

---

**RETURN MIGRATION AS AN INEVITABLE SIDE OF THE KERALA  
GULF MIGRATION: THROUGH THE RETURN MIGRATION OF THE  
GULF MALAYALEE**

Mohamed Musthafa KT

PhD Research Scholar, UGC Center for Study of Indian Diaspora,  
University of Hyderabad, Telangana, India

**ABSTRACT**

Migration is not a new process. It is the movement of people from one place to another. Often migration is not permanent shifting from one place to another. Kerala Gulf migration is example of it. GCC countries (United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain) did not encourage citizenship for foreigners. So the migrants of the GCC Countries from Kerala have to return today or tomorrow. This paper is mainly discusses about the return migration as a by-product of Kerala Gulf migration and historical view of Kerala migration in general and Kerala Gulf migration in particular. It also emphasises on past and present scenario of return migration from Gulf countries to Kerala state.

**Keywords:** Kerala Gulf migration, Return Migration, Remittances, Rehabilitation, Gulf Cooperation Council, Malayali, Keralite

**Introduction**

Return migration has the same history of migration. Both are the two side of a single coin. Return migration defined as the movement of emigrants to their homelands to resettle (Gmelch, 1980). Return migration is the counter part of migration. Generally the emigrants returning for vacation or a short visit without the intention of remaining at home permanently are never treated as return migrants. Number of terms has been used to describe the process of return migration such as reflux migration, homeward migration, remigration, return flow, second time migration and repatriation. According to the definition offered by the United Nations Statistics Division for collecting data on international migration (UNSD 1998) returning migrants are persons returning to their country of citizenship after having been international migrants (whether short term or long term) in another country and who are intending to stay in their own country for at least a year. Gulf Malayalee refers to the Kerala migrant who emigrated to GCC countries. Basically

this paper is based on secondary data and data are collected from surveys and census conducted by Government and non-Government agencies, Books, Journals and Newspaper article etc.

Academically return migration did not get that much attention of migration till recently. Mangalam (1968) prepared a migration bibliography with more than 2000 entries. In which only 10 entries were on return migration. It shows the lack of emphasis on return migration academically. Only in the recent time Government of Kerala and some NGO's took initiation to study the problems return migrants especially from Gulf countries. Return migration is a significant but insufficiently studied phenomenon (Feindt and Browning 1972). But in present scenario, researchers and Government organisations are focusing return migration as a serious issue.. Because in present condition, return migration has become a serious issue in home countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. A detail study about return migrants is becoming essential to understand socio economic condition of return migrants and formulate different rehabilitation programmes. Return migration is not a sudden process. Different reasons may accelerate the process of return migration. There will be different categories of return migrants in the case of reason of return migration. First those who were forced to return due to the some problems like the aged parents or absence of male members in family or physical problems. Other returnees are those who are failed to adjust the way of life in host country or failed to fulfil the objectives of migration or legislation and restriction of host countries. While main motive for the emigration generally economic, the reason for return are numerous, complex and sometime contradictory (Conde, 1989).

It is essential to focus on four important factors when study about Kerala Gulf returns migration.

1) Problems of adjustment and reintegration of returnees to home society after return migration, 2) their contribution to home societies, 3) occupation after return migration and 4) approach of home society towards returnees. First category is that the problems of returnees to adjust and reintegrate to their home society after return migration. Often returnees are taking time to integrate with their home society. Actually they born and brought up at one place but their migration will create distance between them and the home society. The severity of problems faced by return migrants are also related the amount of time they have been away from home and the extent of their success abroad (Gilani, 1983). If the migrants are economically success, they will have good acceptance in society and vice versa. Economy is an important factor to decide status of returnee in their home country. Monetary gains achieved by the returnees, if not properly invested, will only temporarily enhance their prestige and economic power (Weist, 1979). Returnees' contribution to home society is second category while studying about return migration. Definitely their socio economic and cultural contribution will be influence their status in home society. They can share their experience and knowledge acquired by migration in home society. Return migrants in rural societies play the role of catalysts and innovators, provided the

society has requisite capacity to utilize their capital resources and skills in a fruitful manner (McArthur, 1979; Adepoju, 1981). Actually their skills and experiences are asset to the home society. But often it failed to use properly. Returnees failed to use their skills and knowledge in home society because of lack of opportunities or lack of knowledge about current trends of home society.

Occupation after return migration is an important factor. Often returnees are unable to find out appropriate jobs or taking time to find out jobs, this situation creates tensions mentally and economically and leads to depression. Changed occupational expectations in terms of income and status lead to long periods of job hunting and frustration (Demary, 1982). Often unproductive investments of migrants lead to the economic crisis after return migration. Perception of home society towards return migrants is important factor to decide their return life in home society. Often home society will not treat them in proper manner and suspicious on their achievement. Non migrants are often suspicious of returnees and resist innovation brought about by them (Cerase, 1970; Davidson, 1969). Often the achievement of return migrants through migration may lead to the target of envy to non-migrants. It creates problems between return migrants and non-migrants in home society and it will make a gap between them. While returnees may be viewed as successful, upwardly mobile individuals, they also become targets of envy (Rhoades, 1978; Gmelch, 1980). Above four factors are relevant in studies of return migration.

### **Historical Background of Kerala Migration**

Living conditions beyond the borders of Kerala were not attractive to Malayali (Zacharia and Rajan, 2003). Keralites kept relation with across the world through trade. But Keralite did not show that much interest in migration till the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kerala's trade connections with different foreign countries are evident historically. Kerala has had a long tradition of trade contacts with the west and the Middle East connection goes back to 3000 BC. Cotton cloth from Malabar found its way to Egypt around 2000 BC (Pillai, 1940). Until 1940s Kerala was basically having a non-migrating population (Zchaiah epl, 2001). Keralites have started migration during and after world war second. Before that migration of Keralite were limited and numerically less. But at the same time Kerala was attractive destination of migrants from the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu (Zacharia and Rajan, 2003). Lots of reasons accelerated migration of Keralite. Second World War played an important role in Kerala migration. British recruited large number of Keralite to different military services and send to different part of world. It opened a new experience to Keralite beyond the borders of the state in general and boarders of the country in particular.

As a part of Indian independence, Kerala became a state on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1956 by integrating Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Before independence, Cochin and Travancore were princely states and Malabar was under the Madras Presidency under the British rule. The integration opened up wide opportunities to Malayalee of this region (Travancore, Cochin and Malabar) to secure for them employment in military and civilian services in the rapidly expanding government in Delhi (Zachariah and Rajan, 2003).

Demographic expansion (1940s and 1950s experienced low birth rate and high birth) and positive movement in education paved way to beyond the borders of Kerala. Lack of land, a few job opportunities beside agriculture and growing job opportunities of metropolitan cities of Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Delhi attracted Keralite migrate from Kerala. Educated Keralites utilised the opportunities of existing illiteracy in host area. Gradually Kerala became the state to send large number of people to different states.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the major destinations of Keralite were the neighbouring states Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Next important state was given to Maharashtra. In the first stage of Kerala migration, 80 per cent of Kerala Migration was to Madras and Maharashtra accounted for seven per cent and Karnataka accounted for six per cent (Zachariah and Rajan, 2003). After independence Keralite scattered across the country. Now Keralites are visible in every state in India and across the world.

Now Kerala has 1,625,653 Diaspora populations across the world (Kerala Pravasi Census 2013). It is the five percent of Kerala's total population. United Arabic Emirates is having the largest number of Kerala overseas population. 35 per cent of Kerala overseas population is in the UAE and second position goes to the Saudi Arabia with 28 per cent of Kerala overseas population (Kerala pravasi Census 2013). Around 90 per cent of Kerala overseas population are in the Gulf Countries. In general it did not include the Keralite those who are living within country but out of Kerala.

### **Kerala Gulf Emigration**

Kerala has had a long tradition of trade contacts with the west and the Middle East goes back to 3000 BC (Zachariah and Rajan, 2012). But it has taken centuries to a massive migration from Kerala to Gulf countries. Kerala Gulf migration can classified in to two phases. First phase of migration happened from 1930s to 1950s. It was illegal movement by lot of tragedies and sacrifice. It was not a planned movement and migrants didn't have any documents. People moved to big cities like Madras, Mumbai and then moved to the Gulf countries. Actually this migration was a struggle for existence. Because these migrants did not have any hope to reach at destination or come back to home town. The Muslims of Kerala were in the front of this labour

migration as they had a variety of historical and religious reasons for easy access to the Arab region (Sekhar, 1997). In course of time, other religious communities like Hindus and Christians joined this process.

Second phase of Kerala Gulf migration started in the mid-1970s with the hike of oil prices in the Gulf countries. Gulf countries became more attractive destination for migration and migration process became easy when compare to first phase of Gulf migration. Important thing was labour market in Gulf countries became more suitable for semi-skilled and unskilled labourers. It gave a wide popularity to Gulf migration. Till the 1980s, there were no reliable data about number Kerala Gulf migrants. The first survey related to Gulf migration conducted in 1980 by government of Kerala. A major finding of this survey was 5.10 lakh Keralite were working outside of Kerala. In which 2.1 lakh were in foreign countries and three lakh within the country. Gulf countries shared 90 per cent (1.87 lakh) of total Kerala overseas population (Government of Kerala, 1980).

**TABLE 2.1**

No of migrants from Kerala to other states, Gulf countries and other foreign countries, 1987			
Destination	1987	% to total	% change from 1980
Gulf countries	300929	44.1	+ 61.3
Other foreign countries	282727	4.1	+ 32.8
Other states and union territories in India	352404	51.7	+ 17.4
Total	682060	100	+ 34.2

Source: Government of Kerala, 1988. Report of the survey on the utilization of Gulf Remittances in Kerala, Department of Economics and Statistics, Trivandrum

Two major studies of Government of Kerala showed that there was a steady increase in migration from Kerala. Table 2.1 shows that 91 per cent migrants were going to Gulf countries. It was around 90 per cent in 1980s. There was an increase of 34.2 per cent of Kerala migration from 1980 to 1987. It was the peak time of Kerala Gulf migration. Major destinations of the Kerala migrants were United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KS). 39.1 per cent of Kerala gulf emigrants were in UAE and 19.1 per cent were in Saudi Arabia in 1987 (Government of Kerala, 1988).

Malabar region, it is the northern part of Kerala comprises six districts Malappuram, Kozhikode (Calicut), Kannur, Wayand, Palakkad and Kasaragod. Malabar region sent large number of migrants to Gulf countries. Malappuram district sent 64 per cent of its total migrants to Gulf countries in 1980. Kozhikode and Kasaragod sent 50.83 per cent and 41.66 per cent. Major reason behind large number migrants to Gulf countries is that majority migrants were semi-skilled and unskilled and Islamic back ground.

**Table 2.2 Number of Kerala emigrants in Gulf countries**

S no	country	number	percentage
1	Bahrain	70298	5%
2	Iran	522	0.036%
3	Iraq	795	0.05%
4	Kuwait	106133	7.4%
5	Oman	99971	7%
6	Qatar	125503	9%
7	Saudi Arabia	450229	31.5%
8	U A E	573289	40%
	Total	1426740	100%

Source: Kerala Pravasi census 2013, Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Kerala, Trivandrum

Table 2.2 shows that 40 per cent of Kerala Gulf migrants are in the U A E and second goes to Saudi Arabia by 31.5 per cent. Since the starting of Kerala Gulf migration, majority of Kerala Gulf migrants a chose the U A E and Saudi Arabia as migration destination. Malabar region

comprises of 50.36 per cent of Kerala Gulf migrants (Kerala Pravasi census 2013). Study of Kerala government shows that around 50 lakh Kerala people are depending on Gulf migrants (Kerala Pravasi census 2013). 90 per cent of Kerala overseas population are living in the Middle East countries. Malappuram district has 18 per cent of total Gulf migrants (Kerala Pravasi census 2013).It shows that from the beginning to the present, Malappuram district has been playing an important role in the Gulf emigration.

### **Gulf returns migration to Kerala**

It has already discussed that Gulf migration is not a permanent migration. They have to come back today or tomorrow because of the existing legislation of the Gulf countries that they never encourage citizenship for foreigners. Indian emigrants did not face any serious threat to their employment during the seventies because job opportunities were then expanding on a large scale (Sekher. 1997). Majority of Indian workers in the Gulf countries were contract based and after the completion of contract they compel to go back to home country. 1980s witnessed the large scale emigration of semi-skilled and unskilled labours from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Philippines to the Gulf countries and this process made competition in job market and Indians compel to work for low wage, because migrant labours from other countries were ready to work at low wage. Completion in job market and low wage led to return migration to home country from Gulf countries. The peak time of Kerala Gulf migration, 1970 to 1980 was the only period that noted a few number return migrations. Return migration from Gulf countries started since 1980s.

**Table 2.3: Estimated Number of return Migrants from 1970 to 1986**

Year	Number	Percentage
1970 to 1975	432	0.53
1976	173	0.21
1977	778	0.95
1978	1038	1.27
1979	778	0.95
1980	1989	2.43
1981	1384	1.69
1982	4151	5.08
1983	8215	10.05
1984	10809	13.23
1985	15220	18.63
1986	36752	44.97
Total	81719	100

Source: Government of Kerala, 1988. Report of the survey on the utilization of Gulf Remittances in Kerala, Department of Economics and Statistics, Trivandrum

Table 2.3 shows that Kerala Gulf return migration is not a new process. It has been started with Kerala Gulf migration. From 1970 to 1986, Kerala had received 81719 return migrants. This study shows that every sphere of emigration, Kerala had return migration as a counter process. Table 2.3 shows that from 1980 onwards return migration became strong and active. Every year noted the steady increase in the number of return emigrants.



**Table 2.4**

No of return emigrants from1998 to 2011					Increase/decrease			
year	1998	2003	2008	2011	1998- 2011	1998- 2003	2003- 2008	2008- 2011
number	739245	893942	1157127	1150347	411102	154697	263185	-6780

Source: Kerala Migration Survey 2011, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum

Table 2.4 shows that from 1998 to 2008, there was a steady increase in the number of return migration from Gulf countries to Kerala. Compare to previous years, from 2008 to 2011 shows low number of return migrants. 1990s Gulf war, world economic recession etc made return migration more strongly. In 2011, Kerala has 1150347 returnees from Gulf countries, majority of them are unskilled and semiskilled labours. It constitutes 3.4 per cent of Kerala total population and 71 per cent of Kerala overseas population. This number of return migrants shows that Gulf return emigration to Kerala is increasing and Kerala has to accommodate these returnees socially and economically. Latest study of the Centre for Development studies shows that Kerala has 12, 524, 71 return migrants (Zachariah and Rajan 2015). It was 1.1 million in 2011 , when compare with the number return migrants between 2008 and 2011, there is a big hike marked between 2011 and 2014 with 1, 02124 return migrants.

## CONCLUSION

Keralite have been migrating to different countries since ancient time. Kerala emigration passed through different stages and trends. Gulf countries were major emigration destination of Kerala emigrants. Kerala Gulf emigration altered the socio economic and cultural face of Kerala society. Gulf remittances are the economic back bone of Kerala society. 90 per cent of Kerala overseas population are working in Gulf countries. It is very visible fact that Gulf is not a permanent place to Malayali. They have to return to home country because they are working in Gulf countries on contract basis and Gulf countries never encourage citizenship for foreign nationals. Now Kerala is facing the rehabilitation problems of return migrants. Current statistics show that number of return migrants will increase in coming future. Centre for Development Studies survey result shows that Gulf migration will stop within five year (*Times of India*, oct 13 2012). Kerala is going to experiencing large number of return migrants from Gulf countries.

## REFERENCES

- Conde, J. (1989). "Measures to encourage return migration and reintegration of returned migrants in their home country". In R. Appleyard (ed.), *the impact of international Migration on Developing countries*, OECD, Paris.
- Cerese, F.P. (1960). "Nostalgia or disenchantment: consideration of return migration. In S. Thomasi and M. Engels (eds), *the Italian experience in United States*. Centre for Migration Studies, New York.
- Davidson, B. (1969). "No place back home: A study of Jamaicans returning to Kingston", *Race*, 9
- Demary, L. (1982). *The implication of contract migration to West Asia*. Paper presented for the Third Asian and Pacific Population conferences, September 20-29, Colombo.
- Feindt, W. and H.L Browning (1972). "Returnmigration: its significance in an industrial metropolis and agricultural town in Mexico. *International Migration Review*. 6 ((2)
- Gmelch, G. 1980. *Return Migration*. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol-9
- Government of Kerala. 1980. *Housing and employment survey*. Department of Economics and Statistics. Trivandrum
- \_1988. *Report of the survey on the Utilization Gulf Remittances in Kerala*. Department of Economics and Statistics. Trivandrum
- \_2013. *Kerala Pravasi Census 2013*. Department of Economics and statistics & NORKA. Trivandrum.
- Gilani, Ijaz. 1983. *Overview of Stocks and Flows of Migrants and the Social and Familial Impacts on Communities and House Holds in Districts of High Labour Migration*. Paper presented at the Conference on Asian Labour Migration to Middle East, East-West population Institute, Honolulu, 19-23 September
- Mangalam, J.J.1968. *Human Migration: A Guide to the literature in English*. University of Kentucky Press, Lexington
- Nair, P.R.G. 1986. *Asian Migration to Arab World: Migration from Kerala (India)*. Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum

Pillai, T.K.V. 1940. The Travancore State Mannual. Vol. II. State Government Publication, Thiruvananthapuram

Rajan, Irudaya and Zachariak. K. S. 2011. From Kerala to Kerala via the Gulf Emigration Experiences of Return Emigrants.CDS working paper443. Centre for Development studies, Trivandrum.

Rhoades, R.E. 1978. Intra-European Return Migration and Rural Development: Lessons from the Spanish Case. Human Organisation

Sekhar, T .V. 1997.Migration and Social change, Rawat Publication, New Delhi

United Nations Statistics Divisions. 1998. Recommendation on Statistics of International Migration, United Nations. New York

[www.mioa.in](http://www.mioa.in)

Zachariah, K.C and Rajan, Irudaya. s. 2015. Dynamics of migration and Remittances in Kerala : Result from the Kerala Migration survey 2014. Working paper 463. Centre FOR Development Studies, Trivandrum

Zachariah K.C and Rajan, Irudaya. s. 2012. Kerala's Gulf Connections, 1998-2011, Economic and Social Impact of Migration, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi

Zachariah K.C, E.T Mathew and Rajan, Irudaya. 2003. Dynamics of Migration in Kerala dimensions, differentials and Consequences, Orient Longman, New Delhi.