 percent of the stock of Indian emigrants in midyear 2020 (23.9 lakh and 28.7 lakh).

⁴ According to NORKA, the number of Keralite emigrants returned due to COVID-19 crisis till June 22, 2021 was 14,71,437. Of the total return emigrants, 59.3 percent return from UAE, 11.7 percent from Saudi Arabia, 9.7 percent from Qatar, 2.9 percent from Bahrain, 3.9 percent from Kuwait, 9.1 percent from Oman and 3.8 percent from other countries. Source NORKA.

⁵ The sampling procedure followed to select the sample return emigrant workers are as follows. We have selected samples from the three northern districts having the largest number of return emigrants as per NORKA (Malappuram, Kozhikode and Kannur) and two southern districts (Pathanamthitta and Thiruvananthapuram) having small number of return emigrants. Six grama panchayats and five municipalities belong to the above districts which have sizeable number of return emigrants were selected. Of the total 306 wards in the 11 local bodies, 404 sample return emigrants were selected in 102 wards. The survey was conducted between December 2019 and July 2021.

⁶For a discussion on ILO's definitions of different types of migrants. See: ILO (1997).

⁷According to PLFS annual report 2019-20, average wage earnings per day for a casual male worker was Rs. 690.09 in April-June 2020. See: KSPB (2022).

⁸The following categories are excluded from the priority ration cards or BPL cards. All staff in government, public sector and cooperatives; service pensioners; income tax payers; persons having income more than 25,000 per month; ownership of more than one acre land; having house or flat with a plinth area of more than 1000 sq.km; a four wheel motor car for own use and any one of the family member getting more than Rs. 25,000 per month from foreign job or private job. See: Government of Kerala (2017).

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