



# COVID-19 Led Return to Kerala: A Comparative Analysis of Return Emigrants

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## Abstract

This article concerns emigrants who returned to Kerala between May and December 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. We study and document the experiences of 1985 return emigrants (REM) through a quantitative survey conducted via Computer-Assisted Telephonic Interviews. The study utilises a comparative classificatory framework that categorises return emigrants into three groups: normal REM, distressed REM, and REM who returned to re-emigrate. While the REM have been a demographically, politically, and economically significant component of Kerala's population, the COVID-19 REM represent a unique case in history that has the potential to not only affect the economy, society, and psyche of Kerala for many years to come, but to also provide valuable insights into the future of global labor migration governance.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Return migrants · Remittances · Kerala

**JEL Classification** E24 · F22 · F24 · H75 · J60 · J61

## 1 Introduction

Return emigration is an optional yet natural consequence of emigration. The predominant pattern of international migration from Kerala results in large swathes of emigrants located in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. In contexts where permanent residence remains a pipe dream, return emigration is inevitable for the average emigrant. This phenomenon firmly roots their identity and social

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networks in the context of Kerala. Despite the prevalence of emigration opportunities from Kerala to the GCC countries, these opportunities have been decreasing due to rising competition from other states and nations. Consequently, Keralites have started to explore new destinations, gradually establishing new migration corridors. However, in early 2020, global mobility was halted by an unparalleled migration shock, the effects of which continue to unfold, profoundly impacting the patterns and implications of emigration. The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated waves of return migration across the globe, leading to a negative increase in the stock of international emigrants (Boillat & Zähringer 2020; International Organization for Migration 2020; Migration Data 2021; World Bank Group & KNOMAD 2020; 2021).

According to the 2021 budget speech by the Finance Minister, approximately 1.433 million emigrants returned to Kerala from May 2020 to April 2021, representing a significant portion of the estimated 2.1 million Keralites living abroad (Arokkiaraj 2020; Rajan, 2020; Harikrishnan 2021; Purayil & Purayil 2020; Philip 2021; Prakash 2020). Unlike other Indian states that send more migrants, Kerala's economy heavily relies on remittances, accounting for 36% of its GDP (Kannan & Hari 2020; Prakash 2020). Historically, international migration has crucially shaped Kerala's socio-economic and cultural trajectory (Zachariah et al. 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Kannan & Hari 2020). The state's notable socio-economic standing and its initial adept handling of COVID-19 are attributed to the substantial human capital accrued from decades of migration, highlighting the Kerala model's complexities and its dependency on migration (George et al. 1998; Kurien 1995; NP 2013).

In light of this setting, this paper utilises unique survey data collected between January and May 2021 from the Return Emigrant (REM) Survey Kerala. The survey was conducted from January to May 2021 on a total sample size of 1985 REM from 1871 households. The survey was conducted by the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) and the International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD) using the Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing method. The sample was randomly drawn from a partial list of expatriates who returned to Kerala from any international destination during April 2020 to November 2020. The sample is not weighted by the population of the districts, and hence lacks representativeness on that dimension and is broadly a non-probability sample. The questionnaire is divided into sections regarding the emigration history of the REM, the demographic and family characteristics, return experience, future plans, remittances, and household assets (see the appendix for the questionnaire). In this paper, we report the results from this survey and comment on future migration governance from Kerala by providing policy recommendations.

## 2 Who are the COVID-19 Return Emigrants?

### 2.1 Categorising the REM

In this section, we explore the factors influencing the return of REM during the COVID-19 wave of repatriation. Drawing on past crises such as the 2008–2009

global financial crisis and an initial COVID-19 survey of REM conducted by the Centre for Development Studies, we identified determinants for emigrants’ return (Zachariah et al. 2001c, 2006, 2011; Zachariah & Rajan 2010; Rajan & Akhil 2019, 2021; 2022; Rajan & Batra 2022; Rajan & Pattath, 2020; 2022). We categorised return emigrants into three types: normal REM (NREM), distressed REM (DREM), and REM who plan to re-emigrate (RREM) (Rajeev 2021). NREM, outlined in reasons 1–5 in Table 1, may have returned as part of their planned migration cycle, potentially hastened by the pandemic. DREM, shown in reasons 6–15 in Table 1, were compelled to return due to direct impacts of the pandemic. RREM encompasses those with strategic plans to migrate again. The level of coercion varies, being more acute for DREM. Family migration decisions often reflect household-level considerations including long-term utility preferences, which affect the choice of destination, duration of stay, and potential return (Djajic & Milbourne 1998). These decisions are also shaped by pre-emigration factors such as education or training. Table 1 details the primary reasons for return among these categories.

The majority of our sample, comprising 1751 REM, is classified as DREM, indicating widespread impact of COVID-19. This group represents those in the REM workforce potentially dissatisfied with their migration experience, necessitating

**Table 1** Frequency of primary reason for return by REM type

Primary reason for return	Number				
	NREM	DREM	RREM	Others	Total
To retire	28	0	0	0	28
Missed family	29	0	0	0	29
Care for elderly	11	0	0	0	11
Accomplished goals	13	0	0	0	13
Prefer to work in Kerala	13	0	0	0	13
Lost job/laid off	0	955	0	0	955
Illness/accident	0	70	0	0	70
Expiry of contract	0	89	0	0	89
Scared due to COVID-19	0	461	0	0	461
Compulsory expatriation	0	36	0	0	36
Low wages	0	58	0	0	58
Poor working conditions	0	27	0	0	27
Nationalisation policy	0	7	0	0	7
Visiting visa expired	0	20	0	0	20
Cancellation of employment visa	0	28	0	0	28
To re-migrate to another destination or the same destination for different job	0	0	18	0	18
Others (specify)	0	0	0	122	122
Total	94	1751	18	122	1985

Source: Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

immediate support from re-integration programs. Approximately 50% of the sample lost their jobs due to the pandemic, while 25% returned due to inadequate social protection for migrant workers, which exacerbated health vulnerabilities in their living conditions during the pandemic (Martin 2016). The 94 NREM listed in Table 1 might have adjusted their return plans due to the pandemic, either advancing or delaying their intended return, yet managed to repatriate safely.

Table 1 also includes REM who plan to re-emigrate (RREM), whose motivations align with the life-cycle model of repeat migration, focussing on the household's accumulated human capital and the temporary nature of migration typical of major corridors like the Gulf Corridor, home to 90% of Kerala's emigrants (Dierx 1988; Zachariah & Rajan 2011; Rajan & Zachariah 2019).

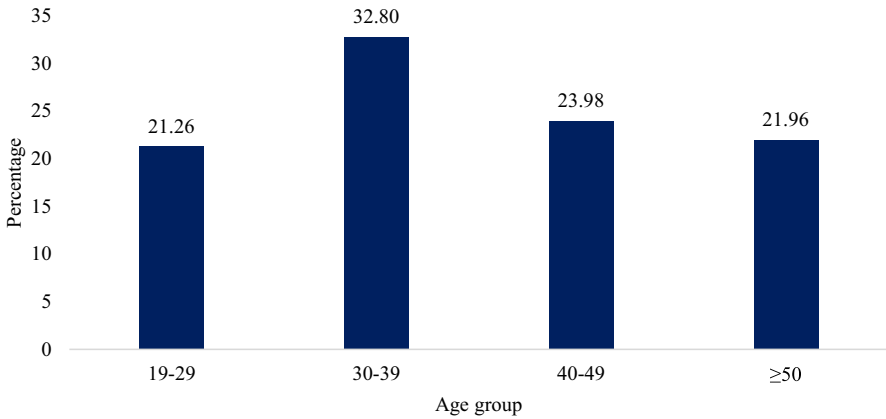
Although only a small fraction of the sample (18 out of 1985) consists of RREM, the survey's metadata offer intriguing insights. Conducted as a Computer-Assisted Telephonic Interview (CATI) with rigorous adherence to ethical guidelines for human subject interviews, consent was obtained before initiating the questionnaire. Of the 353 respondents who declined participation, many indicated their refusal was due to having already re-emigrated, suggesting that the pandemic conditions at the time of the survey permitted such travel. The survey timing, aligned with the pandemic's first wave, may also explain this phenomenon. Additionally, within the "other" category of REM in Table 1, which includes 122 respondents, the predominant reasons listed for returning were "personal reasons at home," "marriage," and "completion of projects."

## 2.2 Country of Destination

The vast majority of Kerala's emigrants work in the GCC countries (Rajan & Zachariah 2019). Regarding the dynamics of return—whether voluntary or involuntary—they vary considerably, influenced by the determinants of return. Although COVID-19 initially immobilised all regions similarly, the subsequent recovery phases have been uneven across countries. This disparity, combined with the nature of employment in the GCC and the non-probability sampling of respondents, likely influenced the distribution of countries from which the REM in our sample returned. Nearly all (99%) of the respondents returned from GCC countries, with a nominal three returning from the UK and Australia.

## 2.3 Characteristics of the REM

Over half of the returnees are younger than 39 years (Fig. 1). Among the groups, NREM are the oldest with an average age of 45.8 years, DREM are younger at 39.5 years, and RREM are the youngest at 34.8 years. Despite limited sample sizes for two out of the three groups, these findings align with expectations from circular migration typologies. It is anticipated that migrants make informed decisions

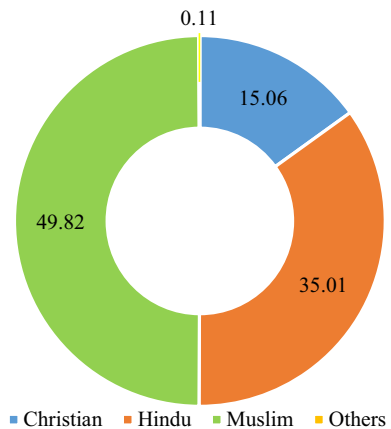


**Fig. 1** Age distribution of return emigrants in Kerala. *Source:* Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

about permanent returns to the GCC as they age and achieve their financial goals from migration episodes. Those who returned in distress, categorising themselves as unsatisfied migrants, tend to be younger, reflecting broader trends in migration dissatisfaction (Harigovind 2021; Purayil & Purayil 2020).

Breaking down the sample by religious affiliation, 49% of the households identified as Muslim, 35% as Hindu, and 15% as Christian (Fig. 2). Demographically, approximately 93% of the respondents are male, with the remaining 7% female. Geographically, a significant majority (78%) of the participants originate from rural areas, in contrast to 22% from urban settings.

**Fig. 2** Percentage of REM by religion. *Source:* Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)



## 2.4 Nature of Stay in the Country of Destination

### 2.4.1 Occupation and Number of Jobs Held

Regarding migration history, 80% of the respondents had worked in only one country (holding one job), while 16% had worked in two countries (holding two jobs). The maximum number of countries any REM had worked in and the jobs held was five. Predominantly, almost all REMs in the sample were employed in one of the seven GCC countries, and their overrepresentation compared to larger sample estimates from previous surveys might be attributed to the challenging conditions faced by migrants in the GCC, which led to their return during the initial waves of the COVID crisis (Mitra et al. 2020; Sircar 2020). The origin of return is crucial as the nature of migration episodes—temporary versus permanent—significantly influences the classification of REM. For many DREM, the status of their visa was tied to their location, as migration within the Gulf Migration corridor is predominantly characterised by temporary labor migration due to local labor laws for immigrant labor. Permanent migration in these settings is often contingent on continuing the migration cycle intergenerationally, with administrative biases favoring higher-income, skilled migrants. Table 2 delineates the occupations of the REM by type.

Many DREM are employed in sectors like construction, hospitality, domestic, and industrial work, highlighting their increased vulnerability during crises. The categorisation differences are influenced by a range of factors, from fixed pre-migration attributes such as age and education to unobserved factors shaping the migration

**Table 2** Occupations of REM-by-REM type

Occupation	Number				Total
	NREM	DREM	RREM	Other	
Business owners	5	45	0	9	59
Construction sector	15	295	3	15	328
Restaurant and hospitality	5	251	2	18	276
Medical services	13	75	3	7	98
Domestic workers/drivers	11	226	1	17	255
Government employees	6	14	0	0	20
Industrial employees	23	336	4	14	377
Banking and finance	1	58	1	3	63
Education employees	1	36	1	3	41
Other services (including human resources staffs)	5	153	3	14	175
Others	9	262	0	22	293
Total	94	1751	18	122	1985

*Source:* Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

episode. The median salary reported by return migrants at their last job before returning due to COVID-19 was ₹ 36,000.

### 2.4.2 Type of Accommodation

Further exploration of living conditions in the destination country shows varied accommodations by REM type, documented in Table 3. DREM typically reside in challenging conditions like “Dormitory Beds in Labor Camps,” whereas NREM tend to have more comfortable housing.

### 2.4.3 Duration of Stay in the Country of Destination

Table 4 presents data based on the primary reason for return. It reveals that over half of the DREM who lost their jobs had been abroad for 0–4 years, indicating they were still adjusting to their new environments. REM, depending on initial conditions, experience a gestation period before they can send remittances home, and the nature of these remittances shifts from consumption smoothing and debt repayment toward savings or investments the longer they are abroad. This duration positively correlates with the amount remitted but decreases their resilience to withstand crises. NREM constitute less than 10% of emigrants by duration.

## 2.5 Future Plans of REM: What Next for Kerala’s Return Emigrants?

The survey included a direct question about the future intentions of the REM (Rajan & Pattath 2022a; 2022b; Rajan et al. 2023). Approximately 59% of REM expressed a desire to re-emigrate for either new or previous employment. Meanwhile, 30% aim to re-integrate into Kerala’s society by finding new employment, and 13% plan to start a business. According to Table 5, slightly more than half of the DREM are dissatisfied with their migration experiences and are keen to re-emigrate for work. Conversely, 44% of DREM prefer to find new employment or start businesses within Kerala. About 68% of NREM have no plans to re-emigrate and are focussed on their

**Table 3** Types of accommodation by REM type

Type of accommodation	DREM	NREM	Other	RREM	Total
Individual studio apartment	10.2	27.7	23.8	27.8	12.0
Shared apartment with one person	12.4	15.9	13.1	16.7	12.6
Shared apartment with more than one person	54.6	43.6	46.7	33.3	53.4
Single room in labor camp	4.9	5.3	0.8	11.1	4.7
Dormitory bed in labor camp	12.1	3.2	4.1	11.1	11.2
Others (specify)	5.8	4.3	11.5	0.0	6.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

**Table 4** Percentage share of return emigrants' reason for return and the duration of stay in the destination countries

Reason of return	< 1 year	1–4 years	5–9 years	10–14 years	15–19 years	> 20 years	Total
To retire	0.0	0.2	0.5	1.5	0.0	3.5	1.4
Missed family	0.0	1.1	2.2	0.7	0.7	2.2	1.5
Care for elderly	0.0	0.7	0.5	0.0	0.7	0.8	0.6
Accomplished goals	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.7	1.7	0.7
Work in Kerala	0.8	0.2	0.8	0.4	1.3	0.8	0.7
Lost job	57.9	53.1	51.4	45.8	53.6	40.4	48.2
Illness	0.8	3.3	2.7	4.0	4.6	4.2	3.5
Expiry of contract	3.2	5.5	4.4	7.3	0.0	4.0	4.5
Due to COVID-19	18.2	20.5	21	30.2	22.9	23.9	23.0
Compulsory expatriation	0.8	1.5	2.2	1.8	1.9	2.0	1.8
Low wages	1.6	2.2	3.6	1.5	2.6	4.2	2.9
Poor working condition	3.2	1.1	1.1	1.1	2.6	1.2	1.4
Nationalisation policy	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.7	0.4
Visiting visa expired	5.6	1.3	0.3	0.7	0.6	0.5	1.0
Reason of return	< 1 year	1–4 years	5–9 years	10–14 years	15–19 years	> 20 years	Total
Cancellation of employment visa	1.6	0.4	1.9	0.7	1.3	2.2	1.4
To migrate to another destination	0.0	1.5	0.0	0.7	1.3	1.2	0.9
Others (specify)	6.3	7.0	7.4	2.9	4.6	6.5	6.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Source:* Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

**Table 5** Future plans of REM-by-REM type

Future plan	Number				Total
	DREM	NREM	Other	RREM	
What is your future plan?					
Start a new business in Kerala	236	20	11	1	268
Re-emigrate to get a new job	589	6	23	13	631
Re-emigrate to the same job as before	280	22	57	2	361
Retired from work	51	20	1	1	73
Seek new job in Kerala	538	24	27	0	589
Other	57	2	3	1	63
Total	1751	94	122	18	1985



lives in Kerala, indicating that the return due to COVID-19 might not significantly alter their long-term plans.

## 2.6 REM who Wish to Re-migrate

A significant portion of REM in the sample have expressed a desire to re-migrate, highlighting the need to understand the factors influencing this decision. Notably, 54% of the sample had pre-existing networks (friends and family) abroad before the COVID-19 lockdown. The role of these networks is more pronounced among the 60% of REM desiring to re-emigrate, likely due to a diaspora effect that encourages migration through familiar connections (Munshi 2016).

Despite Kerala's long history with international migration and several government initiatives aimed at supporting prospective migrants, including REM intending to re-migrate, 66.3% of respondents were unaware of any such programs. This lack of awareness might stem from insufficient promotion, the informal nature of migration networks, or the dominance of private agencies. Of those aware of the initiatives, only 28% had heard of at least one program, and a mere 3% knew of two or more. The most recognised were the NRK ID and insurance cards schemes (NORKA n.d. -b). However, only a small fraction of REM had utilised these benefits.

The potential for labor market re-integration is also contingent on the skills REM possess and acquire abroad. According to the survey, while 87% did not gain any new professional skills related to their specific occupations abroad, 83% reported no acquisition of managerial skills applicable across various office roles. However, 30% did obtain manual skills transferable across multiple professions, with driving (16.5%) and electrician skills being the most common. Cooking emerged as another popular skill, noted by 7% of respondents. Interestingly, 50% of those who acquired new skills are keen on re-migrating, indicating that skill acquisition may influence re-migration intentions. Conversely, those looking to retire showed minimal skill acquisition.

## 2.7 REM who Wish to Re-integrate

We now focus on REM in the sample who aim to re-integrate into Kerala society and seek employment. On the topic of initiating start-up enterprises, 13% of the REM reported having started their businesses, ranging from service-oriented ventures like food and supermarkets, hospitality, grooming, information technology, workshops, repair shops, and transportation to agricultural projects like poultry farms, furniture shops, and manufacturing agencies.

Regarding government support, the SWADES scheme by the Government of India was unknown to 92% of REM, and among those aware, 90% had not registered or intended to do so (Bureau 2020). For regional initiatives, 27% were familiar with the 2018 NORKA rehabilitation policy that offers loans for ventures in Kerala, but only 4% had utilised this scheme. Another program, NORKA Department Projects for Return Emigrants (NDPREM), which aids new business starts, was unknown to 84% of the REM, with only six REMs having benefited from it (NORKA, n.d. -a).

Awareness of programs for the rehabilitation of retired REM was also low; 84% were unaware of the schemes listed. However, 11% knew of the Kerala Non-Resident Keralites' Welfare Board's schemes, including Pension Schemes, Family Pension Schemes, Medical Aid, Death Assistance, etc., and about 4% were familiar with the Mahatma Gandhi Pravasi Suraksha Yojana (Kerala, n.d.; MEA, n.d.). Awareness of state-level programs was comparatively higher, though benefits were minimal; of the 69 individuals who used the first program, only eight found it beneficial, and seven out of 22 benefited from the second program.

Skill development's relevance extends to those seeking employment within Kerala. When asked if a re-orientation and job placement program would be beneficial for securing work in Kerala, 52% of all REM affirmed its usefulness, and 57% of those planning to work in Kerala supported such a program.

## 2.8 Assets Owned by REM

Table 6 illustrates the distribution of immovable assets owned by REM, correlating these holdings with their future plans. The assets considered include houses, land and buildings within and outside Kerala, apartments, and vehicles like taxis and buses. Among those REM aspiring to re-migrate for a new or the same job, 74% and 60%, respectively, had not acquired any of these assets. Conversely, among those planning to retire, only 26% had not purchased any assets, while 49% owned at least one.

This pattern suggests a consumerist inclination prevalent in aspiring societies of developing countries, where owning certain assets, particularly real estate and vehicles, is a cultural aspiration used to emulate the consumption practices of higher societal echelons (Osella & Osella 2000; Paulose & Varghese 2016). Such

**Table 6** Distribution of the number of immovable assets owned by the future plan of REM

Number of immovable assets owned	Start a new business in Kerala	Re-emigrate to get a new job	Re-emigrate to the same job as before	Retired from work	Seek new job in Kerala	Other	Total
Zero	142	470	216	19	382	23	1252
immovable assets purchased							
1	92	136	115	35	157	32	567
2	32	24	26	15	49	6	152
3	2	1	3	3	1	2	12
4	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
Total	268	631	361	73	589	63	1985

*Source:* Adapted from "Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?," by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

aspirations have been identified as key motivators for migration within Kerala society (Pattath 2020). The survey reveals that houses are the most commonly acquired immovable asset, with 31% of REM having purchased one, underscoring the traditional role of emigration and remittances in asset accumulation in Kerala and other migrant-sending regions. Despite this, a significant 63% of REM had not managed to acquire any listed assets, indicating that the desire for re-migration might remain a prominent goal in the post-pandemic landscape.

The survey further investigated the consumer assets owned by the REM, encompassing personal vehicles, household appliances like washing machines, air conditioners, and induction stoves, as well as personal-use electronics including mobile phones and televisions. Among the returnees, 32% had not acquired any consumer assets while abroad. Specifically, 39.6% and 27.9% of REM planning to re-migrate had not acquired any such assets. In contrast, only 13.6% of those intending to retire had not obtained any consumer assets, supporting the notion that migration is often used as a means to accumulate these items.

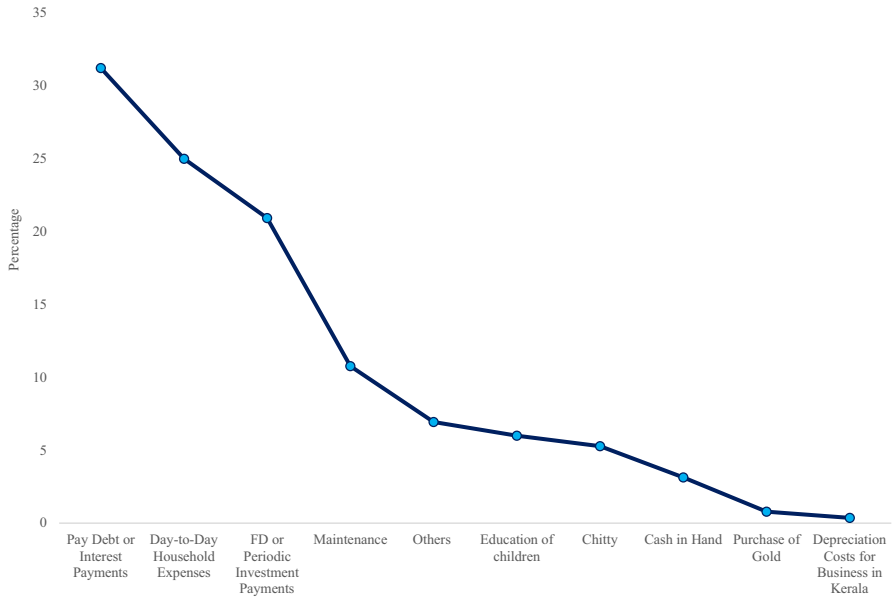
Mobile phones emerged as the most commonly purchased item, with 60% of REM acquiring them, followed by televisions at 40%. The typical image of returning migrants with newly purchased televisions at the airport is a familiar sight and frequently cited in qualitative studies of Kerala migrants. For larger items such as vehicles, washing machines, and refrigerators—which are more cumbersome and challenging to transport internationally—the ownership rates drop to below 33%. This disparity may reflect a deliberate allocation of remittances for specific types of assets or suggest a lack of detailed accounting by household members in Kerala regarding the use of remitted funds for these purchases, though further data would be needed to clarify these points.

## 2.9 Remittances

Remittances are a crucial aspect of the migration decision and process. Given the resilience of remittances during times of crises as previously shown during the Gulf War and the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, we asked a range of questions regarding the remittances sent by the REM before and after the COVID-19 lockdown, as well as the overall composition of remittances based on the purpose they were sent for. Although we were able to elicit data from several REM, we faced difficulties regarding the willingness to share such information as was common for this particular module in our previous surveys.

Out of the total sample of 1895, 1505 REM reported having sent remittances. The remainder either declined to provide information or had recently migrated to their destination countries. Notably, 90% of those who reported not sending remittances had spent fewer than 299 days in the destination country.

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of remittances by purpose for the entire sample. The predominant use of remittances was for debt or interest payments, often related to pre-existing debts that initially prompted emigration or debts incurred during the emigration process itself. A comparable portion of remittances was allocated for daily household expenses. Interestingly, the data also show that fixed deposits and periodic investments were significant, reflecting the temporary nature of emigration to the GCC.



**Fig. 3** Percentage share of the purpose of remittances sent. *Source:* Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

**Table 7** Percentage of total remittance sent and the future plans of return emigrants: Pre-COVID-19 lockdown

	Start a new business in Kerala	Re-emigrate to get a new job	Re-emigrate to the same jobs before	Retired from work	Seek new job in Kerala	Others	Total
< 10,000	15.8	26.3	21.1	0.0	31.5	5.3	100.0
10,000–19000	7.0	43.1	10.9	1.0	35.4	2.6	100.0
20,000–28000	10.1	29.2	15.8	3.0	33.5	8.4	100.0
30,000–40000	13.6	26.4	13.6	2.4	39.2	4.8	100.0
> 40,000	15.6	29.9	22.5	3.4	27.4	1.2	100.0
Total	12.6	32.1	17.9	2.7	31.4	3.3	100.0

*Source:* Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

To delve deeper into these trends, Tables 7, 8, 9, and 10 categorise remittance flows into two periods: pre-COVID-19 lockdown and during + post-COVID-19 lockdown. These tables further break down the data according to different REM classifications

**Table 8** Percentage of total remittance sent and reason for return: Pre-COVID-19 lockdown

	Distress	Normal	Other	Return to re-migrate	Total
< 10,000	89.4	5.3	5.3	0.0	100.0
10,000–19000	94.0	1.7	4.3	0.0	100.0
20,000–28000	93.0	2.7	4.3	0.0	100.0
30,000–40000	92.0	3.2	4.0	0.8	100.0
> 40,000	86.3	6.2	6.9	0.6	100.0
Total	89.8	4.3	5.6	0.3	100.0

*Source:* Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

and their future plans, providing a nuanced view of how remittance behaviors have shifted in response to the global pandemic.

### 3 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In this paper, we analysed a unique Return Emigrant Survey conducted in the immediate aftermath of the first COVID-19 lockdowns of 1985 return emigrants (REM) from Kerala. We find that a predominant portion of the REM are classified as DREM, who were compelled to return due to job losses and poor working conditions exacerbated by the pandemic. This highlights a critical need for robust support systems for these returnees. Additionally, the data suggest a significant inclination among nearly 60% of the REM to re-emigrate in search of better employment opportunities, indicating the transient nature of their return.

In light of these findings which have additionally been submitted to the Kerala government as a detailed report, we suggest policy recommendations which should focus on creating a supportive framework for the re-integration of DREM while also facilitating the potential re-emigration of those looking to return overseas. Key policy actions should include the establishment of a comprehensive register of all emigrants to streamline the provision of support and services. Improving data collection methods to monitor return flows and migration stocks will enable more responsive and tailored policy interventions. Furthermore, providing targeted social services and financial assistance to DREM households is critical, especially those who have faced significant financial and personal hardships upon return. The government should also consider simplifying AML/CFT requirements to incentivise remittances through digital transfers, thereby supporting the financial stability of REM during uncertain times. These recommendations aim to harness the full potential of return migration while safeguarding the well-being and economic stability of REM and their families.

**Table 9** Percentage of total remittance sent and future plan of return emigrants: Post-COVID-19 lockdown

Post-COVID-19 lockdown	Start a new business in Kerala	Re-emigrate to get a new job	Re-emigrate to the same jobs before	Retired from work	Seek new job in Kerala	Others	Total
<10,000	20.0	20.0	20.0	0.0	40.0	0.0	100.0
10,000–19000	11.8	45.1	7.8	2.0	33.3	0.0	100.0
20,000–28000	19.7	40.9	10.6	1.5	25.8	1.5	100.0
30,000–40000	17.2	37.9	13.8	0.0	31.1	0.0	100.0
>40,000	17.0	27.7	19.8	2.3	31.1	2.1	100.0
Total	16.8	33.8	15.6	1.8	30.5	1.5	100.0

*Source:* Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

**Table 10** Percentage of total remittance sent and reason for return: Post-COVID-19 lockdown

Post-COVID-19 lockdown	Distress	Normal	Other	Return to re-migrate	Total
< 10,000	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
10,000–19000	94.1	3.9	2.0	0.0	100.0
20,000–28000	90.9	3.0	4.6	1.5	100.0
30,000–40000	96.6	0.0	3.4	0.0	100.0
> 40,000	80.8	9.0	9.6	0.6	100.0
Total	86.6	6.1	6.7	0.6	100.0

Source: Adapted from “Kerala Return Emigrant Survey 2021: What Next for Return Migrants of Kerala?,” by Rajan and Pattath (2021)

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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