

Social ties at work: Gulf migration among the Mappilas of Kerala, India

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Abstract

This research attempts to study the labour migration of Mappilas to the Persian Gulf countries (the petro-monarchies of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). Since the second half of the twentieth century, more actively since the 1970s, Mappilas have been migrating in significant numbers to the Gulf countries. While migration to the Persian Gulf has drawn participants from all over Kerala, with different communities trying their luck in the land of black gold, the cross-border migration to the oil-rich monarchies has been most active in the northern part (Malabar region) of Kerala, with Mappila Muslims constituting a significant proportion of the total number of migrants. This Malayalam-speaking Muslim community is also considered the most benefitted out of the Gulf migration, so much so that Mappilas' modern identity seems closely intertwined with Gulf migration in more ways than one. This study investigates how the Mappilas emerged as a prominent emigrant community in India, particularly in Kerala. In doing so, the study also seeks to answer the following sub-research questions: How do Mappilas secure job-related information and help to migrate to the Persian Gulf countries? In particular, how do they invoke and activate their social capital to find jobs and successfully migrate to the Persian Gulf? How have Mappilas emerged as a major transnational entrepreneurial figure in the second half of the twentieth century? What are the manifest and latent effects of network-oriented Gulf migration on Mappilas? The study seeks to answer these questions by mapping the migration trajectory of Mappilas, focusing in particular on their job search strategies, economic adaptation, and the effects of migration on the community.

The thesis understands economic migration as a socially embedded process. To effectively map, analyse, and understand emerging forms of mobility and transnational flows, social networks (and social capital) are used as the primary analytical framework. The research findings suggest a strong network character to Mappila migration to the Gulf. Despite a thriving migration brokerage industry in Kerala, Mappilas continue to depend strongly on social ties and connections to secure jobs and facilitate their Gulf journey. More comprehensively, Mappilas secure crucial labour market information, facilitate their cross-border movement, and obtain the much-coveted Gulf job using close interpersonal connections. With their familiarity and first-hand knowledge of the market practices of the Persian Gulf, the Mappila migrants have strategically invested in the Arab cultural practice of *wasta* (securing favours via social connections). We argue that the analytical framework of *wasta*-based networks offers an effective vantage point for understanding cross-border mobility to the Gulf countries.

Not only as labourers, but Mappilas have also been able to establish their strong entrepreneurial presence in the Gulf by specialising in the trade – often small running small enterprises – of niche products and services. When the windfall of petro-remittance accentuated the socioeconomic differences – by giving rise to a small group of the native dominant class and a large group of the expatriate workforce – in the Gulf, this created a socioeconomic void in Arab Gulf. Mappilas quickly capitalised on this opportunity, gradually becoming the “middleman entrepreneurs” in the Gulf. Other than the strong business acumen often attributed to Mappilas’ success, the research findings suggest how the *wasta* became crucial for Mappilas’ economic success in the Gulf. Strong social networks further connect people and businesses between Kerala and the Gulf. Even as cross-border migration pushes Mappilas away from their villages and towns, they remain firmly rooted in their affective ties and social relations.

This strong social character of Mappilas’ economic migration ensures norm conformity and fulfilment of promises made informally. We can also see a solid moral economic imperative, inspired by Islamic community ethics, in the economic behaviour and adaptative strategies of Mappilas. Migration creates distinctive experiences and outcomes for different groups. It often is an extension of migrants’ social context – the nature and extent of the capital they have determine migrants’ access to opportunities and migration’s outcomes.

The constant flow of economic and social remittances has altered the very social context of Malabar by (re)shaping the community socioeconomic structures of Mappilas. By drawing on the empirical evidence provided in the previous chapters, the penultimate and concluding

sections of the thesis highlight how Gulf migration has become part of the social ethos, cultural norms and contemporary social configurations of Mappilas. In Malabar, going to the Gulf is no longer merely an empirical phenomenon – that highlights the rational decision-making of migrants and their agency – rather, it has become a new ingredient (input) in the societal, familial, and cultural expectations one has of the Mappilas. Drawing from Massey’s writings, the study argues that Gulf migration (re)shapes the community socioeconomic structures of Mappilas and generates the internal momentum necessary for its self-sustenance among the community.

Keywords: Mappila, *wasta*, Malabar, middleman entrepreneurs, social networks, transnationalism, social remittances