

# The Role of Government and Non-governmental Organizations in the Integration of Returned Migrants: A Case Study of the State of Kerala, India in the Context of Covid-19

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## Abstract

The Indian state of Kerala has witnessed a massive inflow of returned migrants during the lockdown in the wake of the ongoing pandemic. Though the official data of international and internal migrants who returned to the state by registering in the online portal of NORKA (The Non Resident Keralites Affairs) is not yet publicized by the concerned authorities,- as the process still continues- it is roughly estimated that the number of returned migrants have reached around 8.5 lakh during the lockdown (Philip, 2021). The changing visa rules of Gulf countries and the impending global economic recession act as major challenges to the state of Kerala, as the uncertainty regarding the migrant inflow and pattern can adversely affect the state economy. This paper is aimed at addressing the initiatives by the government of Kerala towards the integration of returned migrants. The significance of NORKA's direct financial assistance and the 'Dream Kerala Proj-

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ect’ announced by the chief minister, as policy level interventions from the government towards the well being of returned migrants is explored in this paper. Similarly, the significance of non- governmental organizations, such as community service groups and youth volunteer initiatives, in the process of integration will be addressed in detail. The paper also examines the long term plans towards structural changes as proposed and implemented by the government, that would be crucial in the process of integration. Therefore, a section of this paper will be allotted to address the policy level interventions that promote start up missions, localization of agriculture sector and small scale industry.

## **Introduction**

The demography of the southern state of Kerala in India represents a significant role that the migrant populations possess in the state economy. The growth in GDP and high per capita income in Kerala are indebted to the remittances of the migrant population. “Kerala saw annual remittances of Rs 85,000 crore in 2018, and was expecting this to increase to Rs 100,000 crore in 2020” (Philip, 2021). Demographically, Kerala stands as an important provider of labor force to the foreign nations, especially Gulf countries, and a significant job market to the migrant workers from different northern Indian states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Assam, and West Bengal. As Kerala can be looked upon as a center of migration cycle, the ongoing pandemic did have a tremendous impact on the economy of the state. As Professor Irudaya Rajan, faculty at the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, told *Quartz* during an extensive interview on the impact of lockdown on migration:

India has somewhere close to 20 million international migrants. Half of these are in six Gulf countries: Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, UAE, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Out of these some 2.5 million are from the Southern state of Kerala. So Kerala will be badly affected. (Pullanoor, 2020)

The ‘Gulf Boom’ that strengthened the economy of Kerala with the massive historical mobility of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labor population came to a standstill during the outbreak of the pandemic. Migrant population, ranging from domestic workers in GCC and medical assistants in European Union and other developed countries, were facing wage theft and job loss, during the pandemic. Consequently, a significant migrant population and stranded migrants made their way back home during the lockdown.

At this juncture, the government of Kerala -similar to any other governing bodies globally- had to initiate immediate policies and measures to tackle the crisis situation. The government prioritized the health care of the returned migrants in the process of integration. Having established a detailed Covid protocol in the initial stage itself, as the first case of the virus in India was reported in the state of Kerala, the government could effectively lay out an effective mechanism of contact tracing and quarantine. The returned migrants were benefited from the zero-cost or subsidized health care facility, quarantine, and transportation as the primary stage of integration. However, considering the gravity of the situation, the government and other stake holders had to make both emergency and long term policy level interventions towards the process of integration. Therefore, this paper is aimed at exploring the role of the government and non-governmental organizations

in the process of integration and return in the context of the pandemic. The paper will also address the inclusive policies and measures that facilitated the safety of internal migrants during the lock down in Kerala, with the combined efforts and co-operation from the civil society as well.

### **Research Methodology and Data**

In the absence of literature, considering the novelty of the research area, most of the data and inputs for the study were collected through various platforms such as news paper reports, government notifications, video recordings of media brief by the concerned authorities, and from official websites. Various social media platforms of ministries and officials were used to retrieve information regarding policies and action plans. Considering the risk factors during the lockdown, a telephone interview was employed as a tool of research to assess the impact of policies among returned migrant communities and internal migrants in the state. A survey was conducted among the selected 30 participants over telephone. Ensuring confidentiality regarding the identity of participants, the response were examined and incorporated for the efficacy of the analysis.

### **Scope and Justification**

The Kerala model of crisis management and relief activities was applauded and celebrated by different nations across the world. The collective effort of government and non-governmental organizations in combating Covid-19 and rehabilitating the returned migrants reflect exemplary organizational skills and effective resource management. The inclusion of internal migrants in the policy formulation and civil society interactions also represents the

efficiency of the system. Therefore, this study makes a significant contribution to the evolving area of research; whereas, other states/nations can replicate and/or improvise the policies and action plans in order to effectively integrate the migrant community. Apart from spreading awareness and sharing knowledge, the paper also seeks to identify gaps and limitations in the process of policy implementation, by conducting a direct telephone interview with select returned migrants and internal migrants. By bringing out the efforts of various stakeholders into the spectrum, the paper also encourages a few remedial measures to improve the relief work and process of integration during the ongoing crisis scenario.

### **Policy level interventions from the government**

The return of the migrant population was facilitated through the online platform of NORKA (The Non Resident Keralites Affairs) in the state. The government of Kerala approved a sum of 5000 INR to each migrant on arrival towards travel expenses, based on the application. The scheme benefitted many returned migrants:

In the past year, the government offered financial assistance of Rs 5,000 each to 1,22,000 people who returned to the State. Under a project for returned emigrants to set up their own businesses, Rs 14 crore was provided as subsidy on capital or interest for 712 ventures. A sum of Rs 10,000 each was also provided to 433 NoRKS who tested positive for COVID-19 (Harigovind, 2021)

Along with the immediate monetary aid via NORKA, the government announced “Dream Kerala Project” as a proposal to effectively utilize the

skills and experiences of the returned migrants to the state welfare by creating more employment opportunities. The project includes the maintenance of a skill registry, option to find required employees, and an open invitation to submit ideas and proposals. The concerned authorities have expressed their plan to make use of the project as a user interface. An excerpt from the official website of the Dream Kerala Project is given below:

The expatriates or Non-Resident Keralites (NRK) who have been pumping our economy with enough foreign remittance for many years are in large numbers returning after they lose their jobs abroad. However, every crisis opens new possibilities and new opportunities. With a large pool of human resource with enough expertise back and they all look for meaningful use of it for a living, the state's business as well as entrepreneur sector could well step in and utilise their skills in good use. State Government is also looking to hear constructive suggestions or plan that would contribute to the welfare of the returned NRK community. The selected suggestions, projects, and plans will be implemented with the help of experts from respective fields. ("Dream Kerala Norka Roots", n.d.)

Dream Kerala project can be cited as an ambitious policy level intervention from the government of Kerala towards the integration of returned migrants. The project is actively reaching out to the proposed subjects and hopes to bring sustainable employment opportunities to the returned migrants in the near future. Though the final outcome of the project is yet to be known to the public, the civil society and migrant population nurture high hopes

towards the project, considering the fact that, Dream Kerala Project is an esteemed part of the “100 Days, 100 Programs” political campaign of the present government, as a stepping stone to the upcoming legislative election in the state of Kerala.

Apart from the above mentioned policies exclusively dedicated to the returned migrants, the government of Kerala ensured the inclusion of migrants- both internal and returned- in the public food distribution system as an immediate pandemic relief measure. All the inmates of the states, irrespective of the existing economic stratification, were given groceries as ration in the initial phases of the lock down. Similarly, the health care support was also extended to all, by incorporating the assistance of local governing bodies and civil society. The government also regularized the private health care system in order to establish fair access to the health care in the wake of covid-19. The migrants were also benefitted from the bank moratorium announced by Reserve Bank of India. Further, the local body government intervened to extend the period from local money lenders and land lords, which acted as temporary financial relief to many returned migrants in the state. The central governments’ *Shramic* Train Special Service to assist the internal migrants to return to their homelands also marked an important benchmark in the process of return in India. However, the government received criticism over the initial delay in arranging transportation facilities to the internal migrants that caused the unfortunate exodus of migrants on feet during lock down.

The government of Kerala has also announced various long term policies and programs to boost the local economy by promoting small scale indus-

tries and agriculture sector. Start-up investments and programs were also welcomed by the government during the lock down period. Providing subsidy to different small scale entrepreneurs are also part of the government's long term plans, which are aimed at creating more employment opportunities that consequently will add value to the integration process of the returned migrants in the long run, claim the authorities.

### **The Impact of Non-governmental Organization in the Process of Integration**

The state witnessed the unending support of various youth volunteer initiatives, community organizations, alumni associations, charity trusts, and *pravasi* [migrant] cultural forums in the rehabilitation programs during the lockdown. Apart from the frontline medical and administrative officials, such volunteer groups played an integral part in the relief works and integration of returned migrants. These non-governmental organizations extended their constant support in various tasks ranging from the distribution of groceries, arranging cooked meal to those who are in quarantine, distribution of masks, sanitizers, and addressing other medical needs etc. Some of these organizations provided monetary supports to stranded migrants, towards the travel expenses.

Internal migrants were identified as one of the most vulnerable groups during the lockdown. The government of Kerala reached out to local body organizations and NGOs to spread awareness among the internal migrants. NGOs played a vital role in the relief activities by surpassing the linguistic barriers.



Within fifteen days of the diagnosis of the first COVID-19 case in India, National Health Mission, Government of Kerala, working with NGOs prepared and disseminated COVID prevention messages in multiple languages. The DOLS on 18 March 2020 issued a circular designating state, district and sub-district officials to conduct COVID-19 awareness programmes among migrant workers (GOK 2020f). The circular instructed officials to identify and map areas where workers resided and also obtain WhatsApp contact details of at least one worker per area to create a group for disseminating information. (Peter et al, 2020)

The government also instructed the landlords and employment contractors to ensure the availability of food and shelter arrangements during lockdown, despite the wage loss. Civil society organizations and NGOs effectively used various social media platforms to pool resources and distribute them to the needy.

Collective efforts of the volunteers, activists, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), corporate entities, contractors, employers and those who lived in their neighbourhood also substantially supported migrant workers and families. Support included donation of food and provisions, masks and sanitisers, setting up multilingual helplines and public announcements, preventing forced detention, providing healthcare services, helping workers to travel to native states and connecting them to public services. Social media groups were also created at national level to facilitate interstate support to migrant workers. (Peter et al, 2020)

The chief minister of Kerala, Mr. Pinarayi Vijayan inaugurated a volunteer service scheme during the lock down, named, “*Sannadha sena*” and encouraged the youth to register in the online portal. Upon submitting the necessary documents, the selected volunteers were given awareness campaigns and online training by the field experts. These trained volunteers were given special permits and effectively deployed in hospitals, quarantine centers, helpline call centers etc. The overwhelming participation from the youth, without anticipating any sort of monetary benefits, by extending their helping hands to the needy can also be cited as an exemplary model.

### **Process of ‘Unlocking’: Reflections on the future of migration in the state**

The prime minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi, announced the first phase of reopening the economy termed as “Unlock 1.0” on June 1, 2020 after two and half months long lock down in India. Despite the increasing number of Covid-19 positives cases, the system was forced to reopen the economy as a survival strategy. With more relaxations in the following phases of ‘unlocking’, the migrant population also started to move across borders, by abiding to the regulations of Covid protocol. The process of ‘Unlocking’ in different phases could have ripple effect on the economy of the state of Kerala as well, and the same could have its reflections on the migration process as well. Prof. Irudaya Rajan observed that:

Overall, I expect some 300,000 Indians to return from the Gulf by September-December because of the Covid-19 crisis. Of these, at least 100,000 will be what I call the eventual returnees... Another

100,000 of these will re-migrate. I have seen this happening post the 2008 crisis, during the Gulf wars, during the Nitaqat crisis in Saudi Arabia. Now, this re-migration need not be to only the Gulf. There are 200+ countries in the world. Why only talk about the Gulf? The government should train these people to think beyond the Gulf. (Pullanoor, 2020)

He further focuses on the necessity of conducting skill acquisition programs to the migrants, in order to suit the demands of the changes in the global job market. His observation adequately borrows references from the historic patterns of migration in the state of Kerala. It can be observed that the migrant population in Kerala tends to return to their respective work places, immediately after the downfall during various crisis situations. Therefore, the stakeholders need to accommodate the reality of resuming migrant mobility and convert it into policy changes to safeguard the interest of migrants, along with addressing the issue of integration. The government has to take up adequate measures to promote migrant mobility, as the economy of the state depends majorly on the remittances of migrant population. The role of certain non- governmental charity groups and community service circles in Kerala in providing monetary assistance to the returned migrants to meet the expenses of airfare and visa procedures during the phases of ‘unlocking’ is also commendable.

### **Report on the Telephone Interview with the Returned Migrants.**

In order to assess the impact of policy level interventions by the government of Kerala and the role of Non- governmental organizations in the relief and

rehabilitation of returned migrants, a ground level study was carried over in the form of telephone interview. 30 migrants across different districts in Kerala were selected for the study. The sample size of 30 was inclusive of 20 international returned migrants and 10 internal migrants. The following are the primary details of each category of samples:

Host Nations and the Number of International Migrants (Total 20):

- UAE 4
- Saudi Arabia 4
- Qatar 3
- Kuwait 3
- Oman 2
- Bahrain 1
- USA 1
- UK 1
- Singapore 1

Domestic States and the Number of Internal migrants (Total 10):

- Tamil Nadu 2
- Bihar 2
- Assam 2
- West Bengal 2
- Uttar Pradesh 2

The age group selected for the study in both categories was limited to 25-45. The questionnaire consisted different set of questions to each category. The survey revealed that only around 20 % of the internal migrants were

returned to Kerala after the relaxation of restrictions imposed by the government followed by lockdown. All the participants were benefitted from the food distribution programs, awareness campaigns, access to medical aids, and transportation facilities to their respective homelands. Similarly, 80% of the sample group appreciated the efforts put forward by civil society organizations as they have benefitted from their services. Around 40% admitted to having received monetary aids during the lockdown from various local body representatives. Around 90% of the sample group revealed that they failed to overcome the wage loss during the pandemic; neither could they find jobs in their respective homelands. About 50% of the internal migrants, who could not come back to Kerala, have revealed their future plans regarding joining the agriculture sector. They expressed their concern of not finding jobs in the urban dwellings followed by the second wave of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown.

The international migrants who returned to Kerala were benefitted from government policies regarding quarantine and treatment on arrival. The sample survey revealed that about 80% of them were forced to return followed by job loss. Only 40% of the sample group has managed to re-emigrate to the host nations so far. The remaining 60% has not recovered from the financial crisis that the pandemic has caused. Mr. X (age 33) revealed that he has failed to pay the EMI on his house loan for the consecutive 14 months. As the government and banks have already lifted relaxations on moratoriums, his increasing liability “drags his entire family to uncertainty”. The outstanding debts and lack of jobs in the market remain the major threat to the returned migrants. About 90% of the sample group has availed

the benefits of public food distribution system and public healthcare in the state. About 40% of the sample group received NORKA's monetary aid on application. The exemplary efforts by non-governmental organizations were wholeheartedly appreciated by all the participants. About 30% of the returned migrants have started to proceed with their entrepreneurial plans, by either spending money from their savings or borrowing from different sources. However, only 10% of the group was aware of the Dream Kerala Project and special package for migrants in 100 Days Action Plan of the government. Therefore, the government has to take necessary measures to bridge the gap between the subjects and the digitalized measures of integration and rehabilitation. Local body government representatives and civil society organizations can be effectively used as medium to educate the underprivileged working class migrants, who do not have access to digital platforms. The government has to ensure transparency and fairness in bringing the policies into action, ensuring grass root level coverage.

The survey reflected the adverse effect of upcoming economic recession at length. Similarly, the startling absence of adequate health care plans and insurance schemes among immigrant community, both international and internal, also require immediate attention.

### **Major challenges and gaps**

The responsibility of the welfare state lays in the inclusion of the vulnerable population in its policy making parameters. In the context of the integration of returned migrants in the state of Kerala, the elderly migrant population has to be identified as one of the most vulnerable groups. Unlike the young

skilled and semi skilled migrant population, who are estimated to either return to their respective work spaces or to find new job markets abroad, elderly migrant subjects/senior migrants would fall through the cracks for their age would be a barrier to compete in the job market. Needless to say, health risks would also act as hindrance in the process of return. Travel restrictions during the pandemic and changing visa rules in the GCC nations are expected to adversely affect the mobility of the elderly migrant population. Therefore, a large section of the returned migrants above the age limit of sixty will be forced to settle down in the state, either willingly or unwillingly. Unfortunately, the records on the senior migrant population in the state are yet to be drafted and publicized. Therefore, one of the major challenges that the government has to face during the policy making regarding the integration process is to identify and address elderly migrant population. The notion of 'building back better' in the post pandemic era needs to be inclusive in its outlook, therefore, has to create cordial environment to the elderly migrants as well. Similarly, another gap in the reintegration policy making can be identified as the absolute silence of the estimated widening of the gender gap in the process of migration, in the post pandemic era. The state also has to address the notion of gender gap in the process of return and integration, and introduce more effective policies and regulations, especially regarding the well being of female domestic migrant workers.

### **Limitation**

Absence of updated data on the returning migrants and the inter-state migrants can be cited as one of the limitations of this study. Proper maintenance and accessibility of the accurate data should be prioritized, to act as

adequate account in the process of policy making. The access to updated and timely data by the concerned authorities is also essential to ensure the transparency of the system, by providing the details of those migrants who have actually benefitted from the policies. Data is essential to discuss further plan of actions as well, and to ensure that the policies are inclusive in nature.

The paper is confined to the time framework of March 2020 to April 2021. The data on the policies and action plans is limited to the stipulated time period. The survey also assesses the impact of policy level interventions in the integration process of returned migrants within the stipulated period. Therefore, the paper does not address the context of the second wave of Covid- 19, second lockdown imposed by the government from May 2021, and remarks about the ongoing vaccination drives across the state.

## **Conclusion**

The role of the government and non- governmental organizations in the management of migrant crisis in the wake of Covid-19 from the southern state of Kerala in India can be looked upon as an effective model. Immediate and long term policy level interventions from the government and humanitarian initiatives by various non-governmental organizations in the state facilitated a rather smooth integration of returned migrants, amidst the panic of wage loss and health hazards. The co-operation and valid efforts of the civil society is also worth mentioning in this context. The attention to the issues of internal migrants and the inclusion of stranded inter-state migrants in the policy making process by the government of Kerala is also



exemplary. Therefore, it can be summarized that the combined efforts of various stakeholders played a significant role in the process of reintegration of returned migrants, by prioritizing the healthcare services and catering to the basic needs, including food and shelter. However, the absence of concrete data regarding the migrant returnees and inter-state migrants does require the immediate attention of the concerned authorities. Despite various commendable measures taken by the stakeholders, it can be identified that sufficient employment opportunities are not created in the rather short span of lockdown in order to counter balance the wage loss of the migrant population. However, at this juncture, it is important to trace down the pattern of the migration history of the state, which positively predicts a significant outflow of the returned migrants to their respective workplaces in the immediate future, thereby resuming the migration cycle. Needless to say, the state has already begun to witness the return of migrant population as the nation announced various stages of the process of ‘unlocking’. This paper also aims to instigate readers and various stakeholders to identify, senior citizen/elderly migrant population as one of the most vulnerable sections in the discourse of the integration of returned migrants. The process of integration require an exclusive policy and action plan to safeguard the interest of the elderly migrant population by prioritizing their mental and physical health into consideration, as the age plays a decisive role in the process of return, citing changing visa rules and health emergencies.

### **Policy Recommendation and Suggestion**

There are three recommendations followed by the impact assessment explored in this manuscript. Firstly, the government has to ensure social and

financial integration of returned migrants by introducing various schemes. Relaxations and extensions on moratoriums and bank loans could lessen the burden on immigrants to a great extent. However, more effective mechanisms to integrate the returned migrants can be achieved by creating more employment opportunities. Financial support, in the form of subsidies and government loans can boost the economy. Measures should be taken to encourage entrepreneurship and small scale industries, by providing financial, technical and legal support. Secondly, safe re-migration of both international and internal migrants should be prioritized. Legal assistance regarding documentation should be ensured. Financial assistance to the under privileged working class migrants can be extended to the sponsorship of return tickets or subsidized ticket rates. Finally, both internal and international migrants should be benefitted from compulsory health insurance schemes and packages along with ensuring priority in vaccination. The government has the responsibility to ensure transparency in the system. Therefore, the data regarding policies and implementation should be updated on digital archives at regular intervals and made accessible to the public. The paper reasserts the fact that the process of migration and remittance can strengthen the economy even after the crisis caused by Covid-19.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standard**

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