



GULF MIGRATION DYNAMICS: KERALA STATE VERSUS MALAPPURAM DISTRICT

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of migration from Kerala and its leading emigrant-sending district, Malappuram, with a particular focus on trends in emigration and repatriation during the decade 2013–2023. Using statistical tools such as percentage analysis and the binomial test for equality of proportions, the research highlights both state and district-level variations. The findings reveal that Kerala experienced an overall decline in emigrant numbers over the decade, though with signs of modest recovery between 2018 and 2023, reflecting sector-specific demand abroad. Malappuram, by contrast, recorded a continuous decline during both the long-term and short-term periods, indicating a weakening of its historical dominance in the state's migration profile. Migrants from both Kerala and Malappuram remain concentrated in semi-skilled and service occupations, with professional categories forming only a small minority. Analysis of repatriation trends shows significant disproportionalities between emigration and return migration across most Gulf destinations, with higher return shares from the UAE, Oman, and Bahrain and lower from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar. At the district level, Malappuram's disproportionality was concentrated in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, highlighting its distinct vulnerabilities. The study contributes to understanding how Kerala's migration system is undergoing structural shifts, with implications for labour markets, remittances, and regional economies.

Keywords: *Migration Dynamics, Emigration, Repatriation, Job localisation, Kerala, Malappuram*

Introduction

More than 2.2 million people from Kerala currently depend on Gulf countries for their livelihood, with a significant share having been unemployed or underemployed before migration. Migration and foreign remittances have been the backbone of Kerala's socio-economic progress, financing improvements in health, education, banking, transport, construction, and real estate. However, job-localisation policies and labour market restrictions in the Gulf have posed serious challenges to Kerala migrants. The rising number of returnees has intensified unemployment in a state that already struggles with a large pool of job seekers registered in employment exchanges. With remittance flows showing signs of vulnerability, scholars question whether Kerala can sustain its present model of social development at the same pace in the future (Kerala Migration Survey [KMS], 2023; The Wire, 2023).

Malappuram District, which sends more than 350,000 workers abroad, illustrates these dynamics most clearly. The first wave of emigrants during the 1970s and 1980s consisted largely of less-educated and unskilled workers who found employment during the Gulf's oil boom. Over time, population growth, higher education levels, and skill acquisition among younger generations created rising demand for better employment opportunities abroad. Yet, restrictive policies in host countries aimed at providing more jobs for their nationals have reduced opportunities for Kerala migrants, especially those from Malappuram. Since over half of the households in the district have at least one emigrant member, the consequences of job loss and forced return are more acutely felt here than in most other districts (Indian Express, 2019; Dhanam Online, 2023).



The challenges faced by Gulf returnees are multifaceted: unemployment or underemployment within Kerala, mounting household debt, declining health, and difficulties with social reintegration. Although remittances continue to contribute heavily to household consumption, education, health care, and debt repayment, their drying up poses a significant threat to both individual families and the state economy. The Kerala Migration Survey (2023) highlights that while remittances rose by more than 150% between 2018 and 2023, the growing share of returnees and uncertainty in Gulf labour markets indicate an unstable future. Thus, migration, once a safety valve for Kerala's unemployment crisis, has now become a source of renewed economic and social tension, particularly in migration-dependent districts like Malappuram (Mathrubhumi, 2024; Indian Express, 2023).

Research Problem

Migration-driven remittances have structurally transformed Kerala's economy over the past four decades, but recent shifts in Gulf labour markets including job-localization/nationalization policies, oil-sector slowdowns, and pandemic-linked disruptions have precipitated large-scale return migration and exposed the vulnerabilities of a remittance-dependent development model. The core research problem is: What are the socio-economic consequences of forced repatriation for Kerala's labour markets, household welfare, and local development trajectories, and how do these consequences play out in Malappuram the district with the highest concentration of Gulf migrants compared with the wider state? Investigating this is significant because (1) the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS 2023) shows remittances remain a substantial share of NSDP and patterns of returnees have shifted (KMS, 2023); (2) Pravasi Malayali Census data identify Malappuram as a migration-dependent district, making it especially vulnerable to shocks (Economics & Statistics Dept., 2013); and (3) emerging literature on GCC nationalization and kafala-era reforms documents ongoing reductions in migrant employment opportunities that are likely to have medium- and long-term impacts on incomes, indebtedness, and reintegration outcomes in origin communities (Erumban, 2024; Migration Policy Institute, 2024; Rajan, 2022). Original, empirically grounded research on Malappuram's experience will therefore provide timely evidence to guide policies on reintegration, employment generation, social protection, and the sustainability of Kerala's migration-led development model.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine and compare the extent and magnitude of emigration from Kerala and Malappuram District to Gulf countries.
2. To analyse and compare the intensity and patterns of repatriation from Gulf countries in Kerala and Malappuram District.

Methodology

This study relied exclusively on secondary data. The required data were collected from reliable and authentic sources, including the Kerala Pravasi Census, the Report on Migrants and Returned Emigrants published by the Economics and Statistics Department, Government of Kerala, various reports of the Kerala State Planning Board, and publications of NORKA Roots. The collected data were systematically organized and presented in tabular form to facilitate analysis.

For the purpose of analysis, appropriate statistical tools and methods were employed. These included cross-tabulation for comparative insights, the binomial test for assessing the equality of proportions. The application of these methods enabled both descriptive and inferential analysis, ensuring that the study findings were not only data-driven but also statistically validated. The conclusions were drawn based on evidence obtained from the tabulated data and the results of the statistical tests.



Results and Discussion

Recent evidence highlights that the preference of emigrants from Kerala, based on employment opportunities abroad, continues to center around the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). However, their dominance as destinations is gradually declining. According to the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2023, while 89.2% of emigrants opted for GCC countries in 2018, this share fell to 80.5% by 2023, largely due to an increase in student migration and diversification of destinations (Kerala Migration Survey [KMS], 2023, as cited in The Hindu, 2023).

Although many Keralites remain engaged in unskilled and semi-skilled sectors such as construction and manual labour, a rising proportion of skilled professionals are both emigrating and returning. For example, a LinkedIn study reported that more than 9,800 professionals had returned from the UAE in the past five years, particularly in fields such as IT, healthcare, and entrepreneurship (LinkedIn, 2024, as cited in The Economic Times, 2024).

Return migration has also intensified in recent years. The KMS 2023 estimated that the number of return emigrants rose from 1.2 million in 2018 to 1.8 million in 2023 (KMS, 2023, as cited in Indian Express, 2023). One major driver of this trend is the localization of jobs in GCC countries Saudisation in Saudi Arabia and Emiratisation in the UAE. For instance, Saudi Arabia's Nitaqat programme was expanded in 2022 to cover professions such as accountants, teachers, doctors, and engineers, significantly affecting expatriate employment (The Hindu, 2022).

Studies of return migrants show the impact of these developments on Kerala. A survey conducted after the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that nearly 70% of Gulf returnees were unemployed after their return, and most expressed a preference for re-migration rather than attempting to secure sustainable employment within the state (Prakash, 2022, as cited in The Hindu, 2022).

Given these dynamics, the present study focuses on the magnitude and characteristics of both emigration and repatriation in Kerala, with special attention to high-emigration districts such as Malappuram, where dependence on Saudi Arabia and the UAE is particularly acute.

Destination Emigrants from Kerala

The destinations of emigrants from Kerala have shifted modestly in recent years but the Gulf continues to dominate. According to the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2023, Kerala's emigrant stock is estimated at 2.2 million people, of whom the majority are labour migrants; GCC countries still host the bulk of these emigrants (about 80.5%), with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) alone accounting for 38.6% and Saudi Arabia for 16.9% of emigrants (GIFT & IIMAD, 2024). The KMS also reports that nearly two out of five households have at least one non-resident Keralite and that the total number of non-resident Keralites (emigrants plus returnees) is estimated to be 4.0 million, while the global Malayali diaspora is put at about 5.0 million (GIFT & IIMAD, 2024).

Regional concentrations remain important: Malappuram district alone was the origin of approximately 377,647 emigrants in 2023, up from 292,753 recorded in the Pravasi Malayali Census (2013), underscoring both the continuing importance of Malappuram as an emigration-sending district and the evolving scale of migration over the decade (Government of Kerala, Economics & Statistics Department, 2013; GIFT & IIMAD, 2024). KMS 2023 also documents a demographic shift in the



migrant population — a growing share of student and young migrants (students comprised about 11.3% of emigrants in 2023) and a modest rise in female participation — indicating increasing diversification of destinations and migrant profiles (GIFT & IIMAD, 2024).

Overall, while the Gulf (especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia) remains the primary employment destination for Keralite emigrants, recent survey evidence points to gradual diversification (a rise in non-GCC destinations and student migration) and an increase in return migration, changes that have important implications for labour markets and policy in origin districts such as Malappuram (GIFT & IIMAD, 2024).

Emigration from Kerala: Recent Trends

Table 1 illustrates the recent trend of migration from various districts of Kerala. The table presents district-wise data on the number of emigrants from Kerala between 1998 and 2023, highlighting both long-term trends and short-term changes. It records fluctuations in emigration levels across different districts and shows how the overall pattern of migration has evolved over time. The last two columns in particular capture the increase or decrease in emigrants during the periods 2013–2023 and 2018–2023, offering insights into recent shifts in Kerala’s migration dynamics.

Table 1: Trends in Emigration from Kerala by Districts, 1998–2023

Districts	Number of Emigrants in years						Increase or Decrease	
	1998	2003	2008	2013	2018	2023	2023-2013	2023-2018
Thiruvananthapuram	130705	168046	308481	241727	137007	107917	133810	-29090
Kollam	102977	148457	207516	199933	240527	195815	-4118	-44712
Pathanamthitta	97505	133720	120990	141343	109836	101624	-39719	-8212
Alappuzha	62870	75036	131719	93096	136857	134116	41020	-2741
Kottayam	35494	106569	89351	107931	166625	143824	35893	-22801
Idukki	7390	7880	5792	23967	32893	25304	1337	-7589
Ernakulam	103750	121237	120979	191373	53418	186956	-4417	133538
Thrissur	161102	178867	284068	230081	241150	233177	3096	-7973
Palakkad	116026	177876	189815	70506	89065	124277	53771	35212
Malappuram	296710	271787	334572	455696	406054	377647	-78049	-28407
Kozhikode	116026	167436	199163	226499	160691	193697	-32802	33006
Wayanad	4552	7704	13996	22568	30650	32341	9773	1691
Kannur	88065	202414	119119	291321	249834	212208	-79113	-37626
Kasaragod	38747	71449	67851	104334	67281	85372	-18962	18091
Total Kerala	1361919	1838478	2193412	2400375	2121887	2154275	246100	32388

Source: Kerala Migration Survey 2023 (<https://iimad.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/KMS-2023-Report.pdf>).

As Table 1 illustrates, the emigration trend in Kerala as a whole and in Malappuram district shows both similarities and sharp contrasts over the past decade. At the state level, Kerala recorded a total of 24,00,375 emigrants in 2013, which fell to 21,21,887 in 2018 and then rose marginally to 21,54,275 in



2023. This reflects a net decline of 2,46,100 emigrants over the ten years (2013–2023), but also a small recovery of 32,388 emigrants in the last five years (2018–2023). These figures suggest that while Kerala experienced an overall downward trend in its emigrant population during the decade, there has been a modest revival in migration activity in the most recent years, indicating renewed interest or opportunities for overseas employment.

In contrast, Malappuram district, which has historically been the largest contributor to Kerala's emigrant population, experienced a sharper and more consistent decline. The number of emigrants from Malappuram fell from 4,55,696 in 2013 to 4,06,054 in 2018 and further to 3,77,647 in 2023. This represents a steep decline of 78,049 emigrants over the decade and a further drop of 28,407 emigrants even in the 2018–2023 period, when Kerala overall was recovering. The data thus reveal a divergence: while the state witnessed a partial rebound after 2018, Malappuram continued to register losses, pointing towards a structural change in the district's migration dynamics. This indicates that the revival in emigration was largely driven by other districts, while Malappuram's dominance as a migration hub has been weakening in recent years.

5.3 Employment of Emigrants in Gulf Countries

Emigrants from Kerala pursue diverse forms of employment overseas, ranging from professional occupations such as physicians to sales and various forms of casual labor. Notably, a significant proportion of these emigrants is concentrated in casual and unorganized sectors, where compensation and social security provisions are generally inadequate. Job localization policies in host countries have disproportionately impacted this segment. The present analysis seeks to evaluate the occupational distribution among emigrant workers from both Kerala and the Malappuram district residing in Gulf countries. Furthermore, it assesses the extent to which the state-wide and district-level patterns of overseas employment align or diverge in terms of occupational engagement.

Table 2: Distribution of Emigrants from Kerala and Malappuram According To Employment in Gulf Countries

SL. No	Employment	Kerala		Malappuram	
		Number	%	Number	%
1	Doctor	3550	0.28	321	0.12
2	Nurse	60334	4.69	802	0.29
3	Engineer	37124	2.89	2999	1.08
4	Bank	8173	0.64	646	0.23
5	IT profession	24118	1.88	2782	1.00
6	Teaching	8530	0.66	825	0.30
7	Manager	17343	1.35	1530	0.55
8	Driver	164750	12.82	44848	16.11
9	Business	72880	5.67	16706	6.00
10	Salesman	151305	11.77	42364	15.22
11	Others	737350	57.36	164573	59.11
	Total	1285457	100	278396	100

Source: (Pravasy Malayali Census, 2013)

Table 2 presents the occupational distribution of emigrants from Kerala and Malappuram district working in Gulf countries. At the state level, the majority of emigrants are employed in the "Others" category (57.36%), which likely includes a wide range of informal, low- and medium-skilled jobs.



This is followed by large groups working as drivers (12.82%) and salesmen (11.77%), indicating the continued predominance of semi-skilled employment in the Gulf. In contrast, the proportion of professionals such as doctors (0.28%), nurses (4.69%), engineers (2.89%), and IT professionals (1.88%) remains relatively small, suggesting that Kerala's migration is still largely shaped by demand for service and labour-intensive work, despite the state's advancements in education and professional training.

Malappuram district, which contributes 278,396 emigrants (21.66% of Kerala's total), shows a broadly similar pattern but with some notable differences. A significantly higher share of its emigrants are found in occupations such as drivers (16.11%) and salesmen (15.22%), compared to the state averages, reflecting the district's strong orientation toward semi-skilled labour migration. The share of emigrants engaged in business (6.00%) is also slightly higher than the state level, underlining Malappuram's prominence in trade-related activities. However, the district's contribution to professional categories is comparatively limited, with only 0.12% as doctors, 0.29% as nurses, and 1.08% as engineers.

Repatriation: Recent Trends

Repatriation has become a significant feature of Kerala's migration history, particularly with regard to the Gulf countries. Since the mid-1970s, large numbers of Malayalees have migrated to the Gulf in search of employment, but this flow has always been accompanied by a steady return of workers after the completion of contracts, loss of jobs, retirement, or changes in personal and family circumstances. In recent decades, return migration has gained greater importance due to structural changes in Gulf economies, stricter labour policies, fluctuations in oil prices, and global events such as economic recessions and the COVID-19 pandemic. For Kerala, where migration has deeply shaped the economy and society, return emigration represents not just the movement of people back home but also the return of skills, savings, and new social attitudes, while simultaneously creating challenges of reintegration, unemployment, and pressure on local resources. Malappuram and other high-migration districts have been especially affected, making return migration an essential aspect of understanding the evolving migration cycle in the state.

Table 3: Return Emigrants in Kerala state and Malappuram Districts for the period from 1998 to 2023

Year	Kerala	Percentage Increase Kerala	Malappuram	Percentage Increase Malappuram
1998	739245	--	123750	--
2003	893942	20.93	141537	14.37
2008	1157127	29.44	219736	55.25
2013	1252471	8.24	299857	36.46
2018	1294796	3.38	309881	3.34
2023	1790758	38.30	351176	13.33
2023- 2013	538287	42.98	51319	17.11
2023- 2018	495962	38.30	41295	13.33

Source: Kerala Migration Survey 2023

Table 3 highlights the trends in return emigration to Kerala and Malappuram district between 1998 and 2023. For Kerala as a whole, the number of return emigrants increased steadily from 7.39 lakh in 1998 to 17.90 lakh in 2023. The percentage increase fluctuated across periods: it was 20.93% between 1998 and 2003, peaked at 29.44% between 2003 and 2008, and slowed down to 8.24% between 2008 and



2013 and 3.38% between 2013 and 2018. However, the period after 2018 marked a sharp rise, with return emigrants increasing by 38.3% between 2018 and 2023, adding nearly five lakh people to the total. This pattern indicates that while return migration was relatively moderate during the early 2010s, the recent years have seen a surge, possibly linked to changing labour market dynamics in the Gulf, economic shifts, and global factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Malappuram, one of the largest emigrant-sending districts, shows a similar rising trend but with its own distinctive pattern. The number of return emigrants rose from 1.23 lakh in 1998 to 3.51 lakh in 2023. Like Kerala, Malappuram witnessed rapid growth between 2003–2008 (55.25%) and 2008–2013 (36.46%), reflecting the large-scale return of migrants during that phase. In the later periods, however, the growth slowed significantly to 3.34% between 2013–2018 and 13.33% between 2018–2023, which is notably lower than the state average. Over the decade 2013–2023, return emigrants in Malappuram increased by only 17.11%, compared to Kerala’s 42.98%, suggesting that while return migration is a significant phenomenon in the district, its intensity has been less pronounced in recent years compared to the state overall. This divergence highlights the shifting regional dynamics of migration and return within Kerala.

Table 4: Country-wise Distribution of Repatriated Workers in Kerala and Malappuram

SL No	Country	Kerala	Malappuram	Share of Malappuram (%)
1	Saudi Arabia	69183 (30.47 %)	16256 (46.13 %)	23.50
2	UAE	96212 (42.3 %)	13822 (39.22%)	14.37
3	Kuwait	11430 (5.03 %)	966 (2.74%)	8.45
4	Oman	19591 (8.63 %)	1503 (4.26 %)	7.67
5	Qatar	16162 (7.11 %)	1848 (5.24%)	11.43
6	Bahrain	14064 (6.19 %)	841 (2.38 %)	5.97
7	Iraq	251 (0.11 %)	0 (0 %)	0.00
8	Iran	118 (0.05 %)	0 (0 %)	0.00
	Total	227011	35236	15.52

Source: Economics and Statistics Department, December, 2013

Table 4 presents the distribution of repatriated workers from Kerala and Malappuram district by country of return, based on data from the Economics and Statistics Department (2013). It highlights that the majority of returnees came back from the Gulf countries, which have traditionally been the main destinations for Malayali emigrants. Among these, the largest share of return emigrants to Kerala was from the UAE (42.3%), followed by Saudi Arabia (30.47%). Other Gulf countries such as Oman (8.63%), Qatar (7.11%), Bahrain (6.19%), and Kuwait (5.03%) also contributed notable proportions, while Iraq and Iran together accounted for less than 0.2 percent, reflecting their limited role as



destinations for Kerala migrants. The table thus underscores the overwhelming dominance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in shaping return migration patterns to Kerala.

When looking specifically at Malappuram district, which is one of the largest migrant-sending regions in Kerala, the figures reveal both similarities and differences with the state trend. Out of the total 35,236 repatriated workers from Malappuram, nearly half (46.13%) had returned from Saudi Arabia, compared to just 30.47% at the state level, highlighting the district's stronger ties with Saudi Arabia. The UAE, though still significant (39.22%), was relatively less dominant in Malappuram than in Kerala overall. Other Gulf countries contributed smaller shares, with Oman (4.26%), Qatar (5.24%), and Kuwait (2.74%) showing lower proportions compared to their Kerala averages. Overall, Malappuram accounted for 15.52% of Kerala's total repatriates, reaffirming its position as a central hub of Gulf migration and return migration dynamics.

Kerala: Emigration versus Repatriation

It has already been mentioned that repatriation is the natural outcome of emigration. In this context, the researcher seeks to examine whether the proportion of repatriation from each country corresponds to the proportion of emigration to those countries. If there is a significant difference between the two (for instance, if the share of repatriation is higher than the share of emigration), it would indicate the seriousness of the problem. Furthermore, it is essential to identify which Gulf country's policies have affected the state and the district more severely. For this purpose, a binomial test for equality of proportions was employed. The following table presents the results.

Table 5: Emigration versus Repatriation in Kerala

SL No	Country	Proportion of Emigration	Proportion of Repatriation	Z value(Binomial Test)	Decision
1	UAE	0.394	0.424	-13.6928	Rejected H ₀ at 5% level
2	Saudi Arabia	0.328	0.305	10.75118	Rejected H ₀ at 5% level
3	Kuwait	0.071	0.050	9.972982	Rejected H ₀ at 5% level
4	Oman	0.069	0.086	-7.9949	Rejected H ₀ at 5% level
5	Qatar	0.088	0.071	8.053302	Rejected H ₀ at 5% level
6	Bahrain	0.048	0.062	-6.72881	Rejected H ₀ at 5% level
7	others	0.001	0.002	-0.31631	Not Rejected H ₀ at 5% level

Source: Author's estimation based on E&S Department data, 2013

Table 5 compares the proportion of emigration and repatriation from Kerala by country and applies a binomial test for equality of proportions to check whether the two distributions differ significantly. The results clearly indicate that for almost all major Gulf destinations, the proportion of repatriation differs significantly from the proportion of emigration, as the null hypothesis (H₀) was rejected at the 5% significance level in six out of seven cases.



Specifically, the UAE and Oman show higher shares of repatriation compared to emigration, while Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar display relatively lower shares of repatriation than emigration, suggesting variations in return dynamics driven by country-specific labour and migration policies. Bahrain also shows a higher rate of repatriation than emigration. Only the residual “others” category did not show a statistically significant difference. Overall, the test highlights that repatriation patterns are not proportional to emigration, meaning some Gulf countries’ policies or labour market conditions have disproportionately impacted Kerala’s migrant workers.

Malappuram District: Emigration versus Repatriation

Table 6 presents the comparison between the proportions of emigration and repatriation from Malappuram district across major Gulf countries. Using a binomial test for equality of proportions, the analysis examines whether the share of returnees from each country is consistent with the share of emigrants. The results help to identify whether repatriation in Malappuram has been proportionate to its emigration pattern or whether certain Gulf countries have contributed disproportionately to the district’s return migration.

Table 6: Malappuram: Emigration versus Repatriation

SL No	Country	Proportion of Emigration	Proportion of Repatriation	Z value (Binomial Test)	Decision
1	UAE	0.3255	0.3923	-12.3591	Rejected H0 at 5% level
2	Saudi Arabia	0.5382	0.4613	14.21391	Rejected H0 at 5% level
3	Kuwait	0.0345	0.0274	1.333653	Not Rejected H0 at 5% level
4	Oman	0.0356	0.0427	-1.31724	Not Rejected H0 at 5% level
5	Qatar	0.0503	0.0524	-0.40581	Not Rejected H0 at 5% level
6	Bahrain	0.0156	0.0239	-1.55612	Not Rejected H0 at 5% level
7	others	0.0002	0.0000	0.045194	Not Rejected H0 at 5% level

Source: Author’s estimation based on E&S Department data, 2013

The results reveal that, for the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the differences between emigration and repatriation proportions were statistically significant at the 5% level, with the null hypothesis rejected. In Malappuram, the share of repatriation from the UAE (39.23%) was significantly higher than its emigration share (32.55%), while the share of repatriation from Saudi Arabia (46.13%) was notably lower compared to its emigration share (53.82%). For all other Gulf countries—Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain—the test results indicate that the differences between emigration and repatriation were not statistically significant, suggesting broadly proportional return flows.

When compared with the state-level results for Kerala (Table 5), some important differences emerge. At the state level, six out of seven countries showed significant disproportions between emigration and repatriation, indicating that Kerala as a whole experienced uneven return patterns across almost all Gulf destinations. In contrast, Malappuram’s disproportionality was concentrated only in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the two dominant destinations for its emigrants. This indicates that while Kerala as a whole was vulnerable to diverse Gulf labour market shocks, Malappuram’s return migration was shaped much more narrowly by the dynamics in just these two countries. This concentration makes Malappuram especially sensitive to policy changes or labour market fluctuations in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which together account for the overwhelming majority of its emigrant and return populations.



Major Findings

Here are a few major findings that can be drawn from the overall analysis of emigration and return emigration in Kerala and Malappuram district

1. Kerala as a whole witnessed a decline in the number of emigrants over the decade 2013–2023, reflecting reduced opportunities abroad and changing migration patterns.
2. Despite the long-term fall, Kerala showed a modest recovery in emigrant numbers between 2018 and 2023, suggesting renewed demand for migrant labour in some sectors.
3. Unlike Kerala overall, Malappuram district recorded a consistent fall in emigrant numbers both over the decade and in the recent five-year period, indicating its weakening dominance as Kerala's leading source of emigrants.
4. Both Kerala and Malappuram migrants in the Gulf are heavily concentrated in semi-skilled and service sectors such as drivers, salesmen, and small businesses, while professional categories like doctors, nurses, engineers, and IT professionals form only a small share.
5. Kerala as a whole witnessed a decline in the number of emigrants over the decade 2013–2023, reflecting reduced opportunities abroad and changing migration patterns.
6. Despite the long-term fall, Kerala showed a modest recovery in emigrant numbers between 2018 and 2023, suggesting renewed demand for migrant labour in some sectors.
7. Unlike Kerala overall, Malappuram district recorded a consistent fall in emigrant numbers both over the decade and in the recent five-year period, indicating its weakening dominance as Kerala's leading source of emigrants.
8. Both Kerala and Malappuram migrants in the Gulf are heavily concentrated in semi-skilled and service sectors such as drivers, salesmen, and small businesses, while professional categories like doctors, nurses, engineers, and IT professionals form only a small share.
9. Six out of seven countries showed significant disproportions between emigration and repatriation, indicating that return migration was not proportional to outward migration for most Gulf destinations.
10. Higher repatriation shares were observed from the UAE, Oman, and Bahrain, while lower repatriation shares came from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar.
11. Malappuram (district level): Only UAE and Saudi Arabia showed statistically significant differences, meaning disproportionality in return migration was concentrated in these two countries.
12. In Malappuram, UAE had a higher share of returnees than emigrants, while Saudi Arabia had a lower share of returnees compared to emigrants.
13. For other Gulf countries (Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain), Malappuram's emigration and repatriation proportions were broadly proportional.
14. Overall, Kerala's repatriation burden is spread across multiple countries, whereas Malappuram's vulnerability is concentrated mainly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Conclusion

The analysis confirms that Kerala's long-standing migration to Gulf countries is entering a phase of transition. While the state as a whole shows signs of cyclical recovery despite a long-term decline, Malappuram reflects a sharper and more persistent fall, weakening its role as the leading emigrant hub of Kerala. The occupational concentration in semi-skilled and service categories continues to characterise both Kerala and Malappuram migrants, underscoring the limited diversification into professional and high-skilled employment abroad. Repatriation patterns further highlight structural imbalances: Kerala's return migration is spread across several Gulf countries, whereas Malappuram's



risks are disproportionately tied to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These findings suggest that future policy responses must be tailored to regional contexts, balancing reintegration strategies for returnees with measures to diversify migration opportunities, particularly in higher-skilled sectors. In doing so, Kerala can better manage the challenges of declining migration dominance, shifting demand in Gulf economies, and the socio-economic impact of return migration on its districts.

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