Student Migration from Kerala

Introduction

Kerala has long been recognized as one of India's most prominent migrant-sending states, with its migration history deeply intertwined with the socio-economic transformations of the region. Since the 1970s, outmigration from Kerala has been driven primarily by employment opportunities in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. By 2018, an estimated 2.1 million Keralites were settled abroad, with approximately 89% working in low- to semi-skilled temporary roles in GCC countries. This migration has played a pivotal role in shaping Kerala's economy, with remittances consistently contributing to improved living standards, higher consumption, and enhanced social indicators in the state. While labour migration has traditionally dominated Kerala's migration narrative, recent years have marked the rise of student migration as a significant phenomenon, signaling a shift in the patterns and priorities of migration from the state.

Student migration has emerged as a distinct and critical dimension of Kerala's migration landscape, driven by the increasing aspirations of the youth to access quality education and better career opportunities. India, as the second-largest student-sending country globally after China, has witnessed a dramatic fourfold increase in outbound student migration over the last two decades. Within this broader trend, Kerala has contributed significantly, accounting for 4% of India's total student migrants, as reported in the Kerala Legislative Assembly. Unlike labour migration, which is predominantly driven by economic necessity, student migration reflects a broader socio-cultural shift, with families investing heavily in education to enhance the long-term prospects of their children. This phenomenon, however, comes with its own set of challenges. One of them is the growing role of recruitment agencies in facilitating international education, coupled with instances of fraud and exploitation, which highlights the need for regulatory oversight and support mechanisms.

The Kerala Migration Survey 2023 (KMS 2023), examines the dynamics of student migration from Kerala. Expanding its scope beyond traditional labour migration, the survey includes a dedicated student migration module that captures detailed data on the patterns, motivations, and outcomes of student mobility. With a sample size of 20,000 households, KMS 2023 helps understand the socio-economic profiles of student migrants and patterns in migration. This working paper draws extensively on KMS 2023 data to map internal and international migration patterns, identify major corridors, and analyze the implications of these trends on Kerala's socio-economic and demographic landscape. By doing so, the study contributes to the broader discourse on migration and education, offering evidence-based insights to inform policy interventions, improve support systems, and address the unique vulnerabilities faced by student migrants and their families.

Student Migration from Kerala: Highlights from KMS 2023

Trends in student migration

The data on student migration within total migration shows notable fluctuations over the years. In 1998, student migration (internal and international) accounted for 2.9% of total migration, gradually increasing to 4.1% by 2003. By 2023, it reached 7.7%.

Internal vs International Student Migration in Numbers

A notable distinction between international and internal student migrants. Among the total student migrants, 37.12% are international student migrants, pursuing education abroad, while the majority, 62.88%, are internal student migrants, relocating within India for their studies.

Migration Corridors – Internal and International

Karnataka is the most significant destination for students from Kerala, attracting 50.80% of the total internal student migrant population. Tamil Nadu follows with 20.90%, reflecting its importance as an educational hub. Maharashtra (5.60%), Delhi (5.30%), and Andhra Pradesh (4.40%) also feature prominently, showcasing the preference for neighbouring states and metropolitan regions as key destinations for higher education. Over 80% of international students from Kerala pursued higher studies abroad after completing their graduation in the state. The United Kingdom emerged as the top destination, followed by Canada and other European Union countries. Notably, one in four students from Kerala chose the United Kingdom for higher education, while one in five opted for Canada, reflecting their growing preference for these countries.

Gender Dynamics in Student Migration

Student migration data from Kerala in 2023 highlights notable gender trends in both internal and international migration. Among international student migrants, 45.6% are females, reflecting a growing shift toward women pursuing education abroad, though males still account for a majority at 54.4%. On the other hand, internal student migration shows a reverse trend, with 57.8% of student out-migrants being female compared to 42.2% male. This significant female representation in both internal and international migration underscores a positive movement toward gender inclusivity in accessing higher education opportunities, breaking traditional barriers and reshaping educational aspirations for women.

Internal vs International Student Migration

The primary financial support for International student migrants comes from their parents' savings, which account for 53.7% of the total funding. Bank loans follow as the second major source at 24.6%, reflecting the importance of formal financing options. Personal savings contribute 15.7%, indicating students' own efforts to fund their education abroad. his underscores the significant reliance on family resources and structured financial mechanisms for pursuing international education.
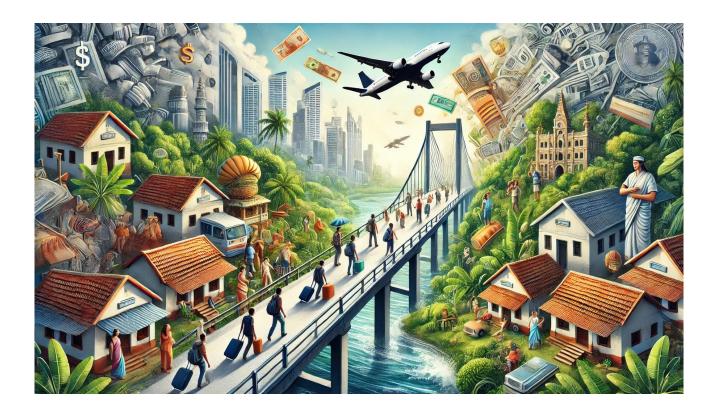
Rising Student Migration

Despite expectations of a decline in migration from Kerala in the 9th round of KMS, a significant rise in student emigration has substantially contributed to maintaining the emigration levels in 2023. This notable increase in student emigration underscores a significant shift in the demographics of emigrants from Kerala wherein there has been an increase in the number of emigrants leaving at a younger age as early as 17 years of age.

The KMS 2023 findings reveal that a growing number of younger individuals are choosing to emigrate, particularly for educational opportunities abroad, as students form 11.3 per cent of total emigrants from Kerala in 2023. This shift towards younger emigrants and the rise in student emigration has played a crucial role in offsetting the expected decline in overall emigration numbers.

Agencies/Facilitators of International Student Migration

The rapid rise of recruitment agencies in India catering to international education has exposed numerous vulnerabilities for students and their families. These agencies often present themselves as one-stop solutions, assisting students with course selection, university applications, and visa processing. However, their profit-driven motives have led to questionable practices, such as promoting substandard universities or programs that align with their partnerships rather than the student interests. Misinformation is rampant; agencies frequently overstate job prospects and living conditions abroad, creating unrealistic expectations. Students from smaller towns, with limited exposure and resources, often place undue trust in these agencies, leaving them ill-prepared for the academic, financial and cultural realities they face upon reaching their destination. The lack of strict governance over these agencies allows such exploitative practices to flourish, leaving many students in precarious situations, including financial strain, academic challenges, and limited support in foreign countries.

Moreover, the promises of a better life abroad are often used to manipulate families into making substantial financial commitments, frequently funded through loans. While these agencies emphasize the potential for upward mobility, they underplay the risks and challenges associated with international education. Reports of students facing deportation due to fake acceptance letters or struggling with inadequate academic infrastructure highlight the darker side of this industry. Many students find themselves unprepared for independent study, high living costs, and competitive job markets. The overselling of foreign education as a guaranteed pathway to success undermines the autonomy and informed decision-making of students and their families. Addressing this issue requires stricter regulations, enhanced accountability for recruitment agencies, and strong support systems to protect potential student migrants from falling into such traps.

Please find attached few tabled and figures as per the KMS 2023
Report regarding student migration

Table 1: International Student Migration by District, 2023

District	Percent
Thiruvananthapuram	2.0
Kollam	8.9
Pathanamthitta	4.3
Alappuzha	5.8
Kottayam	14.5
Idukki	2.9
Ernakulam	18.1
Thrissur	14.7

District	Percent
Palakkad	5.6
Malappuram	6.3
Kozhikode	6.6
Wayanad	1.5
Kannur	9.7
Kasaragod	1.8
Total	100.0

Table 1: International Student Migration by District, 2023

Sex	Emigrant Students
Male	54.4
Female	45.6
Total	100.0
Male	54.4
Female	45.6
Total	100.0
Male	54.4
Female	45.6

Figure 1: International Student Migration by Destination and Sex, 2023

Table 3: Student Out Migrants by Destination State, 2023

State	Student Out Migrants	Percentage
Karnataka	67195	50.8
Tamil Nadu	27696	20.9
Maharashtra	7429	5.6
New Delhi	6983	5.3
Andhra Pradesh	5767	4.4
Gujarat	3392	2.6
Goa	1822	1.4
Uttar Pradesh	1919	1.4
Punjab	1540	1.2
Madhya Pradesh	1288	1
Chattisgarh	1009	0.8
Rajasthan	1002	0.8
Andaman Nicobar	946	0.7
Himachal Pradesh	986	0.7
Uttaranchal	968	0.7
West Bengal	948	0.7
Arunanchal Pradesh	479	0.4
Jharkhand	473	0.4
Pondicherry	514	0.4
Total	132354	100.0

Table 4: Student Out Migrants by Sex, 2023

Sex	Percentage
Male	42.2
Female	57.8
Total	100