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TRANSCENDING BORDERS: INSIGHTS INTO THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MIGRATION FROM KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Kerala, a state in southern India, has a rich history of migration, with Malayalis (people from Kerala) living all over the world. Recently, more students from Kerala are pursuing higher education in countries like Canada, the UK, and Australia. This paper explores the drivers of this trend, the underlying theories, and the implications for both students and host countries. It examines why Keralite students choose to study abroad, considering personal, family, and academic factors, as well as the role of migration networks and individual preferences. Key findings suggest that the internationalization of higher education, the rise of India's middle class, and the appeal of long-term residency options in countries such as Canada are major influences. Although Kerala has high development indices, the state still struggles to retain its youth population. This paper provides an overall understanding of this contradiction by offering an in-depth look at international student migration from Kerala.

KEY WORDS: Kerala, International student migration, Driving factors, Implications, Trends in migration,

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a timeless aspect of human history, present since ancient times. It is a physical movement of individuals or groups from one place to another for various causes. People migrate for food, shelter, better living conditions, and other reasons. The nature and reasons for migration have changed over the years, and it continues to evolve. However, it is interesting to examine the migration in the present globalised era.

According to UN migration data, international migration varies due to economic, demographic, and other factors. which leads to the emergence of migration patterns; these patterns are unique and distinctive, as they bring about various socio-economic implications for both the host and home countries (Chazalnoël & Randall, 2022). This paper examines the major migratory trends in the southern Indian state of Kerala, specifically international student migration from Kerala. The aim of the paper is to analyse current migratory patterns of international students, the factors driving international student migration, and the effects of international student migration on the state. The article is organised into three sections, each addressing a specific objective.

METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to analyze the following objectives

- To understand the current migratory trends of Kerala
- To analyse the driving factors of international migration from Kerala
- To analyse the implications of migration on the state.

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The data for the study were collected from secondary sources, including databases such as JSTOR, SCOPUS, Taylor and Francis, and Google Scholar, as well as publications from the Centre for Development in Kerala, to retrieve existing literature and data on the selected topic. Emphasis was placed on recent publications concerning migration from Kerala. Official data on migration, along with other relevant social and economic statistics, were gathered from the Kerala Migration Surveys conducted between 1998 and 2023. Information from Central and State Government websites was also utilized as a source for the study.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Kerala -The changing migratory patterns

Kerala, India's southernmost state, features a narrow coastal strip bordered by the Western Ghats to the east and the Arabian Sea to the west. Its distinctive geography has fostered ancient maritime trade with Romans, Greeks, Chinese, Jews, Egyptians, and Arabs, beginning as early as the 1st century BCE and continuing into the 3rd century CE. The earliest international maritime trade relations have led to the exchange of socio-cultural aspects within Kerala society (OMER, 2018).

While discussing the history of migration, we cannot separate the developmental trajectory of Kerala without understanding the state's major migratory trends over the years. The Kerala model of development, which aims to provide high living standards despite low per capita income, was also significantly shaped by international labour migration from Kerala during the 1970s and 80's. The earlier Gulf migration, typically a conventional form of relocation where individuals from developing nations move to developed countries in search of employment and opportunities, was more based on contractual agreements. In this pattern of migration, returning to their home country was a key component. Once the contract concluded, workers were generally expected to go back to their homeland. (Prakash, 1998)So these sojourns demanded that they invest in their homeland through remittances, thereby securing a financially stable retirement life.

Remittances from migration contributed to the development of local communities by improving living standards, education, health care facilities, infrastructure, consumer patterns, etc. However, a 1980 survey showed that migration to Gulf countries was higher in the northern districts of Kerala than in the rest of the state; hence, the impact of migration will also be higher in these northern districts than in the southern districts (Prakash, 1998).

On the contrary, the recent Kerala migration survey of 2023 showed a considerable decrease in Gulf emigration, with north Kerala still a sending area, contributing 41.8% to Kerala's emigrant population. The recent Kerala migration survey of 2023, conducted by the International Institute of Migration and Development and the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, revealed that a new kind of migratory change is happening in the Kerala economy, pointing out the mass international student migration to countries like the UK, Canada, Germany, Australia, etc.

International job-seeking migration has now evolved into international student migration, as younger individuals in the region move abroad to pursue advanced education and career prospects, with the goal of eventually settling in a foreign country. Unlike the Gulf migration, in which people had to return to their homeland after a period of stay, international student migration involves emigrants seeking to settle permanently. So, the implications of both these migrations on the

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Kerala economy have different facets. The important question on what drives this change and what motivates these students to pursue a life abroad should be seriously looked into, the common push and pull factors of migration or the perception of lack or absence of opportunities in the home land which is compensated on the host land in the context of international student migration makes migration an undesirable phenomenon from the sending side and desirable on the receiving end. So, the question is, what prompts the younger generation to flee? Is it because of a lack of opportunities, or does this trend imply aspirational migration? While analysing Kerala's development indices to understand the 'lack' pointed out by many, the state shows impressive figures across development indicators.

The 2011 Census of India reports Kerala's population as 33,406,061. with a literacy rate of 94%. By 2024, it had achieved a development index score of 0.790, comparable to that of developed nations. The 2024 Niti Aayog report ranks Kerala first in zero hunger and quality education, second in climate action, and third in gender equality and industry and innovation infrastructure. However, the state still fails to retain the younger generation, resulting in brain drain and the loss of human resources. The number of students opting to go abroad is increasing every year. The Ministry of External Affairs reports that in 2020, 261,406 Indian students studied abroad, with 71,769 departing last year. Additionally, government data shows that in 2019, 30,948 students from Kerala travelled to countries including the US, the UK, Australia, China, Germany, and Poland.

The 2023 Kerala migration survey reports that 2.25 lakh students left Kerala, with Ernakulam recording the highest migration at 43,990 students. This is followed by Thrissur and Kottayam, which saw 35,873 and 35,382 students emigrating, respectively (Government of Kerala et al., 2025). Wayanad had the lowest number, with only 3,750 students leaving. The survey also states that among the destinations chosen by international students, the United Kingdom was the most preferred country to migrate to, followed by Canada and other European countries. The ten most popular study abroad destinations for Indian students are the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada, Russia, Singapore, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy. The choice of preferred destinations is influenced by factors such as visa processing, PR availability, immigration laws, and the job market (George, 2017). However, the United Kingdom and Canada remain the preferred destinations for migration among the Kerala youth.

The number of female emigrants is also noteworthy in international student migration, unlike previous times when migration was primarily dominated by males. In the international student migration from Kerala, female students are also going abroad. The KMS Survey of 2023 shows that female emigrants accounted for 45.6%, while male emigrants accounted for 54.4%. The choice of destination among female migrants has also shifted from GCC countries to Western nations. The gender disparity can be seen as narrowing in the international student migration as compared to the total emigrant population from Kerala. As we can see from the above data, the migratory patterns in Kerala are on the path of a transition, as the younger generation's migration aspirations have shifted toward settling in a foreign land rather than the homeland. The government of Kerala must investigate the issue with a keen eye to address the issue faced by the youth.

Driving factors of international student migration

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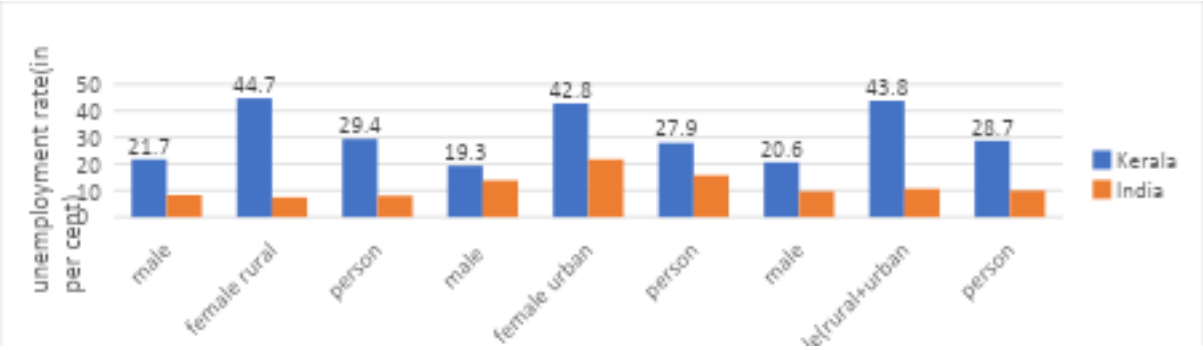
The main drivers of international student migration can be understood through economic, social, and political perspectives. Everett Lee's Theory of Migration (1966), which reinterpreted the principles of migration, identified the factors influencing the decision to migrate and the migration process into four categories: Factors related to the place of origin, the destination, intervening obstacles, and personal reasons (Lee, 2014). This can be analysed in the context of Kerala, focusing on the push and pull factors associated with migration. High levels of educated unemployment, availability of loans, increased presence of educational consultancies, peer group influence, increased exposure through social media, wage differences, rigid curricula of the state universities, etc., can be attributed as the push factors, whereas better living standards, job opportunities, higher wages, financial freedom, global exposure, and opportunity to learn. At the same time, earning potential, permanent settlement, flexible courses, etc., remain pull factors or attractors for the destination area.

Unemployment continues to be the primary driver of migration; the national unemployment rate for men was 3.3 per cent and for women 2.9 per cent in 2022-23. In Kerala, the unemployment rate was 4.8 per cent among men and 10.7 per cent among women during the same period (Kerala Economic Review, 2023). Despite its reputation for higher literacy and advanced education, the state struggles to generate adequate employment opportunities that match its educational achievements.

Fig. 1 Unemployment rate (in per cent) among the youth (15-29 years) in Kerala and India in 2022-23



Source- Kerala Economic Review 2023.

This is clearly visible in Table 1 below, which shows the education status of emigrants over the years.

Table 1: Education status of Emigrants

Years	Graduates and above	Higher secondary	Secondary
1998	3.84	12.30	39.38
2008	15.27	22.73	40.45
2018	30.51	29.68	30.84

Source: Sunny et al. (2020:21)

The increasing number of overseas educational consultancies also influences the rising student migration from the state. As reported in the New Indian Express, Kerala hosts 4,000 private agencies specializing in international study. Easy access to information and support from these

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agencies significantly facilitate migration processes (Abraham, 2024). The significant influx of students to countries such as Canada, the UK, and Australia over the years has resulted in more stringent visa and permanent residency regulations in these nations. Additionally, these countries have raised education fees in an effort to curb the number of incoming students.

Table 2: Cost to study abroad

Country	Tuition fees	Living expense
Australia	AUD 25,000-50,000	AUD 29,710
Canada	CAD 11,000-30,000	CAD 20,635
France	Euro 9000-15,000	Euro 12,000
UK	GBP 10,000-35,000	GBP 12,000
Ireland	Euro 9000-15,000	Euro 12,000

Source: New Indian Express 2024

The majority of students, to compensate for this expense, rely on education loans, which are now easily available in the state. Experts have observed that the increased availability of education loans in Kerala is associated with higher fee structures for overseas education. As per the Ministry of Finance, for the financial year 2023-24, education loans approved by public sector banks amount to Rs. 32,960.29 crore, with Kerala securing a 13.8% share of Rs. 4,545 crore. The data also states that loans availed in the state have increased by 324%, from Rs. 1,610 crore in the financial year 2021 to Rs. 5,218 crore in the financial year 2023 (The New Indian Express Group the New Indian Express-Kozhikode Epaper Dated Sat, 2 Mar 24, n.d.). The students taking loans to pursue professional degrees have shifted to those taking loans to pursue international education. The average cost of studying abroad ranges from 16 lakhs to 25 lakhs per year. This increased cost, combined with high-end living expenses, prompts students to take collateralised loans. The moratorium period, up to one year after the completion of the studies, gives students a breathing space to repay the loan. However, this creates mental stress in many students, coupled with anxiety and challenges faced by them while exposed to a new environment.

Table :3 Education loans Sanctioned by Public Sector Banks

	FY2020-21		FY2021-22		FY2022-23		FY24(Till Dec 31,2023	
Location	A/C	Value	A/C	Value	A/C	Value	A/C	Value
Kerala	14,971	1,610.61 cr	27,235	3,047.48 cr	41,787	5,218.60 cr	34,398	4,544.49 cr
India	1,19,888	13,239.05 cr	2,02,106	23,975.03 cr	3,50,767	38,321.51 cr	3,67,451	32,960.29 cr

A/C-Total loan accounts, Value-Total amount of loans availed, Source: (The New Indian Express Group, The New Indian Express-Kozhikode E paper, dated Sat, 2 Mar 24, n.d.)

After taking out education loans, many students go abroad and end up at institutions without proper rankings or accreditation. International students are treated as cash cows to boost the

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economy. Education is treated as a commodity to be sold in the globalised world, with customers from peripheral or semi-peripheral countries. In contrast, the capitalist core countries boost their economies and retain their capitalist position in the borderless world.

The students are also attracted by their peers and social media exposure, creating a notion that the grass is greener on the other side. The network effect of international migration is relevant while discussing the determinants of migration. Migrant students from the same country tend to concentrate not only in their home country but also at the same universities. The information on the quality of education, culture, and fees can be easily understood through these student networks for an aspirational migrant. These networks operate at different levels, such as providing information on the education process and offering a helping hand with accommodation and settling in. These diasporic communities play a crucial role as a helping hand to student migrants (Michel, 2013).

The network effect also creates a favourable perception of migration. In a society like Kerala, where migration is common, rapid development in mass communication and transportation fuels the aspiration to migrate in search of a better life. The traditional push-pull theories view the decision to migrate as a passive response to external factors (de Haas, 2021), but this fails to account for the micro-level decision-making process, which peers and social media influence. So, further studies are required to understand the micro-level factors influencing the decision to engage in aspirational migration.*Implications for the state*

International student migration has become a topic of discussion over the last few years, even though the phenomenon began over a decade ago. The effects of the mass exodus cannot be fully understood except for the years to come; however, some studies show the negative effects of young migration in the near future.

The demographic change in the state, driven by young people leaving and an ageing population, is a major concern. According to the 2011 National Census, there are approximately 11 lakh vacant houses in Kerala. According to state-level data on local self-government, about 11% of the total 10 million-plus houses are vacant, which is higher than the national average of 7.45% (Babu, 2023).

The ageing population is left behind, or, after attaining financial stability abroad, the parents or grandparents of these migrants move abroad, leaving the houses vacant, implying there is no chance of return migration for these people. The decreased remittance is yet another factor, as there is a shift from the Gulf migration to other Western countries. The increased living expenses, as well as the decision to settle down abroad, will result in sending back less money to the homeland after the successful migration of parents, which will also end, leading to less development of local communities and households in the context of outmigration. Another implication is in the education sector: seats for various traditional graduation courses have been increasingly vacant over the years. We cannot solely blame student migration for this, but it is also a major contributing factor to the alarming increase.

Table 4: Total degree seats and Vacancies

University	Total Seats	Vacancies	Percentage

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Kerala	35,245	8,651	24.54%
MG	55,000	22,310	40.56%
Calicut	1,08,761	39,873	36.67%
Kannur	23,195	10,546	45.46%

Source: https://www.onmanorama.com/career-and-campus/top-news/2023/11/27/undergraduate-degree-seats-lying-vacant-in-kerala.html

Migration is a reality that needs to be accepted as a part of the evolving society. Migration existed in the past, and it will continue in the future as well. We, as a society, cannot see it as an undesirable social phenomenon; instead, it needs to be welcomed and understood, a measures need to be taken to frame and implement policies that would be beneficial to the state.

DISCUSSION

From the study, it was evident that in the current globalised world, we cannot isolate a social phenomenon, as it is a product of multiple social factors. Migration is one such complex phenomenon with many facets. The traditional way of looking at migration from the perspectives of sending and receiving countries no longer provides an in-depth view of the current migration scenario. Brain drain, brain gain, and skilled migration are commonly used terms when discussing the trend of young people migrating from Kerala. However, the emphasis should be on policy-making and its implementation, focusing on what should be done to improve the situation. Instead of seeing this as brain drain or a loss of human resources, discussions on how to make use of this situation for the benefit of the state, as well as the brain gain, need to be emphasised. The intellectual capacity of migrants can be utilised in various ways, especially in education. Student exchange programmes can be implemented at reduced cost across universities in states, thereby attracting students to pursue education in their own homeland. Startup initiatives that provide remote employment opportunities for international migrant students should be encouraged; this, in turn, facilitates financial gain for the state and provides employment opportunities for student migrants. These kinds of initiatives will attract our youngsters and instil confidence for securing a successful life in their homeland itself.

CONCLUSION

Global student relocation is an increasing phenomenon in. In this globalised world, where borders are increasingly porous, migration seems easier and more promising. Unlike the older generation in Kerala, who went to the Gulf countries to work and save for the family left behind, the younger generation sees migration as a means to place themselves in the Western world, with the ultimate goal of settling down and building a life for themselves. This migratory trend is viewed as a concern by the governments of both sending and receiving ends, but in the future to come, this growing concern needs to be changed, and migration needs to be accepted as a natural process instead of seeing it in the dichotomy of loss and gain of sending and receiving countries.

Even though a lot of studies were done in the context of Kerala related to international migration, it was mainly done in the field of adult migration, Gulf migration and its effects on the economy; the study on youth migration remains unexplored in the field. Micro-level studies, including

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stakeholder perspectives on migration, should be conducted in the field to obtain a multidimensional perspective.

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