



Return Migration in the Era of Global Uncertainty: Revisiting Kerala's Nitaqat Repatriation as a Policy Framework for Emerging Repatriation Threats.

Mary Sudha P^{1*}

^{1*} Assistant Professor in Commerce, Government Arts and Science College Ambalapuzha, Alappuzha, Kerala

Citation: Mary Sudha P (2023). Return Migration in the Era of Global Uncertainty: Revisiting Kerala's Nitaqat Repatriation as a Policy Framework for Emerging Repatriation Threats., *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 29(4) 5696-5700
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v29i4.10687

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Return migration has emerged as a growing socio-economic challenge in Kerala, particularly following the mass repatriation of workers due to Saudi Arabia's Nitaqat policy in 2012. This paper presents a timely analysis based on primary survey data of 300 return migrants in Kozhikode. Findings reveal sharp drops in income and savings post-return, limited access to state schemes, and a mismatch between migrant profiles and available policy support. The paper underscores the urgency of localized, data-driven reintegration frameworks for managing future waves of return migration.

Keywords: Return migration, Nitaqat policy, Kerala migrants, reintegration, Gulf repatriation, labor nationalization, income drop, NORKA Roots, NDPREM

1. Introduction

Kerala has maintained a strong and evolving relationship with the Gulf region since the oil boom of the 1970s. Remittances from Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) have significantly shaped the state's economy, enabled social mobility, and supported lakhs of households. Migration emerged as a major escape route from unemployment and underemployment, especially for working-age men.

However, this trend was disrupted in 2011–2012 with Saudi Arabia's introduction of the Nitaqat policy, which mandated the replacement of foreign workers with Saudi nationals across sectors—including menial jobs in small and medium enterprises. Officially launched in June 2011 under Ministerial Resolution No. 4040 and fully implemented by 2013, the policy led to the mass repatriation of Indian workers, a large proportion of whom were from Kerala.

This sudden return triggered a series of socio-economic challenges: household financial instability, rising unemployment, and pressure on public support systems—highlighting the inadequacy of Kerala's reintegration infrastructure. The study, originally conducted during the immediate aftermath of this repatriation wave, captured firsthand the challenges faced by returnees and the gaps in policy response.

Recent developments—such as the 2023 mass deportations due to visa violations, new labor verification protocols in various countries, and stricter enforcement of Gulf nationalization policies—echo the Nitaqat experience. The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing geopolitical disruptions have further exposed the vulnerability of migrant workers to abrupt displacement.

These recurring patterns emphasize the need for evidence-based reintegration strategies. This paper reframes the 2012 returnee experience as a lens to understand the broader risks of repatriation. Using quantitative data from 300 returnees and reviewing policy initiatives like NDPREM and NORKA Roots, the study argues for proactive, locally grounded frameworks to manage future waves of forced return migration in an era of global uncertainty.

2. Objectives

1. To assess the availability and effectiveness of reintegration programs in Kerala,

2. To analyse the influence of demographic factors such as age, employment history and income on reintegration outcomes and make some suggestions.

3. Relevance of the Study: Return migration has become a central concern in global labor governance, particularly amid economic slowdowns, labor nationalization policies, and geopolitical instability. Countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Kuwait are reducing reliance on foreign workers through strategies like Saudization and Emiratization, leading to job losses, visa raids, and deportations that threaten remittance-dependent regions like Kerala.

In 2023, fresh waves of forced return migration from the Gulf and various other counties echo the 2012 Nitaqat-driven repatriation. This study revisits that episode as a critical policy lens to assess returnee vulnerabilities and local system preparedness. By analyzing this case, the study offers timely insights and practical recommendations for designing proactive, inclusive reintegration programs. It contributes both to academic understanding and to urgent policy reform aimed at protecting the welfare of India's migrant workforce.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory, social diagnosis approach combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. The primary data was collected using pre-tested interview schedules and structured questionnaires from 300 return migrants who were repatriated due to the Nitaqat policy. The study universe comprises returnees from Kozhikode district in Kerala. Secondary data was sourced from NORKA records, policy documents, academic studies, and media coverage relevant to the Nitaqat policy and Gulf return migration.

5. Literature Review

The phenomenon of Gulf migration from Kerala has long been recognized for its transformative socio-economic impact. Zachariah, Mathew, and Rajan (1999) noted that by the late 1990s, remittances had become a backbone of Kerala's economy, shaping everything from housing patterns to educational attainment. Subsequent studies by Irudaya Rajan and colleagues (2014, 2016) through the Kerala Migration Surveys emphasized the depth of emigration's entwinement with everyday life in the state, where nearly every family had a direct or indirect link to migration.

The return migration dimension, however, has been less celebrated. Arif (1998) and Gopinathan Nair (1999) explored the challenges faced by returnees, ranging from downward occupational mobility to reintegration into a stagnant labor market. More recent scholarship, such as that by Ajmal Khan and Muneer Illath (2012), highlighted how Gulf policies like Nitaqat created new vulnerabilities for low-skilled migrant workers, many of whom returned involuntarily and ill-prepared.

The Nitaqat episode, while specific to Saudi Arabia, is increasingly seen as a harbinger of broader labor nationalization trends across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Researchers like Srivastava and Sasikumar (2003) warn that migration corridors may narrow as host countries recalibrate their labor priorities. Reintegration programs like NDPREM and interventions by NORKA Roots have attempted to fill the support gap, yet as Zachariah and Rajan (2013) argue, systemic and long-term reintegration policy mechanisms remain underdeveloped.

6. Results and Discussions

This section summarizes the major empirical insights from the survey of 300 Nitaqat returnees. It highlights significant income and savings loss, widespread job dissatisfaction, and systemic reintegration barriers. The results underline the economic and social precarity faced by return migrants, reinforcing the need for stronger, targeted policy responses.

6.1 Demographic Profile

The table below presents the age-wise distribution of the 300 return migrants surveyed from Kozhikode district who were repatriated due to the Nitaqat policy in 2012.

Table 6.1 Demographic Profile

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
Below 30	46	15.3%
30–40	117	39.0%
40–50	99	33.0%
Above 50	38	12.7%

Source: Primary Data

Majority of returnees were in their prime working years (30-50), indicating serious livelihood pressure post-return, having family responsibilities and ongoing financial obligations, making their reintegration both an economic and social challenge.

6.2. Monthly Income Across Phases

Understanding income variation across the migration cycle is vital in assessing the economic shock experienced by returnees. The following table presents the monthly income distribution of migrants before emigration, during their stay in Saudi Arabia, and after their return to Kerala.

Table 6.2 Monthly Income Across Phases

Income (₹)	Before Mig.	%	During Mig.	%	After Return	%
Nil	10	3.3%	—	—	42	14.0%
< 25,000	284	94.7%	—	—	205	68.3%
25,000–50,000	6	2.0%	73	24.3%	43	14.3%
50,000–75,000	—	—	187	62.3%	6	2.0%
75,000–1,00,000	—	—	27	9.0%	2	0.7%
>1,00,000	—	—	13	4.3%	1	0.3%

Source: Primary Data

Before migration, the vast majority (94.7%) earned less than ₹25,000 per month. During migration, income levels rose dramatically, with 62.3% earning between ₹50,000 and ₹75,000. However, post-return, income levels dropped sharply, with 68.3% again earning below ₹25,000. Thus, Income spiked during migration but plummeted after return, with 82.6% earning below ₹25,000.

6.3 Monthly Savings Before, During, and After

Savings behaviour offers critical insight into the financial security of migrants across different phases of the migration cycle. This table compares the monthly savings of return migrants before emigration, during their stay in Saudi Arabia, and after their return to Kerala. The data captures the stark contrast in financial preparedness and vulnerability associated with each stage, particularly post-return.

Table 6.3 Monthly Savings Before, During, and After

Savings (₹)	Before Mig.	%	During Mig.	%	After Return	%
Nil	255	85.0%	—	—	270	90.0%
<10,000	45	15.0%	13	4.3%	25	8.3%
10,000–30,000	—	—	250	83.3%	5	1.7%
>30,000	—	—	37	12.3%	—	—

Source: Primary Data

Before migration 85% of respondents had no savings at all, indicating the economic push factors driving migration in the first place. During migration, the picture drastically improved—over 94% were able to save, with the majority saving between ₹10,000 and ₹30,000 monthly. However, the post-return scenario reveals a sharp reversal. After repatriation, 90% of the respondents once again reported having no savings. Thus, Savings peaked during migration and collapsed post-return, revealing fragile reintegration.

6.4. Job Satisfaction

An important indicator of reintegration success is the level of job satisfaction experienced by return migrants after their re-entry into the local labor market. The following data captures how employed returnees evaluated their current occupational engagement after returning from the Gulf.

Table 6.4 Job Satisfaction

Satisfaction Level	Frequency	Percentage
Extremely Dissatisfied	55	28%
Moderately Dissatisfied	85	43%
Indifferent	2	1%
Moderately Satisfied	55	28%
Extremely Satisfied	2	1%

Source: Primary Data

The data indicates that a significant majority (71%) of employed returnees were dissatisfied with their post-return jobs, with 43% moderately dissatisfied and 28% extremely dissatisfied. indicating downward occupational mobility.

6.5 Challenges in Re-adaptation

Re-adaptation into the home society after years abroad poses significant challenges for return migrants. This section identifies the specific issues faced by respondents who reported difficulties in reintegrating after their return from the Gulf. The following table summarizes the key challenges based on survey responses.

Table 6.5 Challenges in Re-adaptation

Problem Type	Frequency	Percentage
No job available	187	62.3%
Age constraint	46	15.3%
Health issues	24	8.0%
Internal migration	15	5.0%
Loss of social status	9	3.0%
Social isolation	8	2.7%
Others	11	3.7%

Source: Primary Data

The majority of respondents (62.3%) cited non-availability of jobs as the primary challenge they faced upon returning. This highlights a critical gap in employment reintegration services. Joblessness, age bias, and psycho-social challenges dominated re-adaptation struggles.

7. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant difference between monthly income during migration and after return.

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant association between years of stay abroad and current employment status.

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant relationship between education level and awareness of rehabilitation schemes.

Hypothesis	Test Used	Result	p-value	Interpretation
H1: Income during migration \neq income after return	Paired t-test	Mean Diff = ₹18,250, $t(250) = 44.76$	$< .001$	Statistically significant fall in income
H2: Years abroad vs employment status	Chi-square (χ^2)	$\chi^2 = 16.47$	$< .01$	Longer stay correlates with better employment reintegration
H3: Education vs awareness of schemes	Chi-square (χ^2)	$\chi^2 = 22.35$	$< .001$	Higher education increases awareness of schemes

There is a sharp fall in income and savings levels post-return, high rates of job dissatisfaction, and multiple barriers to successful reintegration, such as lack of suitable employment and age-related discrimination. Statistical tests, including paired t-tests, confirm that the financial losses incurred after return are both substantial and significant. The findings underscore the mismatch between returnees' prior migration experience and the reintegration infrastructure currently available in Kerala, pointing to the need for more responsive, skill-aligned, and accessible support systems.

8. Barriers to Reintegration

Despite well-intentioned policies like NDPREM, multiple structural and procedural hurdles continue to obstruct the smooth reintegration of return migrants:

- Many returnees struggle to navigate the complex application procedures and experience long delays in accessing benefits.
- Skills acquired abroad—especially in construction, driving, or electrical work—often go unrecognized in Kerala's local labor market. Moreover, there is limited institutional support for skill certification or upskilling, leaving returnees at a disadvantage in competitive job sectors.
- Most reintegration schemes require formal business proposals, collateral, or digital literacy—resources that low-skilled returnees often lack. As a result, migrants with limited education or entrepreneurial background remain excluded from key support programs.
- While subsidies exist, many migrants lack the capital or banking history needed to access loans or co-investment opportunities. Delays in loan approvals, high rejection rates, and the absence of handholding mechanisms deter uptake of entrepreneurial rehabilitation schemes.

9. Suggestions and Recommendations

To facilitate the effective reintegration of return migrants, it is essential to strengthen institutional coordination between NORKA, local governing bodies, and financial institutions to ensure seamless service delivery. Enhancing access to credit by integrating returnees into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and microfinance networks can improve their financial resilience. District-level skill mapping and modular vocational training tailored to market demands should be prioritized to improve employability. Raising awareness about reintegration schemes through campaigns and digital helplines can enhance accessibility and visibility. Establishing reintegration centres at the district level that provide career counselling and entrepreneurship support would address key reintegration challenges. Simplifying startup procedures, offering administrative guidance, and promoting sector-specific entrepreneurship models such as food processing or agro-enterprises can foster returnee-led businesses. Supporting group enterprises with expedited approvals and targeted financing can strengthen collective reintegration efforts. Recognizing successful NRK investors through awards and policy incentives will help inspire others and encourage local reinvestment. Additionally, channelling NRK remittances into industrial ventures that offer employment to returnees and their families can generate sustainable livelihood options. Returnees should be prioritized in state-led development projects and given access to SEZs and industrial parks via startup incubators. Introducing mandatory pension contributions along with financial literacy training will enhance economic security. Above all, the effective implementation of reintegration schemes is vital to harness the skills and experience acquired by returnees abroad for local development.

Conclusion

Kerala's proactive governance in migrant affairs stands out nationally, but the persistent disconnect between well-intended policy frameworks and their on-ground execution limits real outcomes for returnees. The 2012 Nitaqat repatriation exposed systemic vulnerabilities that remain unresolved, particularly in reintegration planning, employment support, and financial rehabilitation. As global labor markets grow increasingly volatile due to nationalization drives and geopolitical shifts, return migration is no longer episodic but a recurring reality. This study underscores the urgent need for a unified, data-driven, and context-sensitive reintegration policy—one that empowers returnees through skill recognition, targeted finance, and inclusive planning—so they are not consigned to long-term joblessness or social marginalization. The Nitaqat episode, therefore, serves not just as a historical event but as a policy lens for navigating the future of migration governance in Kerala and beyond.

References

1. Arif, G. M. (1998). *Reintegration of Pakistani return migrants from the Middle East in the domestic labour market*. The Pakistan Development Review, 1.
2. Gopinathan Nair, P. R. (1999). Return of overseas contract workers and their rehabilitation and development in Kerala (India). *International Migration*, 1, 209–242.
3. Zachariah, K. C., Gopinathan Nair, P. R., & Rajan, S. I. (n.d.). *Return emigrants in Kerala: Rehabilitation problems and development potential*.
4. Zachariah, K. C., & Rajan, S. I. (n.d.). *Dynamics of emigration and remittances in Kerala: Results from the Kerala Migration Survey 2014* (p. 102).
5. Zachariah, K. C., Mathew, E. T., & Rajan, S. I. (1999). *Migration from Kerala: Social, economic and demographic consequences*.
6. Zachariah, K. C., & Rajan, S. I. (2013, 2014). *Kerala Migration Survey*. Centre for Development Studies (CDS).
7. Khan, A., & Illath, M. (2012). *Nitaqat and Kerala's Gulf returnees*.
8. Srivastava, R., & Sasikumar, S. (2003). *Labour migration from India*. International Labour Organization (ILO).
9. NORKA Roots, & NDPREM. (n.d.). *Guidelines*.
10. Business Standard, & The New Indian Express. (n.d.). *Various reports on migration and reintegration*.