

Distress return migration amid COVID-19: Kerala's response

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Abstract

Emigrants from Kerala, India, were among the international migrants affected by the displacing consequences of COVID-19 — job losses, decreasing wages, inadequate social protection systems, xenophobia and overall uncertainty — which led to large-scale return migration to India. Returning home due to exogenous shocks calls into question the voluntary nature of return, the ability of returnees to reintegrate and the sustainability of re-embedding in the home country. The role of return migrants in the development of their societies of origin is also unclear. In this commentary, we explore the circumstances of return migration since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on a case study of Kerala and provide insights on the future of emigration from this corridor along with policy suggestions. The role of return migrants in the development of their societies of origin requires further research and policy interventions.

Keywords

Return migration, repatriation, wage theft, rehabilitation, reintegration, Vande Bharat Mission, Kerala

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Introduction

The declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020 led to immediate policy responses which were unprecedented. Lockdowns, travel bans and social distancing measures had the effect of temporarily bringing human mobility and global economic activity to a standstill (Ratha et al., 2021). As a result, countless migrant workers, both internal and international, were stranded in their destinations, with increased vulnerability to the economic and social risks that came with such measures (Rajan, 2020a, 2020b; International Organization for Migration, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Rajan and Pattath, 2020, 2021). The gradual reopening of borders resulted in a massive wave of return migration which caused a decline in the international migration stock for the first time in recent history (Ratha et al., 2021). COVID-19 was the first significant event that disrupted migration trends in over a decade since the global financial crisis that started in 2008. During times of economic crises, the sectors that are hit the hardest tend to be the ones in which migrant workers are over-represented (Awad, 2009; Papademetriou and Terrazas, 2009; Martin, 2009; Bastia, 2011; Rajan, 2012). The pandemic impacted economies across the globe.

The suspension of economic activities led to job losses and uncertainties which left many migrant workers with no choice but to return to their home countries. The economic fallout led to instances of wage theft, forced labor and other coercive practices (Subramaniam, 2020; Foley and Piper, 2021). Migrants who returned to their home countries did not find much relief. Many returned empty handed; reports of migrants being stigmatized as carriers of the virus added to the difficulties migrants experienced (Rajan, 2020a; IOM, 2020c). Nowhere was this phenomenon of return migration more apparent than in India, which has the largest diaspora (18 million) in the world (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2020).¹ The largest population of non-resident Indians (NRIs) and persons of Indian origin (PIOs) is in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (henceforth GCC) (Rajan and Oommen, 2020a, 2020b; Rajan and Saxena, 2019). The Government of India has merged the PIOs and Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI)² in the Citizenship Amendment Bill 2015 which took effect on 9 January 2015.

This commentary examines return migration to India during the COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on the case of Kerala. By reviewing the findings from a household survey and developments since then, we argue for the importance of

¹The Indian diaspora was estimated at 32 million as of December 2018 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022).

²The diaspora consists of non-resident Indians (individuals who are citizens of India but are residing in a foreign country and hold a valid Indian passport) and people of Indian origin or PIOs (foreign Citizens except for nationals of Pakistan and Bangladesh, who have either held an Indian passport at any point in time or their parents/grandparents/great-grandparents were permanent residents of India or are spouses of an Indian citizen).

systematically studying the process of return as an integral component of the circular migration continuum.

Return migration to India during the pandemic

The Government of India's initial response to the first cases of COVID-19 was to impose a 21-day lockdown from 25 March 2020 onwards to contain the pandemic and "flatten the curve." During this and the later extended period of lockdown, all establishments came to a halt, and some even closed for an indeterminate period. There was also a complete ban on any kind of inter-state as well as international travel, the latter reinforced by other countries closing their borders temporarily. This left Indians stranded in different parts of the world. The Government of India suspended any ongoing rescue missions across the world citing "lack of resources." The repatriation missions were eventually resumed on 7 May 2020, when the Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Civil Aviation and all state governments jointly announced the launch of the Vande Bharat Mission for the safe return of Indian nationals ([Press Information Bureau Delhi, Government of India, 2020](#); [Ministry of External Affairs, 2020a](#); [Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020](#)). The mission has been in operation since May 2020. As of October 2021, the mission has facilitated the arrival and departure of 18 million Indians (inbound and outbound) according to the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India in Lok Sabha ([Vanamali, 2022](#)).

[Rajan and Arokkiaraj \(2022\)](#) discuss details of the mission, including the standard operating protocol. The aspects that matter for this commentary are the following:

- The Government of India was committed to bringing back nationals, but early efforts were affected by delays due to many constraints. Red-tape, slow diplomacy and one-size fits all technological approaches (such as e-registrations on portals) hampered efforts to meet repatriation needs. Reports of overpriced flight tickets ([Chowdhury, 2020](#); [Smitha, 2020](#)) and poor quarantine facilities in several states added to the shortcomings of the repatriation efforts, especially in the earlier phases.
- The demand for repatriation overwhelmed the capacity of the government to meet these requests. As of 16 September 2020, requests for repatriation reached more than a million, most of which were for the repatriation of Indian nationals in the GCC countries ([Table 1](#)). The mission concentrated on repatriation efforts in the GCC countries. Earlier, the Gulf governments urged India to expedite the repatriation of its nationals. By December 2020, the mission had repatriated 3.8 million Indian nationals.

By 31 October 2021, more than 9 million had returned to India under the Vande Bharat Mission. [Table 2](#) documents the number of Gulf repatriates by

Table 1. Repatriation requests received (as of 16 September 2020).

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number</i>
GCC	
United Arab Emirates	305,056
Qatar	120,600
Oman	100,604
Saudi Arabia	90,119
Kuwait	80,732
Bahrain	41,763
Subtotal	738,874
Other countries	
United States of America	69,030
United Kingdom	44,759
Nepal	26,379
Singapore	21,832
Australia	21,486
Canada	20,385
Germany	17,322
Russia	15,616
Malaysia	14,934
Ukraine	14,585
Kyrgyzstan	14,249
France	12,002
Nigeria	11,694
Bangladesh	10,996
Other Countries	108,379
Subtotal	423,648
Total	1,162,522

Source: [Ministry of External Affairs \(2020a\)](#), Lok Sabha, Q&A Session, Unstarred Question No.479, Answered on 16/09/2020 by MEA, Shri V. Muraleedharan.

state of origin in India. Kerala received the highest number of returnees if we exclude Delhi. The number of returnees to Delhi is high because returnees to neighboring states around Delhi come to Delhi first and then travel by bus or train to reach their hometowns.

Return migration to Kerala

Kerala occupies a unique position with respect to India's emigration history. The state's emigrants have contributed to the international soft power of the Indian diaspora. Successive governments since the 1970s have been

Table 2. Return passengers (migrants) on Vande Bharat Mission as of 31 October 2021.

States/Union territories	Passengers/Emigrants
Delhi	2,760,000
Kerala	2,399,688
Maharashtra	1,009,619
Tamil Nadu	905,845
Telangana	638,225
Uttar Pradesh	487,682
Karnataka	593,321
Gujarat	210,417
Punjab	151,064
West Bengal	133,567
Rajasthan	111,370
Andhra Pradesh	94,244
Goa	36,798
Bihar	11,914
Chandigarh	11,617
Odisha	5,425
Madhya Pradesh	1,393
Others	381
Total	9,562,570

Source: Press Information Bureau Delhi, Government of India (2021) Annexure A, 29 November. Available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1776091>

pro-emigration in their outlook and policies. The inability of the state to generate employment and industrial growth in the state is more than compensated by the remittances received from its large and significant Gulf diaspora. Against this backdrop, Kerala was able to secure the Central government's support to assist Kerala emigrants during the pandemic. Compared to other states, Kerala did well in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the provision of quarantine facilities to returnees (Rajan and Arokkiraj, 2022; Rajan and Pattath, 2021; Rajan and Akhil, 2022; Rajan and Pattath, 2022). This was partly due to the availability of data that provided good predictions of the number of returnees and potential caseloads.

According to the Finance Minister of Kerala in his budget speech on 11 March 2022 (for the financial year 2022-23), 1.4 million non-resident Keralites returned to the state in the aftermath of COVID-19.³ The returnees constitute a significant share of the total number of 2.1 million (21 lakhs) estimated to living

³The state level figure is at odds with the national level figure for Kerala presented in Table 2 – 1.4 million as of March 2022 vs. 2.4 million as of October 2021, respectively.

abroad (Prakash, 2020; Rajan and Pattath, 2022). Rajan and Pattath (2021) undertook a large migration survey in which we document the experiences of 1985 return emigrants (REM) through a quantitative survey conducted via Computer Assisted Telephonic Interviews (CATI). This survey focused on understanding the distribution of the COVID-19 return migrants by socio-demographic characteristics, their motivations for return, their future plans. It also inquired into their return experiences, their skill sets, existing financial portfolio and household situation. We summarize a few findings from this return emigration survey 2021.

Considering the different motivations and circumstances of return, an earlier work developed a typology of return migration (see Zachariah et al., 2001). Based on previous findings from our surveys in Kerala (Zachariah and Rajan, 2011), we classify the returnees during COVID-19 into the following: (1) normal REM (NREM) — those who could have returned as part of their planned migration cycle (with the possibility that the date of return was advanced by the pandemic); (2) distressed REM (DREM) — those negatively affected by the pandemic in various ways and were hence forced to return; (3) RREM are REM who returned strategically to re-emigrate (RREM); and (4) “others” who returned for purposes such as marriage and personal contingencies. Based on the self-selection of “reason for return,” we also classified the REM based on their future plans, which include (1) those who desire to start a new business, (2) those considering re-emigration, and (3) those who return for retirement (Zachariah and Rajan, 2010, 2011). Data on the returnees and their plans are presented in Table 3. Around 50 percent of the DREM wanted to re-emigrate while the negative experience encountered during COVID-19 may have influenced the 32 percent who decided to seek work in Kerala or retire as outlined in Table 3.

Kerala has achieved impressive socio-economic indicators and infrastructure, partly due to the migration phenomenon over the last four decades. This development model, however, has been criticized for its dependence on remittances and concerns about the sustainability of this model (Kannan and Hari, 2020; Prakash, 2020). At the level of households, data from our survey show that 75 percent of REM sent remittances prior to COVID-19. The remittances were used for debt payments (30 percent), followed by household expenses (25 percent), periodic investments (21 percent), and maintenance (12 percent). We compared remittances sent pre-COVID-19 and those sent during and after the first COVID-19 lockdowns. Although the percentage of REM in the sample who sent remittances decreased from 80.3 percent to 67.3 percent, we found that the monthly amount increased for those who used to send less than INR 4,000 before the first lockdown, indicating resilience among more than 70 percent of the sample. Among the DREM, before COVID-19, 89.8 percent sent remittances but after the first lockdowns, this dropped to 86.6 percent. In comparison, the percentage of NREM sending remittances increased after the first COVID-19 lockdowns, from 68.6 percent

Table 3. Number and percentage distribution of typology of REM and their future plans.

Future plans	Number and percent of return emigrants				
	DREM	NREM	Other	RREM	Total
Re-emigrate to seek a new job	589 (33.6)	6 (6.4)	23 (18.9)	13 (72.2)	631
Re-emigrate to the same job as before	280 (16.0)	22 (23.4)	57 (46.7)	2 (11.1)	361
Start a new business in Kerala	236 (13.5)	20 (21.3)	11 (9.0)	1 (5.6)	268
Seek a new job in Kerala	538 (30.7)	24 (25.5)	27 (22.1)	0 (0.0)	589
Retired from work	51 (2.9)	20 (21.3)	1 (0.8)	1 (5.6)	73
Other	57 (3.3)	2 (2.1)	3 (2.5)	1 (5.6)	63
Total	1751 (100.0)	94 (100.0)	122	18 (100.1)	1985

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentage distributions.

Source: Primary survey conducted by the authors.

to 97.3 percent of the NREM. Overall, all REM who usually sent amounts larger than INR 20,000 increased their remittances after the first lockdown, indicating a preference to transfer accumulated savings to the home country in preparation for permanent return.

In the face of economic uncertainties in the destination and migrants' lack of access to social protection, instances of wage theft and forced labor were reported during the pandemic (Rajan and Akhil, 2022). These were also uncovered by the survey and qualitative interviews. Among the 47 percent of respondents who lost their jobs, 39 percent reported non-payment of wages or dues as well as a reduction in wages. Among the workers who were asked to resign by the employers, 40.9 percent of the workers experienced wage theft. Among those who managed to work during the initial months of the pandemic, 8.8 percent worked without wages and later lost their jobs, while 18.2 percent faced reduction in wages. Likewise, 10.9 percent of the workers whose work visas were not extended experienced wage theft. We found a positive correlation between the duration of stay and the non-payment of wages. Through the interviews, we found that companies had resorted to implementing various arbitrary criteria to offload their wage bills, terminating employees below certain years of experience without paying accrued benefits over time, while others in the tourism sector (which offers lower social security) stopped paying their workers in February 2020. Of the REM who lost their jobs since March 2020, only 3 percent were given any advice in addressing wage theft. The finding indicates migrant workers' lack of knowledge and poor access to existing grievance redressal mechanisms.

The survey also looked into rehabilitation schemes and welfare assistance programs by the state government, the awareness of these programs by Non-

Resident Keralites (in turn, this is also an indicator of the strength and efficiency of information dissemination), the take-up of these programs, and whether anyone benefited from these programs. Ninety-two percent were unaware of programs like Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES) scheme by the Government of India,⁴ and 90 percent among those unaware of the programs were not intending to register or had not done so. Among regional programs, 27 percent of the REM had heard of the Non-Resident Keralites Affairs (NORKA) rehabilitation policy which was launched in 2018. The program allows REM to take loans for their ventures in Kerala, but only 4 percent of them had availed this scheme. Another scheme which was also launched before the pandemic is NORKA's Department Projects for Return Emigrants (NDPREM) for the benefit of those who intend to start a new business. However, according to our survey, 84 percent of the REM were unaware of this scheme, while only six REMs had availed it ([NORKA Roots, n.d.](#)).

We also elicited their awareness of government programs for the rehabilitation of REM who have retired from work. Eighty-four percent were unaware of the schemes listed; 11 percent of the REMs were aware of Kerala's Non-Resident Keralites' Welfare Board's welfare schemes, such as the pension schemes, family pension schemes, medical aid and death assistance. About 4 percent of the REMs were aware of the national program named the Mahatma Gandhi Pravasi Suraksha Yojana. In general, REMs showed higher awareness of state level programs than national programs. However, for the state program, of the 69 individuals who had applied for its services, only eight benefited while eight out of the 22 who availed the national program benefited from it.

This survey provided a snapshot of the dynamics of return migration after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which devolved into a migration crisis due to the unaddressed vulnerabilities in existing migration governance ([Rajan and Pattath, 2020](#)). The study concludes with policy recommendations centred around improving data collection pertaining to migrant stocks and flows, enhancing social security systems for migrant workers, advocating for short-term relief to the COVID-19 REM as well as long-term reintegration assistance for future REM, and supporting entrepreneurial innovations that sustain and infuse new life into remittance flows across the globe ([Iavorskyi, 2021](#)).

New developments since the survey

Through the survey, the authors produced a report which was submitted to the Kerala State Planning Board for review and recommendations. Previously, the

⁴The initiative was launched to conduct a skill mapping of return migrants. It was a joint initiative of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Ministry of Civil Aviation and Ministry of External Affairs. The returnees were asked to complete an online skill card which asked for details that could be used to create a dataset for skill training and mapping.

authors argued for the importance of data collection and analysis related to migration and its dynamics (Rajan and Pattath, 2020). While migration data is administratively available through emigration clearances and visa applications, it is not publicly available to researchers at a disaggregated level with sufficient additional information that can inform studies. Conducting sample surveys to study migration histories, remittance behavior and socio-demographic characteristics of migrants allows scholars to estimate in- and out-migration patterns. However, return is a process that is still largely unaccounted for, particularly because of the varying definitions and lack of a clear typology. COVID-19 provided impetus to document return migration because of the sheer magnitude, and for best-guess responses to the influx of the labor force, several of whose future migration status was unclear. It necessitated an evaluation of each sending country's ability to provide rehabilitation and employment opportunities for REMs. These interventions are particularly important in crisis-induced return migration, such as the massive return migration due to the pandemic. Findings from earlier surveys reveal that forced or involuntary return can be disruptive, despite their experience of poor work conditions and environments (Zachariah et al., 2002).

Surveys and data collection efforts of REMs should comprehensively map socio-economic characteristics that can be linked to vulnerability and protection factors. These factors can provide good approximations of the likelihood of migration, return and future decisions. For example, a distressed COVID-19 REM's decision to remigrate may be affected differently by indebtedness—they may re-migrate because of the pressing need to repay that debt, or they might choose not to if re-migration could compound the existing debt. Even the choice of destination may depend on not just their experience in these locations, but also the heterogeneous impact of the shock that necessitated their return. For example, having strong networks, which are a source of protection and support, can motivate and incentivize migration. The process of migration and return exist as part of a continuum of the life cycle mobility of a person. Immobility or the constraints on movement despite strong incentives and pressures to move is an interesting topic in and of itself.

The importance of representative survey data was evident in Kerala's response to the COVID-19 return migrant crisis. Thanks to multiple rounds of the Kerala Migration Survey, including 20 years of panel data on migrant households which have generated accurate measures of migrant stock and remittances, the Government was able to determine the requirements for hospital beds and quarantine facilities with the appropriate outlays before the Vande Bharat mission began. It also informs the work done by the Kerala Government, through NORKA Roots, the agency responsible for the welfare and provision of information to emigrants, which has undertaken several interventions since COVID-19. These included the *pravasi* (migrant) registration which helped inform the random sample for this survey, emergency financial

assistance to REM who returned from 1 January 2020, and assistance to stranded migrants through the provision of medicines sent through courier services. However, for REMs who experienced wage theft, the options for redress remain vague. The existing system allows an NRI returnee to grant power of attorney to the Ministry of External Affairs to fight a case on their behalf through the Indian Embassy in the relevant country. The studies carried out by The International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD) and Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS) document these experiences, but this can be scaled up by NORKA by including wage theft in their records, which can then inform bilateral operations between India and labor destination countries.

For those REM who returned and wished to remain in Kerala and seek new employment, the state government's skill mapping initiatives and job portal are designed to provide opportunities. These include national programs such as Skills Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness Livelihood Promotion (SAN-KALP), under the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), to strengthen the institutional mechanisms for skill development and increase access to quality and market relevant training for youth across the country. The state level response is provided by the Kerala Academy for Skills Excellence (KASE) which has been designated as the State Skill Development Mission (SSDM). It conducted skills training cum re-employment programs for NRKs who had returned due to the pandemic and also for prospective migrants in such fields such as pipe fabrication, industrial electrical work and welding trades. Overall, these programs are steps in the right direction, but awareness, usage and scaling up of these programs remain hurdles to be overcome.

Conclusion

Emigrants from Kerala are part of a migration corridor which is hugely important, not just for the economies and societies of the countries that are part of it, but for the demand and supply dynamics of international migration flows in general. Although COVID-19 was a tide that sank all boats more or less equally, this corridor was among the hardest hit. Not only did it bring return migration into the fore of academic and policy discussion, it also laid bare the vulnerabilities that need to be addressed for the migration waves that are incipient and will characterize the direction of human capital flows in the next decades, or before the next such crisis when return migration may re-enter the collective consciousness.

This commentary stresses the need to devote considerable focus to studying return as an indelible component of the migration continuum. This period presents an important opportunity for countries to elicit reliable responses from REMs and to inquire into their welfare not just during the pandemic, but also beyond the pandemic. Large migration surveys and scientific focus group discussions can do more to inform actions that can protect the stock of current

and future migrants. The Kerala REM survey, the highlights of which are reported here, is part of an academic endeavor that has given rise to several comprehensive migration surveys since 1998, when the Kerala Migration Survey became the first large scale survey in India to exclusively focus on migration, collecting important socio-economic and demographic information (Rajan, 2020c). Subsequent waves of the survey retained a panel dimension and are now being used by researchers around the world to study the theoretical underpinnings of internal and international migration with not just rigorous internal validity but also external validity. While reliable estimates of emigration from these surveys may have helped state planning for return migration, the same cannot be said of several other Indian states. There is a need to extend the KMS to an India Migration Survey as soon as possible.

While the pandemic exposed several vulnerabilities and worsened them, it also forced introspection into the human cost of migration and the implications of return. Other positive by-products included a positive shock for ease of doing certain kinds of businesses by going virtual, a revisit of work from home arrangements, and a reduction in transaction costs for transnational remittance flows. The GCC is at the center of these debates. The region will continue to host migrants in the future as they continue to develop, thereby sustaining the India-GCC migration corridor. In terms of employment profile, the next waves of migration may come from a demand for healthcare workers and young labor from the more developed, older countries, which India could respond to. Therefore, digital interventions that enhance training and education for the future migrant stocks can be emphasized. REM can play a role in the development of such programs. While the resilient international migrants contributed to their home countries could have been treated better during the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps their experience and knowledge can help prevent a migration crisis in the future.

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