



# MIGRATION, REMITTANCES, AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION IN KERALA: A DEMOGRAPHIC AND RELIGIOUS ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

*International migration has become one of the most impactful social and economic changes in Kerala. Migration to Gulf countries has significantly changed the state's economy, population, and social structure. This study looks at the demographic and religious aspects of migration and remittances in Kerala, focusing on emigrant households. The article primarily uses data from the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2016, conducted by the Centre for Development Studies (CDS). It also references secondary data from census reports, human development reports, and previous studies. The analysis investigates migration patterns, gender breakdowns, age distributions, marital statuses, educational levels, job conditions, and the religious makeup of emigrants and return migrants. Findings show that migration from Kerala primarily involves males and focuses on younger, better-educated groups. Muslims make up the largest share of emigrants, despite shifts in migration patterns over time. Remittances have greatly improved living standards through better housing, education, healthcare, and household resources. However, remittance use tends to focus on spending rather than investment. The study concludes that migration has become a key means of social and economic advancement in Kerala, significantly transforming the lives of migrant communities, especially in districts such as Malappuram.*

**KEYWORDS:** Migration, Remittances, Kerala, Gulf Migration, Muslim Emigrants, Socio-Economic Development, Kerala Migration Survey

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Migration refers to the temporary or permanent movement of people from one place to another for social, economic, political, or cultural reasons. International migration has become a major factor driving development in many developing countries. It provides job opportunities and helps reduce poverty by enabling remittances to be sent home at the household and community levels. Kerala has a unique position in India's migration history. Since the oil boom in the Gulf region during the 1970s, many Keralites have moved to West Asian countries in search of better jobs. Over the years, migration has become deeply embedded in Kerala's economy and society. Migration and remittances have affected spending habits, job markets, housing conditions, education levels, and access to healthcare throughout the state. We can analyze the impact of migration in Kerala through various angles, especially demographic and religious aspects. Certain groups, particularly Muslims from northern districts like Malappuram, have historically led migration to Gulf countries. Migration has thus become a significant factor in understanding social changes within Kerala. This study examines the demographic and religious traits of migrant households in Kerala and explores the social and economic effects of migration and remittances on these households.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Migration from Kerala to Gulf countries has gained significant attention from economists, sociologists, and demographers. Earlier studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s mainly focused on migrants' socio-economic backgrounds, the reasons for migration, and the effects of remittances. Prakash (1978) and Mathew and Gopinathan Nair (1978) conducted early studies that examined migration and remittance flows in Kerala. These studies emphasized how migration helps improve household income, savings, and spending. Sociological research by Gulati (1983, 1987, 1993) and Shekhar (1997) looked at the social effects of migration, particularly the impact of male migration on women and family structures. Prakash (1998) claimed that Gulf migration has become one of the most significant factors influencing Kerala's labor market, poverty reduction, income distribution, and economic growth. Studies on return migration by Gopinathan Nair (1986), Nambiar (1995), and Prakash (2000) explored the reasons for return migration, rehabilitation issues, and the socio-economic situations of return



migrants. The Kerala Migration Surveys conducted by Zachariah and Rajan are the most detailed sources of migration data in Kerala. These surveys provide specific estimates of emigrants and return migrants by district and taluk and examine the demographic and economic aspects of migration. Further rounds of KMS were conducted in 2003, 2008, 2011, 2014, and 2016, generating valuable information on migration trends and remittance patterns. While there is a large body of literature on Kerala migration, relatively little focus has been given to community-specific studies, particularly concerning Muslims. Since Muslims are a major migrant group in Kerala, it is important to closely examine migration-related social and economic changes in Muslim households.

### 3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the demographic characteristics of migrant households in Kerala.
2. To analyze the religious makeup of emigrants and return migrants.
3. To assess the socio-economic profile of emigrant households.
4. To study the effects of migration and remittances on living standards and social change.

### 4. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This study relies mainly on data from the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2016, conducted by the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Thiruvananthapuram. Secondary data were obtained from census reports, UNDP reports, National Human Development Reports, Kerala Human Development Reports, Reserve Bank of India statistics, and published research studies. The Kerala Migration Survey 2016 is the seventh survey in the series of migration studies carried out by CDS since 1998. This survey revisited households included in KMS 2011 and gathered detailed information on emigrants, return migrants, demographic traits, education levels, employment conditions, and household socio-economic profiles. The survey included 13,195 households throughout Kerala. In Malappuram district, 1,077 households were surveyed after excluding those that had either moved or been relocated.

### 5 MIGRATION TRENDS IN KERALA

Kerala has seen steady growth in overseas migration since the 1970s. The Gulf region became the main destination due to rising labor demand linked to oil-driven economic growth. The number of emigrants from Kerala rose from about 1.86 lakh in 1980 to 15.01 lakh in 2000. During this time, Kerala accounted for nearly 35.75 percent of Indian emigrants to Gulf countries. The number of emigrants increased further to 21.93 lakh in 2008, 22.80 lakh in 2011, and around 24 lakh in 2014. Migration has become a significant part of Kerala society. Its effects are seen in better housing, higher consumption, greater investment in education and healthcare, and rising household incomes.

### 6. DEMOGRAPHIC ASPECTS OF MIGRATION

#### 6.1 Gender Composition of Emigrants

Migration from Kerala is mostly male-oriented. According to the Kerala Migration Survey 2011, females made up only 14.8 percent of all emigrants. This figure remained nearly the same as 14.6 percent in 2008. Female migration is more common in internal migration than in international migration. Cultural restrictions, job market barriers, and immigration laws limit women's ability to migrate overseas. Women who migrate often work in nursing, domestic work, and service sectors. The share of female return emigrants was lower at 11.5 percent in 2011, showing that male labor migration continues to dominate.

#### 6.2. Age Composition of Migrants

Migration is strongly linked to younger age groups. In 2011, the average age of Kerala's population was 35.09 years, while the average age at migration was only 24.78 years. Nearly 59.5 percent of emigrants were between 20 and 29 years old compared to only 16.5 percent in the general population. The average age of emigrants in 2011 was 33.6 years, while the average age of return emigrants was 44.5 years. These findings show that migration is mainly undertaken by economically active youth looking for jobs abroad.

#### 6.3. Marital Status of Emigrants

The marital status of emigrants highlights important gender differences. Most male emigrants were unmarried, while most female emigrants were married. Overall, about 61.2 percent of emigrants were unmarried, and 38.6 percent were married. However, approximately 85.4 percent of return emigrants were married. The higher number of married return migrants suggests that many migrants return after achieving economic goals, such as building a house, educating their children, or saving money.



#### 6.4. Educational Characteristics of Migrants

Migrants from Kerala tend to be better educated than non-migrants. About 75.1 percent of emigrants had completed secondary education or higher, compared to 45.2 percent in the general population. Similarly, 35.4 percent of emigrants held diplomas, degrees, or higher qualifications, while only 12.2 percent of the general population did. The average years of schooling among emigrants was 11, compared to 7.9 in the general population. These findings reflect the growing educational selectivity of migration from Kerala.

#### 6.5. Employment Status of Migrants

Employment is the main reason for migration. Before migrating, unemployment among emigrants was much higher than in Kerala's general labor force. The unemployment rate among emigrants before migration was about 31.1 percent, compared to 7.2 percent in the general labor force. However, once migrants reached their destination countries, unemployment dropped significantly as they found jobs abroad. Migration, therefore, serves as a crucial means of generating employment and improving income for Kerala's educated and semi-skilled youth.

### 7. RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION OF EMIGRANTS

Emigrants by Religion Migration from Kerala shows strong religious aspects. Muslims have historically led migration to Gulf countries. Earlier studies estimated that Muslims made up nearly 75 percent of emigrants during the early stages of Gulf migration. According to KMS 2011, Muslims represented 43.6 percent of emigrants, Hindus 36.4 percent, and Christians 20 percent. Although the number of Hindu migrants has grown over time, Muslims remain the largest group among emigrants. The increase in Hindu migration reflects the gradual growth of migration networks across communities. However, Muslim households still show much higher migration intensity.

#### 7.1. Return Emigrants by Religion

Among return emigrants, Muslims accounted for 44.5 percent, Hindus for 43.3 percent, and Christians for 12.2 percent. The relatively higher share of Hindu return migrants suggests changes in labor-market dynamics and in return-migration patterns. The number of Christians among both emigrants and return migrants has decreased over time.

#### 7.2. Non-Resident Keralites by Religion

The share of Muslim Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) grew from 41.9 percent in 2008 to 43.9 percent in 2011. Hindu NRKs also increased during this time, while the share of Christian NRKs fell. These trends show the ongoing importance of Muslim migration networks in supporting overseas migration from Kerala.

#### 7.3. Migrants per Household

Migration intensity varies greatly across religious groups. Among Muslims, there were about 59 emigrants for every 100 households, compared to 29 among Christians and 18 among Hindus. Similarly, roughly 37.2 percent of Muslim households had at least one emigrant, while 19.5 percent of Christian households and 12.7 percent of Hindu households did. These numbers show that Muslim households rely more on migration and income from remittances.

#### 7.4. District-Wise Variations in Migration

Migration patterns differ significantly across districts in Kerala. Districts such as Malappuram, Kozhikode, Wayanad, Kasaragod, and Palakkad have higher numbers of Muslim emigrants. Malappuram district consistently reports the highest number of emigrants in Kerala. Migration has become a key part of the district's economy and social makeup. Kannur district has recorded very high migration levels among Muslims, with some areas having over one emigrant per household. Differences in migration at the district level reflect variations in religious demographics, migration connections, education levels, and access to jobs abroad.

### 8. SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF EMIGRANT HOUSEHOLDS

The socio-economic profile of emigrant households shows how migration and remittances can change lives.



**Table.3.21. Socio-economic Profile of the Emigrant Households**

Religion	Per cent	Land Owned (in cents)	Per cent
Hindu	40.9	< 10 Cents	20.0
Christian	17.2	10-20	39.4
Muslim	41.2	20-50	24.7
<b>Ration Card</b>		50-100	8.7
Yes	99.4	100+	7.2
APL	81.6	<b>Household Assets</b>	
BPL	18.4	Motor car	24.3
<b>Fuel Used for Cooking</b>		Taxi / Truck / Lorry	5.0
Wood	30.3	Motor Cycle /Scooter	47.9
Electricity	0.4	Telephone	45.9
Kerosene	0.5	Mobile Phone	94.6
L.P. Gas	68.7	Television	92.9
<b>Type of house</b>		MP3/DVD/VCD	42.7
Luxurious or Very Good	59.0	Refrigerator	78.1
Good	35.8	Computer / Laptops	27.6
Poor or Kutcha	5.2	Microwave Oven	12.6
		Internet connection	16.4

Source: Compiled from Kerala Migration Survey, 2016

According to KMS 2016, Muslims made up 41.2 percent of emigrant households, followed by Hindus at 40.9 percent and Christians at 17.2 percent. Housing conditions for these families have improved greatly due to remittance income. About 59 percent of emigrant households lived in good or luxurious homes, while only 5.2 percent lived in poor or makeshift houses. The ownership of household items was also notable. Approximately 94.6 percent of emigrant households owned mobile phones, 92.9 percent had televisions, and 78.1 percent had refrigerators. Migration also improved transportation. Nearly 24.3 percent of emigrant households owned cars, and 47.9 percent had motorcycles or scooters. Cooking fuel use reflected better living conditions, with 68.7 percent of households using LPG for cooking, although around 30.3 percent still relied on firewood. Despite these gains, about 18.4 percent of emigrant households remained below the poverty line, showing that the benefits of migration are not evenly distributed.

## 9. IMPACT OF MIGRATION AND REMITTANCES

Migration and remittances have greatly changed Kerala's economy and society over the past 40 years. Remittances played a vital role in reducing poverty, increasing spending, building homes, advancing education, and improving access to healthcare. Migrant households invested heavily in housing, children's education, healthcare services, and durable goods. Migration also helped grow Kerala's service sector, especially in education, healthcare, communication, transportation, and finance. However, remittances are mostly used for consumption. Productive investments in sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, and industry remain low, limiting the long-term benefits of remittance flows. Dependence on overseas jobs also makes Kerala's economy vulnerable to external shocks, such as changes in oil prices, immigration rules, and instability in Gulf countries.

## 10. CONCLUSION

Migration has become a significant socio-economic force in modern Kerala. Movement to the Gulf has transformed household economies, social mobility, educational ambitions, and spending habits across different communities. The study shows that emigration from Kerala mainly involves men and focuses on younger, better-educated individuals. Muslims continue to make up the largest group of emigrants, particularly in northern districts like Malappuram. Remittances have greatly improved living standards by funding investments in housing, education, healthcare, and consumer goods. Migration has also lowered unemployment and opened up economic opportunities for families with limited resources. However, the full potential of remittances has not yet been realized because much of the income is spent on consumption rather than investment. Policies that encourage business investment, skill training, financial access, and support for return migrants are essential. Kerala's migration experience illustrates the complex links between international migration, remittances, and economic change. Understanding these dynamics is key to developing inclusive strategies in economies that rely on migration.



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