

## The Culture of Migration in Kerala: An Inquiry

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### Abstract

*This paper attempts to understand the culture of migration in Kerala qualitatively, primarily in the light of Kerala-Gulf migration. It addresses three major arguments associated with the culture of migration in the context of Kerala. The first argument is that migration is widespread and has a historical presence in Kerala. The second argument is that the decision to migrate is influenced by the day-to-day experiences of an individual. The final argument is that families and communities consider migration a pathway to socio-economic well-being. Most people from Kerala are aware of the migration history, processes, costs, and benefits attached. Individuals and households make choices to migrate or not to migrate based on these cost-benefit analyses. The Kerala community defines its social space by factoring in migration and remittances, which are pivotal in achieving social status and prestige. The study concludes that migration became culturally accepted when individuals could not meet familial and social expectations, such as a middle-class lifestyle, a meaningful job, children's education, and social mobility. Decisions related to migration are socially implanted and culturally informed. The culture of migration is dynamic and continuously evolving over time.*

Keywords: Culture of migration, Kerala, Middle-east, migration, household, community.

### I. Introduction

*[How] we [were] always attracted by the promise of a land where we can harvest gold. Once upon a time, it was Ceylon; then, it was Malaya. In the last decade, there have been stories doing the rounds of land where you end up being rich if you somehow, even selling off the roof over your head, can manage to reach there. Thousands of youth now found a dream to cherish – Dubai.*

- Movie: Vilkanundu Swapnangal –Dreams for Sale (dir. M. Azad 1980).

The emergence of the oil-related economy and the subsequent labour migration to the Gulf began to attract a massive scale of immigrant workers from different categories from other parts of the world (Addleton, 1992; Al-Ali, 2002; Amjad, 1989; Gardner, 2004; Chouri, 1986; Seccombe, 1986; Shah, 2004; Birks & Sinclair, 1979). Migration to the Gulf region from Kerala has become a major subject of debate in academic circles since the 1970s oil boom. Kerala has more than three crore inhabitants as per the 2011 Census. Since the beginning of the oil boom in the Middle East, Kerala has emerged as one of the foremost labour exporters.

Through active engagement with migrant recruiters, the Malayalee (person from Kerala) has built a sophisticated network that enables, facilitates and promotes labour migration. It is evident that many of the migration theories, from the broad structural theories to theories that attempt to account for the migrant agency, are relevant for Kerala. Kerala fits into extensive economic models, being a net migrant-sending country to wealthier, more developed countries. However, these models are inadequate in explaining why the Keralites or Malayalees leave their homelands.

In this paper, a step was taken to understand the presence of the culture of migration in Kerala through the qualitative data collected from the Calicut district from June to November 2019, which was part of the author's PhD research on the culture of migration and aspirations of the youth in Kerala. The data is collected from an urban and a rural block in Calicut, Feroke municipality and Narikuni village. Forty-three open-ended interviews were conducted among the potential migrants, migrants and non-migrants using respondent-driven sampling. Key informant interviews were also

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conducted with different community leaders and travel agents. Interviews were more formal, but the bulk of the interviews, taken from a group of people, were informal. No real names are used in this paper, and all respondents' names were changed to keep confidentiality and privacy. The attempt to develop the concept through qualitative data was considered due to many facets of the culture of migration that have been described qualitatively. No study has yet documented the existence of this culture or its effects quantitatively, using representative survey data. Based on Cohen (2004), this paper makes three arguments about the "culture of migration". First, Gulf migration has a historical in Kerala. Second, people decide to migrate as a part of their everyday experiences (familial and social). Third, Keralites consider the decision to migrate as a path towards social and economic well-being. This paper will try to address these arguments.

## II. Gulf immigrant past

### *The early movers in Kerala*

Migration is not a decision made in haste. Households and family members plan for their members' migrations and anticipate the migration results, where migration is one way a household can meet its needs. Migration is a vital part of local history and transfers success stories to the next generation. Migration has a history and movements build slowly over time. To understand migration in the present, we must follow its development over time. The first argument can be explored through various narratives, beginning with the historical presence of Gulf migration in Kerala.

"If there was no Gulf" (Gulf illarnel-ഗൾഫ് ഇല്ലായിരുന്നെൽ ....) and "this is all gulf money" (ilthelam gulf paisa anu-ഇതെല്ലാം ഗൾഫ് പൈസയാണ്) are the two of the most frequent expressions repeated in discussions of Kerala and the gulf connection during my research fieldwork. In the beginning, even though it was hard and sacrificing, People travelled through the Arabian Sea searching for the dream shore in the 1970s.

*"The trip through the Arabian Sea was dangerous. Many who had travelled before us did not reach the Gulf. We took the adventure due to severe debt. There were no job possibilities in Kozhikode then. We could have died of starvation," - Kunjappa (73, who returned to Kerala after 46 years of Gulf life).*

Pathemari (meaning dhow, a first mode of smuggling oneself to the Gulf; dir. Salim Ahmed) movie, which came out in 2015, signals the coming of retrospection on the Gulf era, a gesture towards the impending end of a way of life so common to this south Indian state. 'Pathemari' (dhow) in 2015 recreated the early adventures of the 1960s: the dangerous journey of dhows and the bear-bearing work conditions. 'Nadodi Kaattu' (1987) portrays the human trafficking of jobless Keralites packed in dhows and despatched across the Arabian Sea and its exploitation. It was visible through experience and stories that the beginning of the dream journey was similar to a nightmare. In earlier days, these migrants didn't know anyone at the destination or have any idea about the living conditions in the Middle East. They migrated to an imaginary land expecting a job that they didn't even know about.

*"We boarded the dhow from Mumbai, and after two and a half months, we reached the Gulf. Three passengers died on the way, and we didn't know them; their bodies were thrown into the sea. Once we reached the shore, we started walking by, looking for settlements. Brother and I ended up in an Arab tent; he fed us and dropped us off at Bur Dubai market." - Abukar (69, early migrant).*

*"Life was miserable in the Gulf then. We stayed in a hut made of date palm leaves. We used open places for defecation. Water was minimal and the available water was salty. Besides that, we used to go to companies that we heard were hiring people looking for a job. It was hard initially; most of the money we earned went for food and water". - Bappu (64, early migrant).*

This reflects that the movement was a complete response to unemployment and poverty in the sending region. The initial group of Kerala migrant workers who ended up in the deserts of the Gulf had no idea where they were directed. They only understood their Dravidian language, the new paddy fields, the bountiful streams and the noise of the never-ending rain. It was the call between death and survival.

*“We were seen as the fortunate ones who got to the Gulf, even though a large number got back empty-handed or injured during work.” – Kunjappa (73, who returned to Kerala after 46 years of Gulf life).*

Even after making it into their dreamland, most of them failed to achieve success. Many people returned owing to injuries and other illnesses due to the heavy manual work and a hostile climate. In some cases, the people who went missing ended up with slave rackets. Adujeevitham (*Goat days*, 2008), a novel by Benyamin, shares the real-life story of a Malayalee who went job-seeking in Bahrain, ending in a slave racket that landed him in a remote desert ranch in Saudi Arabia, where he spent almost all his youth. In the early stages, the journey and prospects presented by the Gulf region were perceived as more compelling than those offered by one's homeland. This distinction prompted individuals to take daring actions, even if it meant risking their lives rather than remaining in their place of origin.

#### *Road to prosperity*

The notion that migrants acquire substantial wealth began to disseminate swiftly throughout Kerala, akin to the rapid spread of a forest fire. This created a social atmosphere where Gulfkaran (a man who has been to the Gulf) became a role model for the young generations. A representative example of this success story is a poverty-stricken youngster who travelled from Kerala to the Middle East in 1973, merely eight years after the mass migration (*ET*, 2011). MA Yusuff Ali is today the wealthiest Malayalee (*Forbes*, 2019). Even in movies, the Gulfkaran (a migrant returning from the Gulf) was portrayed as a man getting off a flight with a costly suit and Raybon cooling glasses, foreign cigarettes and a national Panasonic (radio player) in one hand with loud music to glorify the Gulf (Vilkkannundu Swapnangal, *Dreams for sale*, 1980) Venicile Vyapari (*The Merchant of Venice* 2011)).

The Keralites, particularly those who completed their studies or were tired of studying in the 1990s, had no choice but to look for greener pastures outside. This has pushed many people to move away from their homes and follow the earlier migrants. The network created by earlier migrants helped these youngsters plan their journey.

*“I wrote to one of my family members about my plan to visit him and get a job in the Gulf; it was hard then. Once I got his reply, I went to Mumbai to do all the documentation work, which took almost four months. I have seen Malayali people in Mumbai who have been trying to go to the Gulf for years; Alhamdulillah, I was lucky”.* – Muhammad (61, migrant).

Like Muhammad, many people tried their luck to reach their dreamland and some of them made their dreams come true. Nevertheless, many of them dropped halfway. The drastic change was the arrival of travel agents and agencies in Kerala. Even individual agents who knew travel and visa arrangements started recruiting people locally by charging money. Travel agencies reduced people's time and struggle when travelling to Mumbai to facilitate their Gulf journey.

*“When we started, people were worried about paying money before getting the visa, and they tend to trust the local agents they know. Compared to the 90s, things are easier now. People can track their progress via the internet, but it was not that easy to convince earlier. Besides all that, our company grew with Gulf migration, we started here in Kerala and now spread to all over the world”* – Key informant (travel agency).

Based on the key informant, travel agencies have grown slowly. But they played a considerable role in smoothening Gulf migration. The known local agents had more demands than the agencies. In the movie 'Nadodikattu' (1987), the famous dialogue of the agent character "(if anyone asks you, tell them you are Gafoorka ka dost (friend of Gafoor))" itself shows the number of people had trust in the local agents about their arrangements.

*"Once I decided it was better to try my luck at the Gulf. I approached a local agent who arranged visas for people. He demanded a huge amount that made me take a loan on my house from a private money lender. When I got the visa, he mentioned that I would have a job once I landed there. Once I reached there was no one or job. Luckily I managed to find one of my old village friends. I struggled the first two months till I got the job, but I never complained about this to my agent"* – Siddik (46, migrant).

There was still a struggle, and people took those challenges without complaint. Many people were cheated by visa rackets, those who got visas got issues at the destination on finding jobs, and finally, those who got jobs struggled to save and send money home. But just like the oil boom, things changed swiftly. Communication between people became easier, news from the Middle East started reaching local pockets of Kerala through telephone booths (Old STD and ISD telephone booths). They served as a significant communication infrastructure, facilitating connectivity and interaction within and outside the state. People became aware of the migration process through direct connections or networks through these newly established telephone booths. Moreover, by that time most of the villages in Kerala (particularly in the Malabar region) had someone in the Gulf who became successful. That's when migration evolved into a communal endeavour in Kerala.

*"The biggest motivation that local people got to migrate in the 1990s was the knowledge that there was someone in the Gulf they knew to arrange for them a visa, receive them and help them when they reached there"* – Key informant.

To conclude the first argument, it is evident that Gulf migration has a longstanding historical background in Kerala. By the end of the 20th century, nearly all households in Kerala had been significantly impacted by Gulf migration. According to Mathew et al. (2003), migration has profoundly influenced various aspects of life, encompassing economic, social, political, cultural and religious dimensions among the Malayalee community.

### **III. Household, community and migration**

The second argument, "People decide to migrate as part of their everyday experiences (familial and social)" can be examined by considering the involvement of households and communities in the migration decision-making processes of its members. Most of the migration from Kerala to the Gulf starts with discussions and decisions made by the household. According to Kearney (1996), when a family makes a migration decision for its members, it always considers the resources available, the potential of its members (both migrant and non-migrant), the opportunities available at the destination and importantly the history of migration in the community. Individuals can't ignore their households and communities while making their migration decisions.

On the other hand, migrants create, maintain and negotiate transnational ties with kinship-based social networks at home while abroad (Kleinman, 2016). Transnationalism is an essential concept in the context of Kerala. Many Keralites who emigrate maintain intense and frequent connections with the homeland, while those who stay behind live in transnational contexts. This creates a 'bifocality' whereby a youngster [also called homeland trans nationalists (*Akesson (2004) defines "homeland trans nationalists" who "live their lives in a social universe that stretches far beyond the borders of their country."*)] in Kerala can learn and see the world through a 'double habitus'.

*Household and migration*

A household is a fundamental unit through which the Keralites develop a sense of belonging and identity in their community. Thus, it is unsurprising that families play a role in the decision-making process concerning a migrant's journey. As mentioned earlier, the decision to migrate is mainly taken by the household, with the other family members' active participation and the personal network they have with earlier migrants. The decision is the product of family strength, the household's resources, cultural values and social network. The involvement of the household in the migration decisions of its members was visible from the beginning of the Gulf migration. Soon after that the people became more aware of the opportunity and took the risk of crossing the sea and making it into the Gulf. Consequently, families compelled unemployed youths to migrate.

*"Now the circumstances have changed; you can't find a single household that doesn't have food to eat here in the community. So, to reach this place, the migration of youth from the community to the Gulf has contributed substantially. They had no choice other than going someplace else to find a way out to live, and that made them move into Gulf countries."* – Key informant.

*"I was just 19, and my brother was 22. Our father came to us one day and told us that all arrangements were made. Tomorrow evening, both of you are going to Mumbai and then to the Gulf. I didn't have any choice."* – Abukar (69, early migrant).

*"At that time, I was 19 years old, already out of school, and I was still living with my family and had no work. The people of my age were migrating already, and my family was expecting me also to migrate. They were waiting for me to initiate the conversation. Once I showed interest, it was my family who arranged all the money and other requirements"* – Afzal (51, migrant).

Stark's (1991) *New Economics of Labour Migration* reveals that the decision to migrate is partly arranged by all adult members of a migrant's family. The 1983 Malayalam movie *Akkare* (meaning Across, dir. K N Sasidaran) shows the struggle of a man named Gopi, whom his wife forces to migrate to the Gulf for better earnings. He was forced to learn several skills suggested by the people to get a visa to the Middle East. Like Gopi, Afzal, Abukar and his brother, several individuals were influenced by their families and returning migrants during that period, leading to their decision to migrate.

*"My uncle proposed the idea to me when I met him on his vacation, and my parents had a little say. He asked me to get a passport. Later, he obtained a visiting visa for me. Once I reached there, he and his friends supported me till I got my job."* – Samad (56, migrant).

*"I got a job offered by a friend from the village. He was there for a one and half years. The job is in his company. There were no second thoughts."* – Sabith (44, migrant).

While migrants still opt to head to places where they have relatives to reduce the economic and emotional costs of being abroad, asking for approval and obtaining consent from their families plays a secondary role in their decision-making process (Konaté, 2010). Once the culture of migration is prevalent, the risk related to migration is reduced, and further migration is encouraged. Keralites commonly receive job information through friends or families residing abroad. They often prefer to join their established acquaintances or relatives in foreign countries. It is visible that all family members, including extended ones, have to be informed about the migration beforehand. Therefore, family ties are helpful in attaining support once the migrant reaches the destination. Consequently, migration has emerged as a pivotal life event for the youth in Kerala with migrants being perceived as successful individuals.

*"Staying back became a bad decision one can makes. The elders will show the migrants who stayed abroad for a while, on their return, they got married and built a beautiful house."* – Ali (39, migrant).

Because of Kerala's economic situation at that time, personal goals of wealth accumulation and status attainment, and a passion for exploring life abroad, migration is the first choice. Overall, migration is a collective and transnational process strategised by migrants and their kinship-based social networks, both in origin and overseas (Soda et al., 2015). Migration became a lifestyle that men should follow, and they should work to support their families, get married, and settle down by constructing a house. Those who show no interest in migration are considered lazy, irresponsible, selfish and have less value in the marriage market. On the other hand, those who migrated became vital members of the family and society. People proudly called him *gulfkaran*. Therefore, their opinions are valued in all the decisions made in the household and community. Migrants use this recognition in different ways (both materialistic and non-materialistic) to be a part of the family and community.

*"When I left Kerala, everyone in the family was aware. My family members were proud to tell people that I was in Persia (The Gulf region was commonly referred to as Persia in earlier times in Kerala). They take it as something they have achieved. When I returned for vacations, they celebrated it in a way that I felt proud of being a gulfkaran."* – Muhammad (61, migrant).

The 1989 movie *Varavelpu* (Meaning Welcoming, dir. S Anthikad) portrays the story of Murali, who returns to his hometown after spending seven long years working hard in the Gulf/Persia. In the first part of the movie, the family welcomes Murali with respect, which later turns into hatred toward him due to his decision to settle down peacefully in his hometown.

*"I have been working in the Gulf for nearly ten years. Once I decided to return, I discussed it with my family members. My spouse asked me what I would be doing once you return and suggested that I should stay a little longer and earn money so I could start business or do something back home once I returned"* – Afsal (51, migrant).

Most of the migrants think that they have to return and settle in their homeland one day. The decision to return is also collective rather than individual. The decision to return is also an outcome of the familial compromises made between return and the benefits of staying in the Gulf, which is visible from the experiences of people like Muhammad and Afsal, and portrayed in movies like *Varavelpu* (Welcoming).

Migrants use different ways (both materialistic and non-materialistic) to be part of the family and community, providing them with a space to bargain their return migration or any other future decisions. In these transnational ties, the Kerala migrants use a material and effective exchange of money, goods, and emotions. In the context of Gulf migration, remittances show the migrant's loyalty to his family.

*"Once I received my first salary, the first thing that came to my mind was my family. I sent the money I had after meeting my expenses; that's the first I felt responsible."* – Afsal (51, migrant).

*"Yes, I always sent money to the family members so that they could support themselves. It was my duty to send them money every month. I never thought about saving it for myself."* – Abukar (69, migrant).

Besides thousands of phone calls and texts, migrants effectively reconstruct social relationships and support familial responsibilities with stay-behind communities through temporary returns (Cole & Groes, 2016; Enguld, 2002; Fall, 1998), which is common in Kerala. Gulf migration, as most of the migrants are temporary workers. Thus, the 'abroad' and the 'home' became an interconnected space.

*"Throughout my migration period, I have visited my family at least once in two years, mostly for family functions like the marriage of son or daughter."* – Kunjapa (73, migrant).

Most of the temporary returns are made to fulfil the household responsibility of the migrants. This helps them regenerate the kinship networks and to uphold familial and social status. It creates a transnational space where other community members live and experience the migration in front of their eyes. In essence, the household negotiates with its members on all migration-related decisions, serving as a medium through which migrants can maintain ties with their homeland community and enhance their individual status among community members. Now, it's the community's turn to consider how it embraces and advocates for migration, glorifying and promoting migrants as successful individuals within their midst.

### *Community and migration*

*“The Kodali thailam (a type of oil), Tiger balm and the high led torch in each Malabar household shows how deeply the migrant entered in the society” – Babu Bharathraj (author of the book – Oru Pravasiyude Kurippugal).*

Gulf migrants are closely attached to their family, friends and communities. These connections are regenerated through materials exchanges by the migrants among the familial and social networks. Finally, being from a particular community or a region develops an emotional value in forming a material exchange. According to one of the key informants, in earlier times, *chakka* (jackfruit), a regionally abundant fruit, was sent from Kerala to the Gulf through migrants to other migrants. It helped them develop belongingness to their native land as this carries a nostalgic connection with it. Besides that, the concept of *petti* (luggage) of migrants always carries pieces of stuff that belong to another community members and the opening of this luggage (*petti pottikal*) was one of the highlights of every migrant's life, both when arriving at homeland and reaching the destination.

*“Anybody coming from or returning to Kerala always carries pieces of stuff from others. Once they reach the destination, they distribute the stuff to whom it was intended. I stayed in the Gulf for seven years. All that time, my friends and community members carried things from and to my family. So whenever a need arises in my family, I wait for someone to return to Kerala so that I can send that needed stuff through them.” – Ali (39, migrant).*

*“Before I came here, my father wanted me to meet all the extended family, which I did. So many extended families gave me numbers and details of the migrants they know. Some of them gave me parcels to be delivered to a migrant in Abu Dhabi, where I was to go. So it helped a lot once I reached Abu Dhabi to make friends here.” – Sabith (44, migrant).*

This mutual assistance and generosity in the familial and community-based networks may have roots in Kerala's long historical social and community practices. Migrants always maintain and negotiate transnational ties with family-based social networks both at origin and destination (Kleinman, 2016). Migrants also collectively strategise their departures by gathering and relying on all possible familial and social networks, both in their hometown and overseas, while sustaining and regenerating familial expectations. The community as a social group tries to integrate and support the migrants and receives economic benefits for development. Additionally, the community fosters an environment where potential migrants feel encouraged and valued in their decisions regarding migration.

*“Earlier, in different parts of Kerala when someone from the village community got the opportunity to migrate, then community members individually and in the form of a group used to visit that household. Some even provided little monetary help; others gave details about people they knew at the migrant's destination.” – Key informant.*

*“When my travelling date was fixed, my family asked me to throw a prayer (mouleed) for village members. Most of the people I know were there at that gathering and they prayed for my successful future.” – Ali (39, migrant).*

The community in Kerala has historically been supportive of migration, viewing the departure of its members as a means to contribute to the society's development. They believe that they must

emotionally support the left behind members after the migrants' departure. Besides, local community programmes need monetary support from the migrants, which allows migrants to develop the image of successful migrants and further helps them reintegrate back into the community on their return.

*"The whole time I have been in the Gulf, I have sent money for local developments- whatever you see around, the masjid, sports club and Islamic colleges are constructed from the funds we sent from abroad. I even asked other migrant workers who are working with me in the Gulf to contribute to these developments."* – Kunjappa (73, migrant).

*"Most of the religious and charitable organisations in this area are run by money from people who migrated from this region. It is essential to see these contributions creating job opportunities in the community. However, the problem is that the people who work in this sector completely depend on the monetary help they receive from the migrants"* – Key informant.

The narratives show that the community received substantial financial support from the migrants throughout history. In return, it gives them enough respect, and his status depends on his financial contribution to the community. Migrants always prefer to acknowledge their gift, so it will be easy to integrate with the community upon their return. In a nutshell, those who migrated became vital members of the society and were proudly called Gulfkaran. The status the migrants receive in the community motivates the younger generation to choose migration as a career option.

Mass media also covered various aspects of this give-and-take between the community and migrants and its outcomes, particularly movies. For example, Akkare Ninnoru Maran (A Groom from Elsewhere; dir. Girish, 1985) portrays a father who will only marry his daughter to a Gulfkaran. The movie Visa (dir. Balu Kiriyath, 1983) and the Nadodikkattu (dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1987) show how local agents exploit the Gulf dreams of jobless youths. The changing local financial and real estate scenario due to Gulf migration was discussed in movies like Devasuram (dir. I.V.Sasi, 1993) and Thinkalazhcha Nalla Diavasam (dir. Pandmarajan, 1985). Further, glorifying the Gulf has also been part of mainstream movies, which show the luxuries of life of the Gulf, include films like Dubai (dir. Joshiy, 2001) and Diamond Necklace (2012).etc.

This paper further distinguishes mainstream media from community-based media including songs, movies and literature in Kerala, to delve further into community migration and migrant interactions. Unlike mainstream media, which caters to a broader audience, community-based media targets smaller communities, using specific dialects of Malayalam unique to those communities.

*"Parallel to mainstream media, the Gulf money created a community-based art in the form of songs and telefilms that can be enjoyed by all the families and messages conveyed with an emotional touch. The Kathu Pattu (Letter songs) and the home cinema or Islamic cinema are the major ones."* – Key Informant.

The Kathu Pattu in this time of WhatsApp and other video call platforms may have nothing more than anthropological significance. Still, in the 1970s letter songs were a colossal hit. These were long lyrical letters (like Bidesiya songs in Bhojpuri) sung with a lonely, heart-touching voice where women told their migrant husbands about their emotions. They start like this: *"This letter is written to my beloved husband by your lovely wife. I convey my warm wishes to you with sweet love"*. The reply letter song starts with: *"I was shocked when I opened the letterbox in Abu Dhabi. I got the letter you wrote for me with a broken heart"*. The letter song covers most of the life of migrants at their destination and the emotions of the left behind family members.

Later, these songs were turned into phone songs. Today they are a part of the *Mappila* songs and are considered and heard as the memory of those days when there were no phones. These songs develop a social understanding of how hard it is for the migrants and their families and how they cope with the separation. Simply, these songs list the costs and benefits of migration of a member to a household and the community. Further, with the development of technology, *Mappila* songs and telefilms are community-based art forms that have grown with the Gulf migration from the earlier



art forms like *Kattu Pattu*. Both have a long story to tell about the individual migration experience to the community. Arjun Appadurai (1996) links migration, media and imagination, explaining that “media provide resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project.” The consumption of images, stories and cultural productions that cross national boundaries allows people to imagine alternative lives for themselves and their children.

The above discussion shows how individuals, households and communities developed an extensive network created by Gulf migrants and vice versa. The study couldn't find a person who doesn't have a family member, friend, or at least someone he knows from the community who lives abroad.

*“I know more than ten people in Sharjah. They all work as engineers. They always invite me there and we keep in contact regularly. Life seems good there. Once I finish my studies, I would love to meet them there.”* – Potential migrant 1 (19).

*“Why worry? I know migrants; anytime, I can ask them for help if I have any doubts about migrating. Till now, I'm not worried about that.”* – Potential migrant 2 (23).

It shows that the network of households and communities created is helping potential migrants have information related to migration and life at the destination. The culture of migration is vital in Kerala. Information sharing between origin and destination is intense, with many migrants constantly interacting with their native land.

Therefore, in the context of Kerala, the second argument presented to establish the culture of migration concludes that the decision to migrate is made as a part of people's everyday experiences, including familial and social experiences. The family supports in making an individual ready for migration and participates in all decision-making from departure to return. At the community level, migration became deeply rooted in people's behaviour due to the community's participation in the migration process of its members, the influence of migrant members on the community and the community-level transmission of information related to migration through various media. Simply put, the values associated with migration become household and community values.

#### **IV. Migration: Path towards social and economic well-being**

The final argument in understanding the culture of migration in Kerala was that the people consider migration to be a pathway to economic and social well-being. In general, migration studies show that the technical, moral and physical conditions of the returning migrant are determined by his success in achieving the goals he had before migrating (Cerase, 1974). In the case of Kerala, the effectiveness of using the money earned from abroad and how the returning migrants used it to transform their lives should be understood. The ultimate expectation of migration was to make money to help the household. Although most migrants succeed in that, some fail. Cerase (1974) called this kind of return the return of failures.

*“The ultimate aim of migration is to earn more money, and the family always expects the migrant to have enough money to support household needs. The household needs increase based on the ability of the migrant to remit money; the more money the migrant earns, the more the expectation grows. And yeah... household expectation plays a more significant role than the migrant's expectation.”* – Key informant.

As part of their culture, migrants expect to earn money and spend it on the family to feel fulfilled in their life. Pellegrino and Vigorito (2005) pointed out that there are many reasons why international migration happens worldwide. These reasons are created from deeply rooted attitudes and expectations that prevail in the population. Kerala, as a collective identity in this decade, is considered to be a place where education is highly valued. However, social prestige and social mobility are still dependent on the earning capacity of an individual. From the field observation, it is found that the following expectations prevail highly among the people of Kerala.

### *Middle-class lifestyle*

In Kerala people and households have a strong expectation of having formal employment and living a middle-class lifestyle.

*“A middle-class person in Kerala is one who can afford to have his own house, have a vehicle, educate his son/daughter and support the family with food, clothing and health. It is only possible if you have a government job here or a good business. I didn’t have that, so the way I have to meet those family expectations is to migrate.... Have I met those expectations? I don’t think so; my wife still says we should have made a bigger house and started a business here” – Ali (39, migrant).*

The respondent couldn’t meet the expectations by staying home. In earlier days, it was hard to achieve the middle-class lifestyle by staying home, especially without education. Jobs like housekeeping, construction, waiting, cleaning, or any job where a good education is not needed have low wages in Kerala.

*“Cleaners, construction workers and waiters have low salaries here, but that kind of job would provide a good salary in the Gulf, which will help in achieving a typical middle-class lifestyle. I have seen people around me who work as housekeepers in Gulf but have their housekeepers here back home”. – Azeez (46, migrant).*

The expectation related to changing lifestyles can influence migration in both ways. If an individual can’t meet his and his family’s expectations, he must migrate to meet them. Putting differently, expectations can trigger chain migration, as individuals or households weigh the advantages and disadvantages of their home community against those of the destination community (Fisher et al., 1997). In the case of Kerala, people migrated to the Gulf to improve their lifestyle and to have a middle-class lifestyle: most of them succeeded (with a long period of migration), but some of them failed (the expectations from the families are dynamic as they changes based on the migrant member's attitude towards spending (financial attitude)) (Cerese, 1974)). In short, migration can help meet the expectations of a middle-class lifestyle.

### *Education of children*

During the fieldwork, we asked the migrant what their primary aspiration was once they reached the Gulf and learned about life there. Most of them replied that they wanted to educate their children.

*“Once I reached the Gulf and joined the construction company, the first thing that I decided was that I don’t want children to come here and do this work. I decided to educate my children so that they can live happily with a formal job in Kerala” – Fahad (42, migrant).*

*“I don’t want them (children) go through what I went through as a migrant; even if they want to migrate one day, I want them educated enough to get a better job.” – Muneer (57, migrant).*

The expectation is that with higher education and training, children should be able to find a job and have a better life back home. So migrants and non-migrants put their children's education on the utmost priority. However, the lack of suitable jobs for educated youth in the homeland made migration a choice for them.

*“In Kerala, enrolling your child in a private school is considered well, even though most people are aware and talk about the quality of the public education system, particularly school-level education. They want to educate their children in a good institution so that they can get better jobs in Gulf countries. Earlier migrants observed the opportunities arising in the Gulf. Accordingly, they educated their children. Leading to Engineering and MBA becoming a widespread course that students choose in higher education, particularly in the Malabar region at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. – Key informant.*

The expectation to educate the child was achieved, but finding a suitable job back home was not achieved in many cases. The expectations that earlier migrants had for their children were not completely fulfilled, even though it ended up creating a generation of migrants who are educated and have better jobs than earlier migrants. In other ways, it can be said that well-educated children turned into a better migrant than earlier migrants who exploited the Gulf's opportunities.

The financial expectations placed on a well-educated child by the family tend to be high. This stems from the children's household expectations of securing meaningful employment either in Kerala or by migrating to the Gulf countries. As migration to the Gulf doesn't provide permanent settlement, educated migrants are likely to remit more money than non-educated migrants. This goes against the findings of the conventional migration studies that highly educated migrants have less intention to return to their homeland and remit less (Faini, 2007). This is because they are well integrated into their destination and are more likely to attain permanent resident status. In the case of Kerala-Gulf migration, returning is the final stage, and it is important for the migrant to keep connected with his homeland and invest in there both financially and emotionally. In essence, many migrants from Kerala, especially early migrants, choose migration primarily to fulfil household expectations of providing education for their children, which is interconnected with other familial aspirations.

### *Meaningful employment*

This study pointed out that the family wants its members to find meaningful jobs. Not all the people migrating from Kerala are unemployed. According to the Kerala Migration Survey (2018), 58.8 per cent of the migrants were employed before migrating from their homeland.

*"I was working here in the village before I migrated; I also did the same work there, the difference is the earnings. Besides that, I had the opportunity to improve and progress in my work there."* - Ali (39, Migrant).

A majority of people left Kerala because of financial problems and low wages. Others, left because their careers did not improve. People naturally do not want to stay in one place and earn the same throughout their lives.

*"Other than government jobs in Kerala, most other jobs are considered jobs without prospects."*  
- Key informant.

The government's minimum wage acts, especially in Kerala, could not reduce migration. People in Kerala prefer jobs with promotional opportunities back home. A job without prospects of improvement does not motivate Keralites to stay back in their homeland. Even though early Kerala-Gulf migrants also wanted to have quality jobs, they mainly consider whether the particular job can meet their family's financial needs. Sabith spoke about the situation of employment in the Gulf when he migrated there,

*"I started working as a waiter in a restaurant, and there was no way up; my family was concerned after a year, and to end their concern, I started working extra shifts, then took the extra job of delivering. It was hard; I wouldn't call it a proper job."* - Sabith (44, migrant).

Most of the migrants employed in the Gulf are recruited for temporary contract jobs and there is no career ladder. To meet the family's financial expectations, they either have to work extra hours or be involved in two different jobs (if the sponsor allows). However, there is an opportunity to create a network and hunt for new jobs with higher prospects. In a nutshell, in Kerala, a meaningful job is mainly a job that can meet the family's financial expectations. For those who couldn't meet this expectation by staying back, migration became the right choice. Most early migrants struggled to meet these expectations even after migration. However, the next-generation migrants were educated and trained to find meaningful employment in Gulf countries or in other parts of the world, as the children's education was the expected outcome in a migrant family.

### *Social prestige and mobility*

Like wage level and education, social prestige and social mobility are directly linked to the expectations attached to migration. Regarding social prestige and mobility, people get more disappointed if they cannot meet them. Kerala produces professionals every year, but most migrate to other countries. In this case, professionals expect to have careers that fit their expertise, i.e., meaningful employment, which fuels the achievement of higher social prestige and mobility.

*“Kerala's health professionals are paid low, but they earn ten times more in the Middle East. Besides that, those countries value professionals more than we do here. In Kerala, attaining such professional skills and earning so little is excruciating.”* – Key informant.

*“When I work here as a coolie, I'm a coolie before my society but when I work there as a coolie, I am a Gulkaran in front of my society”*-Fahad (42, migrant).

The above responses show the relationship between wage and social prestige. As mentioned before, some professionals connect their salary as skilled professionals to their social reputation. Others directly connect their higher earnings to their social mobility and prestige, even if they do a blue-collar job at their destinations.

*“Many of them get educated well, but they prefer to work abroad rather than here because it is hard to stay here and earn a good salary. They value what they have learned, and they prefer a place where their qualifications get paid accordingly.”* – Key informant.

In Kerala, just after the first wave of Gulf migration, i.e., the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, professionals in engineering, law and medicine were considered to have more prospects than others. When it comes to wages, they are not getting paid enough in their native land. In most cases, the gap between educational investment and wages is evident. As stated before, migrants give attention to the education of their children, creating a large number of young professionals. People joke about the number of engineers in Kerala by saying that if you throw a stone at a crowd, there is a higher chance you will hit an engineer than others. Skilled professionals prefer to migrate to have a meaningful job that will help them ensure social upward mobility and prestige.

*“Here we have many nurses, making it so difficult to find a job with a good salary. Because availability reduces the price, nurses get paid Rs. 4000-8000 monthly. The same is true in other parts of India too. However, most of them continue in these jobs until they can migrate and so many nurses are waiting for an opportunity.”* – Key informant.

Cerese (1974) pointed out that professional migrants overcome difficulties at the beginning of their careers by taking any pay. This is their first step to better wages and economic stability, which satisfies their family and society expectations. Better salaries will lead to higher remittances, which will help boost the social prestige and mobility of the family and the migrant. Buying a piece of land and showing high consumption standards are considered signs of social mobility and prestige in Kerala. In short, individuals migrate to attain a particular financial status that meets theirs and their families' social reputation and mobility expectations.

The third and final argument this paper has made is that Keralites consider the decision to migrate as a path towards social and economic well-being. It is argued that social and economic well-being is permanently attached to the expectations of households and communities. In a larger context, to find evidence for the culture of migration in Kerala can be concluded here. In Kerala, children's education, higher wages, middle-class lifestyle and social reputation come under the umbrella of social expectations compared with individual expectations.

The earlier migration network helped the society to create this expectation by developing the concept of productive or successful migrants, which further developed the glorification of migration and migrants. These migration-attached expectations create a mindset among new migrants that they

should prepare to meet them through sound education and meaningful jobs to improve their lifestyle and social status. There is no individual in Kerala who hasn't thought about migrating at some point of life to meet these financial expectations. Brause (2005) had the same viewpoint in his study based in Uruguay. In Kerala, Emigration seems to be a widespread life choice. It is constantly discussed at the societal level, connected to their historic migration past. Family and society's expectations of migrants are financial (to better economic status), even though these migrants act as flag bearers of the culture of migration in Kerala by involving the households and community in their day-to-day life even though they are far away from the native land.

## **V. Discussion and conclusion**

This paper has tried to understand the culture of migration in Kerala. Simply put, it considered the idea that migration was a day-to-day experience and was regarded as a way to end economic problems. Keralites considered the Gulf as a dreamland and viewed migration as a way to achieve their dreams and goals. Some Keralites interviewed considered migration an option, not a life-changing decision. The current pattern and migration process do not mean it was the same from the beginning. The historical presence of migration portrays the development of these processes and practices. Most migrants and non-migrants are aware of the migration history, processes, costs and benefits attached. Individuals and households make choices to migrate or not based on these costs and benefits. The people define their social space by considering migration and remittances, which play an essential role in attaining social goals.

An attempt was made here to qualitatively understand the culture of migration in Kerala. Three arguments were made at the beginning of this paper based on earlier studies to find evidence of the culture of migration. The first argument was that migration is widespread and has a historical presence in Kerala. The Kerala-international migration started perishing under British workers to British colonies, which later paved the way for educated Keralites's migration to newly independent British colonies such as Malaysia. Formation of the new nation-state concept and the post-World War II years helped Keralites to migrate to meet the labour shortage of the developed nations. Finally, the oil boom in the Gulf countries in the 70s created a new age migration stream, which was focused in this paper. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most households were directly or indirectly affected by these migrations.

The second argument was that the decision to migrate is influenced by the day-to-day experiences of an individual. In Kerala, the decision to migrate is controlled by the household's resources, cultural values and the familial migration network. At the same time, migration became a topic of discussion in the community and it transmitted information related to migration to individuals. The individual decision to migrate became influenced by the migration values of the household and the community. The last argument was that families and communities consider migration as a pathway to socio-economic well-being. In Kerala, familial and community-based expectations like middle-class lifestyle, education of children, a meaningful job and social prestige have created a set of reasons for migration that ultimately ends up with the economic well-being of the migrant and his household. As a result, the society considers people who do not want to migrate and improve their lives as lazy and irresponsible. The family and community put pressure on the members who do not have lucrative jobs in Kerala to migrate to achieve a middle-class lifestyle.

Even though studies across the globe have attempted to develop a comprehensive understanding of the culture of migration present in a community (Patricia Brause, 2011; Fischer et al., 1997; Cohen, et al., 2011; Massey et al., 1999), put forward arguments and tried to address those arguments qualitatively and quantitatively. Discussion based on these arguments provides insight into the culture of migration in Kerala, which is activated by households and communities based on their values and circumstances.

An individual's decision to migrate or not is always dominated by the pressure and negotiation of the family and the community. Keralites consider migration as a life choice and live in a

transnational societal setup. Many of them have a solid familial migration network and the opportunity to migrate abroad for higher wages. Migration became culturally accepted when individuals could not meet their familial and social expectations, such as a middle-class lifestyle, a meaningful job, children's education and social mobility. The decisions related to migration are socially implanted and culturally informed. The culture of migration is not static. The changes in Kerala's society (educational and economic) and in the destination (legal and financial) can affect and bring changes to the culture of migration in the future.

In conclusion, while this study has highlighted the intricate dynamics of the culture of migration in Kerala, it also underscores the evolving nature of this phenomenon. As the society continues to undergo demographic, educational and economic transformations, and as changes occur in destination countries' political and financial landscapes, the culture of migration will inevitably adapt and evolve. This fluidity highlights the importance of ongoing research and analysis to capture the nuances of migration patterns and their implications for Kerala's society and beyond. It is certain that migration from Kerala to other countries will continue. By acknowledging the dynamic nature of the culture of migration, policymakers, scholars and communities can better understand and respond to the complex interplay of factors shaping migration decisions and outcomes in Kerala.

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