

# The International Institute of Migration and Development



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through the  
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(Im)Mobilities  
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among Student  
Migrants of  
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## **Navigating Education through the Pandemic- The (Im)Mobilities of Aspiration among Student Migrants of Kerala**

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the aspirations of mobility for a vast section of students in Kerala in unexpected ways. There was a deferring of attaining achievements of a carefully planned future, a limbo state of uncertainty, as well as a temporary freezing of future dreams. There were multiple reports of students being stranded, faced with the impossibility of return as well as the uncertainties of health risks. At the same time, many aspiring students were frozen within different stages of the admission process causing severe psycho-social repercussions. The returning students had to battle the challenges of a return they were severely unprepared for. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic thus led to a plethora of restrictions on movement curtailing not just physical movements, but also the ‘aspirational mobility’ of the students. However, adapting to the uncertainties, the student migrants as well as students aspiring to migrate are negotiated different strategies of mobility showing marks of resilience. In this paper, we elaborate on how ‘aspiration’ “marks an intersection of personal, collective and normative dimensions” (Carling & Collins, 2018) framed by socio-political circumstances and how the formation of aspiration of mobility as well as its realization has been severely hampered by the pandemic. The paper specifically focuses on the repercussions of the first wave of the pandemic, excruciating in the uncertainties it produced, by analysing how the respondents reflected on this earlier period of the pandemic as well as formulated strategies of survival in its aftermath with most of the uncertainties following them into the second wave of the pandemic.

### **Methodology**

We conducted in-depth interviews with 15 student return migrants of Kerala as well as students attempting to migrate abroad after the easing of travel restrictions to understand the challenges of navigating an education at a time of the pandemic during the period of 2020-21. We identified the respondents, consisting of 8 men and 7 women, through snowball sampling. We also took efforts to speak to students coming from different socio-economic situations to gauge the differential impact of the pandemic. We also explored the possibilities of digital ethnography and conducted online zoom interviews with students who were stranded abroad as well as analyzed their public social media posts to trace the virtual student support groups which were formed during this time. We have also conducted telephonic interviews with educational immigration agencies and members of the families of the return student migrants to include both the institutional and emotional effects of the return on student migrants.

## **Deferred dreams, Uncertain futures- (Im)mobilities of Aspiration**

The student return migrants we interviewed first were students of medicine belonging to the 2000-strong Malayali student migrant community in China. All of them had secured admission through educational agencies and had chosen their respective universities taking into consideration the quality of the education (references were made about the world university rankings) as well as it being financially viable. The quality of education was also ascertained by talking to students from Kerala who were already studying there. All our respondents returned to Kerala in January 2020 before the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Kerala. However, as the number of cases rose, all of them talked of how their return from China was seen with apprehension in their neighbourhood. At the time of the study, they were all still unable to go back, their aspirations of a holistic medical education being severely hampered. Their classes had shifted online and were app-based, severely compromising their grasp of the practical side of medicine. They were deprived of clinical experiences and reported severe anxiety regarding their professional proficiency being compromised. The Government of China which had suspended the visa process and flights from India had not provided any information to the students awaiting return for the past one and a half years. As of December 2021, while China had hinted towards permitting the return of students from ASEAN countries, the foreign ministry has been vague in their responses to allow the 23000 Indian students awaiting a return to their studies. The students expressed their disappointment with the lack of transparency and communication from the side of the authorities in China. Students mobilised among themselves and had been petitioning the Chinese authorities from the start of the year and have formed social media accounts to garner support like the Instagram group 'Take us back to China'. The sustained pressure from the student community had resulted in India's Ambassador to China, Vikram Misri conveying his concerns about the student return migrants at the Track II Dialogue on India- China relations in September 2021, but to no avail.

In our second round of interviews, the students expressed continued disappointment, but they had found ways to make up for the lack of practical classes, such as approaching private hospitals in Kerala to let them observe the clinical practice of doctors. The private hospitals charge an amount while enlisting their services in a non-official way. This way of circumventing the difficulties of online education, however, was not accessible to all students equally. Social capital that the return migrant enjoyed before the migration is important in them navigating the return and helped in the lack of preparedness for the return. (Cassarino, 2004) Hence the respondent whose family had links with doctors practicing in hospitals run by her religious community had access to clinical experience while many of her counterparts struggled with such access.

There was uncertainty over the validity of their professional certificates obtained online without sufficient laboratory and clinical experience. The National Medical Council of India does not recognize online courses, but they have given final-year students a reprieve by allowing them to upload provisional pass certificates instead of the original certificates in order for them to appear for the Foreign Medical Graduates Examination which will allow them to register and practice in India. The lack of clinical experience would make the students unemployable which would increase their debt. All of our respondents who went to China had taken hefty student loans which they were hoping to pay back after entering medical practice.

Financial trouble and increased uncertainties for their financial future were also reported in the narratives of Malayali students who were stranded abroad during the pandemic. This was expressively conveyed in the student respondents who had stayed back in the US and European countries during the pandemic. Nikhil<sup>1</sup> who is an undergraduate student at the University of Massachusetts talked of the housing crisis that Indian students including himself faced. The students had to vacate college dorms and had to find housing in the midst of the pandemic placing a heavy burden on their financial situation. Some respondents reported restrictions on working because of student visa restrictions while others mentioned a decrease in getting shifts during the crisis. One respondent conveyed how his friends who had booked one-way return tickets in March 2020, lost the money as India went into an international travel ban soon after. When US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement brought out a new rule which said that students have to exit the country if their universities are not offering in-person classes or resorting to the hybrid model, a lot of students from Kerala took to social media to express their concerns in losing out work permits they had painstakingly obtained.

At the same time, we traced that in the aftermath of the vaccination drives in different countries, the students were already either preparing to go back or have already left. Here the category of 'student' is in flux with a significant number of the return migrants to Kerala, who had to return following the loss of employment, exploring the possibilities of entry into other emerging corridors of migration as students. Education here has underlying currents of other aspirations, which is reflected in the choice of the places of migration as well as the courses of study. In our interviews with education consultants and agents, we were told that France, UK and Canada were preferred destinations for such migration, while in the case of Ukraine which was already a preferred destination for student migrants from Kerala wanting to pursue Medicine, there was an increase in this preference because of the uncertainty regarding China.

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed for the purpose of privacy and confidentiality.

New Zealand was another preferred site for student migrants from India because of the adept and humane way in which the government addressed the challenges of the pandemic, while the US was still preferred, but rising apprehension was reported among students regarding the increasing restrictions on migration and a rise in xenophobia which interestingly has been on an increase worldwide during the pandemic. (IOM, 2021)

Students who were preparing for the admission process in 2020 expressed the agonising uncertainty and being helpless in the face of an extended deferral of their aspirations. This had an adverse effect on the student as well as the family of the student. In the case of Aravind from Kayamkulam, his aspiration to migrate to the UK for an MSc in International Business started in 2018, and he had to work hard on his IELTS preparation as he was not very confident about his English language proficiency. He obtained a favourable score in January 2019, but he had a very bad experience with repeated delays in communication from the agent's side, at the end of which he managed to secure admission by December 2019 and paid the admission fee. When the pandemic delayed his travel to the UK, the university offered an arrangement by which he could take 6 months of online classes in Kerala and complete the rest of the course on the university campus. He did not take up this offer as he believed that it would compromise the quality of the experience of an education abroad. What he had not anticipated was the delay of more than a year for him to start the course. During this period his IELTS score - which is only valid for a year - also expired and the university demanded that he take the exam again. This gave him severe anxiety as preparing for the exam was not an easy task for him in the first place. His sister in our conversation with her conveyed the stress the entire family went through as they had spent a lot of money on the agency as well on the admission. It was difficult for the family to see Arvind dejected and especially difficult to battle their own feeling of helplessness. Two weeks before he had to leave, the family tested positive for Covid-19, after which he had to rebook the tickets. In the whole saga of dejection and difficulties, Arvind recalls the support of the Students Union of his university to whom he had written about his difficulties. They negotiated with the university and waived the requirement for a fresh IELTS score. Arvind's bad experience is however not exceptional; most of the respondents who were at the beginning of their academic journey in 2020 had to experience this uncertain deferring of their aspirations.

The experience of being quarantined or in a lockdown in a foreign land was also exceptionally challenging. Anupama, who was a school teacher in Kottayam, had gone to Canada on a student visa in hopes of attaining the status of permanent resident and slowly progressing towards citizenship. Canada has more points in the comprehensive ranking system in their express entry immigration system for those who have completed a Canadian post-secondary credential. Canada is a preferred place for student migration for Indians with its exemplary quick visa processing through the Study Direct Scheme.

The private career colleges which do not receive government funds are advertised aggressively in the edu-schemes of agencies to students in India citing the prospects of permanent residency, to an eventual citizenship. (Ghosh, 2021) Anupama's family was in huge financial debt because of various failed businesses of her husband and she had planned on bringing her husband and child after she attained permanent residency. She described her quarantine experience in Canada after one of her apartment-mates contracted the virus as harrowing as her room was in the basement with hardly any ventilation. The experience she described as being unnerving where she felt like a complicated mess caught in an unending spool of 'desertion and loneliness'. She travelled back to India to meet her daughter as soon as the travel restrictions were eased even though it cost her double the normal expense. Her narrative shows how important emotions are in decisions to return during the pandemic (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). Another respondent also shared how her parents with comorbidities contracted Covid-19 in 2020 and she was stranded in Italy, worried out of her mind. The excruciating journey of return of Malayali students including a pregnant student from Milan to Kerala in March 2020 was reported extensively in the media. (Indian Express, 2020) The reports suggested that the worry for the loved ones back home was one of the reasons for the students' decision to return.

### **Gendered experience of migration and return**

Though this cannot be generalized, in the interviews we conducted we traced aspiration working in a collective manner for women students who were migrating for an education. Rose Anne, a former engineering lecturer from Thrissur who moved to Germany in early 2021, when asked about her aspiration to study in Germany, said that though she always wanted to pursue a PhD in Engineering, the choice of going to Germany wasn't hers. Her colleague and friend in a private engineering college wanted to migrate as soon as possible and she applied 'koottinu vendi'(to give company). This idea of 'koottu' or companionship recurred within other interviews as well. Interestingly in Rose's case, the friendship was also based on the common feeling of alienation and frustration experienced as unmarried women in their thirties facing repeated questions and scrutiny over their marital status from family and relatives. This was coupled with a deep dissatisfaction with the routine work in a private engineering college where the teaching staff is burdened with administrative duties and continuous evaluation systems. Hence they applied for a management course together in Germany (even though they were not interested in an education in management), their visas came through in March, 2020 and they were supposed to fly out in April 2020 when the international ban on air travel was announced. They were both deeply frustrated with their carefully laid plans being foiled.

To add to the grief and confusion of being without a job while also unable to join the course, Rose's friend's marriage got fixed during the pandemic and she dropped her plans of going abroad or pursuing the course. Research has shown how 'Life events' are a determining factor in actual mobility or immobility even when there is a desire to move. (De Groot; Carola & Mulder; Clara & Das; Marjolijn & Manting; Dorien, 2011)

In our second interview with Rose, she had travelled to Germany after attending online classes for one semester. She described the lightness of being in a strange land away from the prying questions of neighbours and fellow worshippers in her local church in Thrissur. Interestingly Rose navigated her way to Germany through a local church prayer group on WhatsApp meant exclusively for unmarried women above 30. She befriended the pastor leading the prayer group who subsequently invited her to join church activities meant for providing mentorship to teenagers during the pandemic. In organizing one of the sessions, she established contacts with a pastor in Germany who later helped her find accommodation and a job when she arrived in Germany in 2021. While Rose is emblematic of the countless student migrants from India who travelled abroad as soon as travel restrictions eased to pursue their aspirations, her friend and her ambitions were halted indefinitely because of the pandemic. The friend declined to talk to us telling Rose that it will reopen wounds that she is trying to forget.

Similarly, Khatija, a fourth-year medical student at Sichuan Medical University also referred to companionship while travelling abroad. She decided to pursue Medicine in China along with five of her school friends from Ernakulam. She said how delightful and exciting the whole process of applying, securing admission and travelling as a group to China was. There is a robust Malayalee community within the university which meant that there was less nostalgia. The companionship here helps get parental approval for young women aspiring to study abroad. When she travelled back from China in January, there were talks of a virus doing the rounds, but the university was closing for the winter vacation and she had seen it as an opportunity for some more time to spend with her family. However, as the pandemic progressed, she was increasingly frustrated with the lost opportunity of a wholesome medical education. Also, she comes from a remote village in Kerala, where the news of a return from China meant increasing suspicion and ostracization in a period of uncertainty. Gushing over the freedom in the university, she refers to missing the companionship of her friends. However, she quickly checks herself saying she doesn't approve of such levels of 'unchecked freedom'. We read this as self-policing which makes sense if one reads it along with the moral policing of youth within Kerala's public and private spheres. The return back is a return to familiar worlds of morality as well. We found the difference in tone in Rose's interview where she owned the lightness of the freedom that a foreign land gives a woman.



Even in narratives of female respondents who did not navigate an education abroad as part of a collective aspiration, we see the lament for the lack of 'koottu'. For example, the respondent who had applied for a degree in Bioenvironmental engineering in South Korea referred to how she regretted her decision not to join friends who applied in Europe as they all have joined back their courses or have completed them. Her desire to join the course was a result of a long interest in the culture and music of South Korea coupled with the niche area of interest where the research advisor in the university she shortlisted had expertise in. She had learnt the Korean language out of her interest in migrating to this foreign land of her desire, which she describes as a dream from her school days. The respondent conveyed her moments of self-doubt regarding this aspiration for her saying if she had chosen a university outside of South Korea, she would have had a degree in hand. But she quickly corrects herself and says how much this desire is part of the person she is. The pandemic has resulted in spatial (im)mobility (Marzi, 2015) which she hadn't imagined for herself as her parents were very supportive of her decision to join a foreign university which was not chosen by her peers. The limbo within a lost opportunity to education thus signifies more than the content and quality of the education. It signifies the loss of opportunities to form meaningful companionship, the loss of imagined as well as real selves imbued with, among other traits, independence and freedom denied within spaces of familiarity such as home and 'naadu'.

### **Caste-ing Mobility**

Mohan is a Dalit poet hailing from Thiruvananthapuram who secured admission to the MA programme in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. He applied for the State Overseas Scholarship which is a scheme of the Government of Kerala to provide scholarships to SC/ST as well as Backward classes. The University of East Anglia provided him with a nominal India fellowship which would cover the entire tuition fee and the scholarship provided by the Department of Scheduled Caste Development was to supplement the university scholarship. Mohan was optimistic about receiving the scholarship, but was deeply disappointed with the bureaucratic red tapism. "They raise a thousand hurdles and expect you to trip and fall". He refers to a rigid gatekeeping by the casteist bureaucracy that is deeply uncomfortable in dispensing scholarships for Dalit students. He parallels this discomfort to the discomfort and heartburn that upper castes experienced during the land reforms. The delay in dispensing the scholarship resulted in a delay in his joining the course and the University deferred his admission by one year as the rest of the batch had joined resulting in his missing classes. This delay in dispensing funds is not peculiar to the period of the pandemic as Kerala has witnessed the case of deferred admission in the case of Bineesh Balan and Hafeesha TB.

Mohan's case is interesting in that in the moment of desperation faced with apathy from bureaucracy, he turned to crowdfunding to raise the rest of the amount. Crowd-funding has emerged as an avenue for students from marginalised backgrounds to raise funds for education abroad, especially during the pandemic. The reasons to turn to crowd-funding reveal the skewed nature of the National Overseas Scholarship which has a history of under-utilised funds. In the year 2020-21, only 90 out of 596 Scheduled Caste (SC) students studying in universities abroad, who applied for the National Overseas Scholarships, were awarded the scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Most students are denied the scholarship on the basis of family income when the conflation of caste with class has been shown to be erroneous by so many social scientists. When traditional modes of accessing mobility through hard-won State schemes fail them, newer modes of accessing education are being sought especially by first-generation learners.

During the pandemic, Western universities also cut back on financial support. In this context, the online community has responded in multiple cases by now to garner financial assistance, sometimes in a time span of hours as seen in #SumittoOxford, to help students who have gained admission to prestigious institutions abroad. We read this as a mark of resilience. When we examine the narratives of students from marginalised castes, we can delineate an aspiration to gain education as being intricately tied to a denial of knowledge for them within the rigid caste system in India which seeps into the Indian academia as well. Kerala is not an exceptional space for caste violence within academia as we have seen in the case of Deepa Mohanan and Mahatma Gandhi University. (Rohitha, 2021)

Aspiration in the narratives of our respondents coming from marginalised caste backgrounds is tied intricately to the dignity of the community. Mohan and another Dalit student respondent, who joined the University of London on a Kerala Government scholarship, were the only ones who talked of aspiration in community terms and saw the opportunity to study abroad as a step towards broadening the support system for more Dalit students who might aspire to go abroad in the future. As Jørgen Carling & Francis Collins in their influential introduction to the special issue on aspiration in migration avers "An aspiration to migrate reflects the transformative potential of migration and implies that this imagined transformation is not only viewed positively by the prospective migrant but is also institutionally embedded".(Carling & Collins, 2018; Collins, 2018) The narratives of the Dalit student migrants show how within the context of Kerala, it is embedded within aspirational mobility and the transformative potential for the caste-community.

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<sup>2</sup> Response of Union Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment, Virendra Kumar to the question by Villupuram MP Ravikumar in Parliament.

## **Conclusion**

Migration is one of the 'time-space' strategies available along with staying, waiting and returning. In the narratives of student migrants, we can trace how the pandemic produced different types of mobilities and immobilities. While actual movement across borders gets more attention in studies on migration, in this paper we can see how there are mobilities and immobilities affected on aspiration. We have tried to put forward the emergence of the concept of 'aspirational mobility' in its inchoateness and tentativeness within the narratives of student migrants. The meaning of return, leaving behind a land of education, and leaving back to the country of desire are not monolithic and differs according to the different stages of education the students are in, the countries of their educational aspiration as well as their social positionalities before and after migration. However, the paper has its limitation in the specificity of the period it looked at. Indian Medical students have returned back to China after a long two-year wait amidst a stringent Zero-Covid policy; the Russia-Ukraine war highlighted the plight of stranded Indian students making us also wonder about the educational agencies which concentrated on that region; massive deskilling is happening along with students opting to take huge student loans to migrate. It will be interesting to reassess how the aspirations of students have changed and evolved and the role of different agents involved in the artificial manufacturing of aspirations.

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