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THE IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON KERALA DIASPORA

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“We must come to the aid of the ultra-vulnerable – millions upon millions of people who are least able to protect themselves. This is a matter of basic human solidarity. It is also crucial for combating the virus. This is the moment to step up for the vulnerable.”

(Antonio Guterres, March 2020)

Abstract

Migration has become a worldwide phenomenon in the 21st century. Kerala is perhaps one of the states in the country which has been experiencing a very high rate of international migration. Over the past five decades, the role of Kerala's diaspora in the economic, social, and cultural development of the State has been crucial. The economy of Kerala is mainly based on the remittance sent by the Kerala Diaspora contributing with a higher proportion in the state's NSDP. Today we are passing through a most turbulent crisis in the form of Corona virus. As great global crisis of this century, it affected almost all countries of the world in one way or the other. All of governments of the world are striving hard to contain the spread of Covid 19 viral infections. Global remittances are projected to decline sharply by about 20 per cent in 2020 due to the economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and shutdown. Why does migration matter for the pandemic response? What is the impact of Covid 19 on the future of Kerala Diaspora? What should policymakers consider when designing and implementing migration- sensitive policies? These are some of the questions that I would like to answer through this paper. However, the paper concludes that the rejuvenation of the productive sectors like agriculture and industry that were sidelined in the wake of the remittance boom.

Keywords: Covid 19, Diaspora, Migration, Remittance, Kerala.

Introduction

We are facing an unprecedented crisis due to Covid-19, which originated from Wuhan, China, and has since spread globally. As a significant global crisis of this century, it affected the lives of people badly. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19), characterized as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), is attacking societies at their core. COVID-19 has plunged the world economy into a recession with the potential of profound consequences and historic levels of unemployment and deprivation. The disruption caused by the coronavirus could have a significant impact on migrant workers who generate remittances. Migration has been the single most dynamic factor in the development of Kerala since its formation in 1956. Post COVID-19, Kerala stares at the prospect of large-scale return migration from the Gulf. This highlights the importance of out-migration in Kerala's economy and raises questions about its future. The present article aims at assessing the impact of Covid 19 on Kerala Diaspora.

The scenario of Novel Corona Virus: A Brief Analysis

The Covid 19 is a human, economic and social crisis. The COVID-19 outbreak affects all population segments and is particularly detrimental to members of those social groups in the most vulnerable situations. If not adequately addressed through policy, the social crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic may also increase inequality, exclusion, discrimination and global unemployment in the medium and long term. The UN Sustainable Development Goals call for making sure no one is left behind, including migrants. Different age groups face varying vulnerabilities as both migrants and being part of a particular period in life. The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems, which amplify the impacts of the pandemic. Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply under their sex (UN, 2020).



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Table 1 Statistics on Covid 19

Countries infected	Total cases	Total deaths
221	219,353,998	4,546,997
Continents Infected	Cases in India	Deaths
Asia, Africa, Europe, North and South America Australia and Antarctica	3,28,58, 978	4,39,989

Source: WHO, 2021 & GOI, 2021 (As on September 02, 2021)

As of 21 May 2020, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has confirmed 3,28,58, 978 cases, and 4,39,989 deaths in the country. According to Michael Ryan (chief executive director of the World Health Organisation's health emergencies programme), India had "tremendous capacity" to deal with the corona virus outbreak and, as the second-most populous country, will have an enormous impact on the world's ability to deal with it. The Indian Government has responded more stringently than other countries in tackling the pandemic. The Government's swift action, emergency policymaking, emergency investment in healthcare, fiscal measures, investment in vaccine research and active response to the situation scored India with a "100" for its strictness (GoI, 2021). Kerala was the first Indian state to be affected by Covid-19 with the highest number of cases at one point in time, but today it has a flat infection curve and one of the highest recovery rates in India (The Hindu, January 30, 2020). As on September 02, 2021, 3702417 people are so far affected by novel corona virus. When the first positive case of corona virus in India was reported in Thrissur on January 30, the country's entire attention was focused on Kerala to know how the deadly infection was going to be managed. The highest political and administrative commitment and proactive, timely interventions were evident in the state as far as COVID-19 management was concerned. The state government invited religious leaders, private partners, local bodies and civil society organizations to participate in policy design and implementation, considering its specific socio-economic conditions.

Table 2 COVID-19 pandemic in Kerala by district

District	Confirmed	Recovered	Active	Death
Alappuzha	264784	251621	11882	1241
Ernakulam	487971	452451	33377	2073
Idukki	110698	99746	10661	283
Kasaragod	124789	117023	7292	457
Kozhikode	442808	411091	29477	2196
Kollam	321123	310374	9073	1619
Kannur	228090	212964	13696	1378
Kottayam	259284	245056	13323	889
Malappuram	499692	468456	29338	1867
Palakkad	311690	294327	15319	2022
Pathanamthitta	154563	139945	13959	648
Thiruvananthapuram	413808	394174	17250	2358
Thrissur	371969	353705	14581	3569
Wayanad	98767	87681	10711	361

Source: GoK, September 02, 2021

Trends in International Migration

International migration is a global phenomenon that is growing in scope, complexity and impact. Migration is both a cause and effect of broader development processes and an intrinsic feature of our ever-globalizing world. The rise in global mobility, the growing complexity of migratory patterns and its impact on countries, migrants, families and communities have contributed to international migration becoming a priority for the international community (UN, 2005). IOM is the leading inter-governmental organization working with migrants and governments to respond to contemporary migration challenges. Today, the needs and demands of the large diaspora often influence government policy ranging from foreign affairs and economic development to immigration. The international migrant population globally has increased in size but remained relatively stable as a proportion of the world's population—the total estimated 281 million people living in a country other than their countries of birth in 2020. Europe and



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Asia hosted around 87 and 86 million international migrants, respectively – comprising 61% of the global international migrant stock (UN, 2020).

Table 3 Top countries receiving remittances (2005–2018) (current USD billions)

Country	2010	2015	2018
China	52.46	63.94	67.41
Mexico	22.08	26.23	35.66
India	53.48	68.91	78.61
Nigeria	19.75	21.16	24.31
Philippines	21.56	29.8	33.83

Source: World Migration Report, 2020

There is an overall increase in remittance from USD 126 billion in 2000 to USD 689 billion in 2018. There was a 9 per cent increase in remittances in 2018, up from USD 633 billion in 2017. In 2018, India, China, Mexico, the Philippines and Egypt were (in descending order) the top five remittance recipient countries (UN, 2020). The US remained by far the largest country of destination of international migrants, with 51 million migrants in 2020 (UN, 2021). The top five countries sending remittances include the USA, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and Switzerland.

The Covid-19 pandemic is crippling the economies of rich and developing countries alike. One of the significant economic impacts of COVID-19 is migration, both internal and external or cross-border. It is increasingly evident that COVID-19 causes a global recession that will shrink most economies. Furthermore, it is equally evident that the consequences for employment, income, and equality will disproportionately affect migrant workers. International students have also been affected by the closure of university campuses, loss of student jobs and mobility restrictions by both origin and destination countries hit by COVID-19 (UN, 2021). An estimated 37 per cent of total remittance inflows globally in 2019 and in 2020 were received in the 20 countries with the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases as of 1 March 2021 (World Bank, 2020).

Globally, 7 of the 20 countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases – the United States of America, India, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Germany – were among the 20 countries from which the highest amounts of remittances were sent in 2019. Remittances sent from these seven countries alone made up more than 25 per cent of all global remittances received in 2019. The most severely affected countries include the U.S., Brazil, and India. Compared to the global share of international migrants making up 3.5 per cent of the total population, international migrants are overrepresented in these countries. According to ILO estimates, we could lose between 5 million and 25 million jobs and see losses in labour income in the range of USD 860 billion to USD 3,4 trillion. Small and medium enterprises, the self-employed, and daily wage earners are hit the hardest (ILO, 2020). According to a report by the World Bank, global remittances are projected to face a sharp fall of about 20 per cent due to the economic crisis due to the novel coronavirus lockdown. It is said that the projected fall is because of a decline in the wages and employment of migrant workers. India is predicted to see a decline of 23 per cent in remittances (WB, 2020).

As of March 2021, emigrants from the 20 countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases accounted for 31 per cent of the total international migrant stock, and they had sent an estimated 37 per cent of all remittances globally to their countries of origin in 2019 (World Bank 2020a; WHO, 2021). Immigrants accounted for at least 3.7 per cent of the population in 14 of the 20 countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases, and this share is more than 7 per cent in 9 of these countries (WHO, 2021). Compared to the global share of international migrants making up 3.6 per cent of the total population, international migrants are overrepresented in these countries. Increasing border restrictions also have an impact on the mobility of migrants and the role of humanitarian organizations. The lockdowns in many countries can have disproportionate implications on the socioeconomic status of migrant women, who are overrepresented in these sectors among all migrant workers (UN, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted procedures to apply for and obtain residence and work permits, as government offices have reduced their services or closed during this time. Moreover, economic uncertainty related to the pandemic may have an impact on the demand for work permits. Global remittances are projected to decline sharply by about 20 per cent in 2020 due to the economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and shutdown (WB, 2020).

Diasporas contribute to developing their countries of origin through the promotion of foreign investment, trade, access to technology and financial inclusion. However, according to projections by the World Bank, the COVID-19 pandemic may reduce the volume of remittances sent to low-and middle-income countries from USD 548 billion in 2019 to USD 470 billion in 2021, a decline



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of USD 78 billion or 14 per cent (UN, 2021). The loss has affected the livelihoods of millions of migrants and their families, stalling progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. National strategies and international cooperation will be needed to mitigate the effects of this loss.

Response of Indian Diaspora to Covid 19

According to the UN, The Indian diaspora is one of the most vibrant and dynamic, the largest in the world. India has the most prominent global population in the world. India topped the list of countries with the largest diasporas in 2020, with 18 million persons from India living outside of their country of birth (UN, 2021). There are around 18 million people from the country living outside their homeland in 2020. The United Arab Emirates, the US and Saudi Arabia host the most significant migrants from India. Migration from India is primarily motivated by labour and family reasons. The diverse Indian diaspora also includes highly skilled scientists, engineers and doctors. Indian diaspora contributes by way of remittances, investment, lobbying for India, promoting Indian culture abroad and building a good image of India by their intelligence and industry.

Indian diaspora is one of the wealthiest minorities in many developed countries, and this helped them lobby for favourable terms regarding India's interests. Many people of Indian origin hold top political positions in many countries; in the US, they are now a significant part of Republicans and Democrats and the Government (Prasenjit, 2021). The institutionalisation of "diaspora diplomacy" is a distinct indication that a country's diaspora community has become considerably more important as a subject of interest for foreign policy and associated government activities. Angshuman Kar's work Contemporary Indian Diaspora: Literary and Cultural Representations (2015) examines how contemporary Indian diaspora literature(s) and films produced in the last twenty years have tried to negotiate the changing experiences of the Indian diaspora communities across the globe. India continued to be the largest country of origin of international migrants. India had the largest number of migrants living abroad (17.5 million), followed by Mexico and China (11.8 million and 10.7 million respectively) (UN, 2019).

The surge in COVID-19 infections and deaths in India has had a global impact, especially among 18 million diasporans. Indian migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic have faced multiple hardships. As India struggles with the pandemic's fastest-growing Covid-19 surge, one of the world's largest diasporas is mobilizing aid. The migrants also play an essential role in response to COVID-19 by working in critical sectors. Globally, India is the country of origin of most emigrants (UN DESA, 2020). As of 27 February 2021, India's official repatriation operation had facilitated the return of more than 4.5 million stranded Indians from around the world (Indian Ministry of Civil Aviation, 2021).

The Impact of Covid 19 on Kerala Diaspora

Over the past five decades, the role of Kerala's diaspora in the State's economic, social, and cultural development has been crucial. By the beginning of the 20th century, the newly introduced colonial economy prompted Keralites to migrate to plantations in Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Malaysia (Malaya) as clerks and coolies (Oommen, 2016). The southern State has a long history of several thousands of its citizens working abroad. For the last five decades, the State has been sending lakhs of its skilled and unskilled men and women to Gulf countries whose remittances, in return, have powered the State's economic and social development. The discovery of oil in the Gulf countries and the subsequent oil boom in the 1970s initiated a massive emigration from Kerala (Nikhil, 2018). Currently, the State of Kerala sends the most significant volume of immigrants to the Gulf countries. Over 90 per cent of emigration from Kerala is to the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain. The average Malayali emigrant is male, young, and has a secondary level of education. However, in the last twenty years, emigration from Kerala has become more inclusive, and the shares of women and the more educated have risen (Prakash, 2013). In 1998, while only 9 per cent of emigrants were women, it has increased to 15 per cent by 2016. As a result of migration, Kerala has witnessed a series of various economic and social changes, including, among others, a money order dependent economy. As per the Kerala Migration Survey 2018, the number of NoRKs is estimated to be 34.17 lakh in 2018. Kerala has been receiving a large number of foreign remittances every year from Keralite emigrants. It is estimated that the total remittances received in Kerala from the emigrants increased from Rs 13652 crore in 1998 to Rs 85092 crore in 2018 (Rajan, & Zachariah, 2020).

Malappuram has the most significant number of residents outside India, with a total NoRK population of 7.16 lakh in 2018. Compared to the trend in the 1970s and during the exodus from the State to the Gulf, a large number of the skilled workforce of doctors, nurses, engineers, IT professionals and teachers are now seeking employment outside the country. Of those employed abroad from the State, 67.78% are professionals such as businessmen, teachers, bankers; 3.78% are engineers, doctors (0.53%), nurses (6.37%), IT professionals (2.23%), drivers (11.85%), and 10.99% are salesmen (GoK, 2020).



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Due to large-scale and significant migration, the high migrant areas in Kerala, to a lesser extent, the State as a whole, experienced a process of rapid economic and social transformation and provided for an excellent example of migration-induced development in the last quarter of the past century. The most recent accelerated process of migration, especially to the Gulf and North America, has impacted every facet of Kerala's economy and society. The economy of Kerala is mainly based on the remittance sent by the Kerala Diaspora, contributing to a higher proportion in the State's NSDP. The circular nature of the Gulf migrants has significantly influenced the class structure, social hierarchy, worship patterns, family structure, and religion and religiosity in Kerala (Zacharia and Rajan, 2021).

Migration and remittances are twin pillars that supported the sustenance of the much-acclaimed 'Kerala Model'. KC Zacharia argued that Kerala's household is characterised by a wide range of consumer goods and high consumption levels. Foreign goods have become widespread and are deemed as a necessity to maintain primary status in society. There is a general argument that Kerala society has shifted its orientation to consumerism due to Gulf migration. Significantly Kerala's social and cultural landscape is highly influenced by the migratory process and remittances.

CDS data narrates that a substantial amount of remittances have been channelized by the families of emigrants to buy lands and build luxury/dream houses in Kerala. Since the 1980s, remittances and migration have had an enormous influence on Kerala's socio-cultural and political dynamics. A consumerist culture with different shades of 'new richness' profoundly influences the Kerala society, particularly in the gulf migrant dominated areas or 'Gulf pockets' (Rajan and Oommen., 2020). Since Gulf migration is both transitory and circulatory, its impact is strongly reflected in all spheres of the society, including the religious space. Non-resident Keralites play an essential role in the development of the State. However, the trend of return migration is increasing over the last few years. The number of return emigrants estimated by the Kerala Migration Survey 2018 is 12.95 lakh, about 60 per cent of the number of emigrants. This has increased further by the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Government has initiated new programmes to reintegrate NRKs and provide assistance to those adversely affected by the pandemic (GoK, 2020).

RBI studies revealed that India is the largest remittance-receiving country globally, and Kerala is indeed the largest remittance-receiving State in India. According to Kerala Migration Surveys, about 90 per cent of Kerala migrants leave for the Gulf for temporary contract employment. Gulf countries do not provide citizenship, so they have to return to Kerala once their contract expires (Rajan and Zachariah, 2019). The number of return emigrants estimated by the KMS 2018 is 12.95 lakh, about 60% of the number of emigrants. The figures show an increase since 2013, but the percentage of increase has declined (from 7.6% in 2013 to 3.3% in 2018). Emigrants from Kerala are highly engaged with the society of Kerala. They maintain deep familial, cultural and economic ties with the source society. The nature of their engagement has changed dramatically with technological improvements (Nikhil, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on immigration policies and processes worldwide. In order to contain the spread of the virus, dozens of jurisdictions implement new measures or change existing ones daily. The COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the lives of migrants significantly, and their futures have been put on temporary hold. Whether they return to their homes or decide to re-migrate, the policy will need to be prepared adequately and holistically. Remittances are already anticipated to drop by 23% this coming year, according to the World Bank, which will affect many millions of households all over the country (World Bank, 2020)

The big challenge is the rehabilitation for migrants who return to both the origin society and economy and helping them re-migrate in newly formed migration corridors due to the pandemic. While the trend of return migration was already an ever-increasing one due to labour market changes in the Gulf economies, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the trend, and the return of migrants has only just begun. The weakening of oil prices and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the oil-dependent economies in the Persian Gulf countries have led to uncertainties. Out of 1.8 million workers from Kerala in West Asia, at least 200,000 are desperate to come back home after losing their jobs. (GoK, 2020).

Due to the spread of COVID-19, there was panic among the Keralite emigrants in the Gulf and other countries to return to Kerala. A large number of emigrants have registered with NORKA and other agencies immediately returning to Kerala. As per figures compiled by the Department of Non-Resident Keralites Affairs, 8.43 lakh people returned to Kerala from foreign countries between the first week of May 2020 and January 4 2021. Of them, 5.52 lakh had lost their jobs — with 1.40 lakh of them returning in the last 30 days. Another big chunk of returnees, 2.08 lakh, opined that job visas had expired. The rest include senior citizens, or children, and family members of expatriates (The Indian Express, January 7, 2021). The fall in remittances adversely affected investment on land, construction of houses and other buildings, consumption, education, health, and repayment of loans to banks in districts with high



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intensity of emigration. Likely, thousands of households that solely depend on remittances for their survival will face severe economic distress.

The details of the returnees as per Covid-19 Jagratha portal are shown in Table 4

Table 4 Returnees in post Covid situation

SI No	Country	Number of Returnees
1	United Arab Emirates	1,89,295
2	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	59,608
3	Oman	33,998
4	Bahrain	14,611
5	Kuwait	21,222
6	Qatar	36,224
7	Others	22,120
Total		3,77,078

Source: Economic Review, 2020, GOK

Successful Malayali emigrants and the influential diaspora are a significant support for the state at this time of need. Kerala received support from other sovereign states with large diaspora populations. Emigrants, return migrants, and diaspora also forms the most significant contributors to the Chief Minister’s Distress Relief Fund (CMDRF). However, it is evident in the long term that the state of Kerala is going to be less dependent on emigration and remittances. With an unfavourable demographic dividend, Kerala can't regain its dominance in migration to the Gulf. Although, there is still a possibility of improving skilled migration to the developed nations in the West. The Kerala government has come up with several projects and rehabilitation schemes for the return of emigrants. NORKA has announced distress relief schemes for return migrants.:

Conclusion

Kerala is one of India's leading destinations for immigrants, and migrants make up a large percentage of Kerala's workforce. The pandemic outbreak and implementation of lockdown in the state have resulted in an unprecedented loss of GSDP and employment in all sectors of the state’s economy. The possibility of a significant scale return of Keralite from the Gulf and fall in remittances will have serious economic consequences in Kerala. The COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating impact on every aspect of life. The pandemic and the consequences of lockdown have had apparent impacts on remittances to Kerala from Gulf countries and an unemployment crisis among NRKs. A vibrant domestic economy is the only solution to deal with the change in migratory patterns. What is urgently needed is the rejuvenation of productive sectors like agriculture and industry that were sidelined in the wake of the remittance boom.

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