

Socio-Cultural Perspectives on the Well-Being of Parents of Migrant Children in Kerala: A Conceptual Review

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Abstract

Migration has become a significant socio-economic trend in Kerala, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era, with many young adults moving abroad for better opportunities. This has led to a growing number of elderly parents being left behind, raising concerns about their emotional, psychological, social, and economic well-being. This conceptual paper explores the multifaceted effects of migration on elderly parents in Kerala, focusing on how traditional family structures and caregiving roles are disrupted. Drawing on existing literature and theoretical frameworks such as social support theory, family systems theory, and migration theory, the study examines the emotional toll of separation, social isolation, and the weakening of intergenerational bonds. While remittances provide economic security, they often result in a form of 'remittance dependency' that does not address emotional or social needs. The erosion of the joint family system and weakening community networks further exacerbate feelings of loneliness and disconnection. At the same time, cultural factors such as the enhanced social status of having migrant children offer only limited relief from the emotional strain. Elderly parents employ various coping mechanisms, including participation in religious and community activities, forming new social ties, and redefining personal roles. These strategies reflect resilience but also highlight systemic gaps in emotional and social care. The paper calls for targeted research and policy interventions to support the well-being of this vulnerable population within Kerala's unique socio-cultural context.

Keywords: *Migration, Psychological Well-being, Community networks, Cultural factors, Caregiving dynamics*

1. Introduction

Migration is not merely an economic decision; it is a deeply transformative social process that reshapes family structures,

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relationships, and individual well-being. In Kerala, a state known for its high rates of outward migration, the phenomenon has brought both prosperity and challenges. For decades, young adults from Kerala have sought opportunities abroad, contributing to one of the highest remittance economies in India. However, behind the financial benefits lie complex social consequences, particularly for the elderly parents left behind.

Traditionally, Kerala's society is anchored in a system of strong family bonds and intergenerational caregiving. The joint family system, once common in Kerala, ensured that elderly parents were cared for within the household by their children and extended family members. This system offered not only physical care but emotional support, keeping the elderly integrated into daily family life. However, with increasing migration, this traditional support system is eroding, leaving many elderly parents to fend for themselves, both emotionally and socially.

The psychological impact of migration on elderly parents often goes unnoticed amidst the economic discourse surrounding remittances. Many parents who were once central to their children's lives find themselves suddenly isolated. The emotional disconnection and physical absence of children create a profound sense of loss, leading to loneliness, anxiety, and even depression. While the economic contributions of migrant children may secure the parents' financial well-being, they cannot fill the emotional void left by their absence. This situation is further compounded by the breakdown of community-based support systems, where elderly parents, once embedded in close-knit social networks, now experience a growing sense of alienation.

Culturally, having a migrant child is often seen as a marker of success and upward mobility. Many elderly parents in Kerala take pride in the achievements of their children abroad, but this

social prestige can be a double-edged sword. The status symbol of migration does not alleviate the emotional toll of long-term separation, nor does it address the day-to-day struggles of living without close familial ties. For many parents, the reality of growing older without the comforting presence of their children challenges the very cultural norms that once promised security in old age.

This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted effects of migration on the well-being of elderly parents in Kerala, considering the emotional, psychological, social, and economic dimensions. Drawing on key theoretical frameworks, including social support theory and family systems theory, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how migration reshapes family dynamics and caregiving roles in a state where intergenerational solidarity has been a hallmark of cultural identity.

Moreover, the paper aims to uncover the coping mechanisms that elderly parents employ to navigate these changes. As the traditional family structure weakens, parents are finding new ways to adapt, whether through engagement in local social and religious networks or by redefining their roles within their communities. While remittances offer economic stability, they do not fully address the emotional and psychological needs of these elderly parents, making it necessary to explore community-based solutions and policy interventions to support their overall well-being. In light of Kerala's unique socio-cultural context, this paper critically reviews the existing literature on migration, aging, and family dynamics. The findings from this research will contribute to broader discussions on how migration affects the mental health and social integration of elderly parents in Kerala, and what can be done to mitigate these impacts in the future.

2. Objectives

- To analyse how migration has disrupted traditional family caregiving structures and intergenerational support systems in Kerala.
- To find the role of socio-cultural factors, including financial remittances, social status, and community networks, in shaping the well-being of elderly parents.
- To identify the coping mechanisms adopted by elderly parents to deal with the emotional and social challenges arising from migration.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Global Trends in Migration and Family Structures

Migration has long been recognized as a global phenomenon with profound implications for families and communities. According to the United Nations (2019), over 272 million people live outside their country of birth, with migration driven by both economic opportunities and social factors. The separation of families due to migration is a common outcome, leading to changes in family structures, caregiving roles, and intergenerational relationships.

Migration remains a dominant global trend, with the International Organization for Migration (2021) reporting that over 281 million people live outside their countries of origin. Migration leads to changes in family dynamics, especially as younger generations move away, leaving behind elderly parents. Boccagni (2020) emphasizes the increasing significance of transnational family life, where families are separated by borders but maintain relationships through long-distance communication. However, this distance strains caregiving responsibilities and affects the mental health of elderly family members.

Dahinden (2020) studied transnational families in the context of Europe and South Asia, revealing how elderly parents experience emotional deprivation due to physical distance, even as they receive financial remittances from their children. These studies suggest that while migration can be an economic boon for families, the emotional costs are high, particularly for aging parents left behind, who rely on virtual caregiving from abroad but still suffer from physical absence and emotional isolation.

Researchers such as King and Vullnetari (2006) have highlighted the "care drain" phenomenon, where migration disrupts traditional family caregiving structures. In countries like Mexico, the Philippines, and several Eastern European nations, the elderly are particularly affected by the out-migration of younger family members, resulting in increased emotional vulnerability and social isolation. Studies also show that while financial remittances from migrant children provide economic security, they often fail to compensate for the emotional and psychological void created by physical separation (Carling, 2008).

3.2 Migration and Well-Being of Elderly Parents

Recent studies have continued to explore the impact of migration on the well-being of elderly parents, with a growing focus on the psychosocial dimensions. King and Vullnetari (2020) revisit their earlier work on the "care drain" and emphasize how migration reconfigures the role of elderly parents, often leaving them emotionally and physically unsupported. The separation leads to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among the elderly, as they lose their traditional role as central figures in their children's lives. A study by Baldassar (2021) on long-distance caregiving reveals that while migrants attempt to maintain their caregiving responsibilities through digital means, such as regular phone calls or remittances, this is insufficient to meet the emotional

needs of elderly parents. The research suggests that the psychological toll on elderly parents is often hidden, masked by economic remittances, but it persists nonetheless, with long-term implications for their mental health.

As global migration patterns increase, several studies have focused on the impact of migration on elderly parents left behind. Toyota et al. (2007) emphasize that while remittances can improve material conditions for elderly parents, their emotional well-being often deteriorates. Baldassar (2007) introduces the concept of “transnational caregiving,” where migrants attempt to care for their elderly parents from a distance, but the lack of physical proximity limits the effectiveness of such care. This long-distance caregiving results in emotional strain for both migrants and their parents. Similarly, Antman (2012) examines the psychological and health outcomes of elderly parents of migrants in Latin America, noting that the absence of children contributes to increased loneliness, depression, and anxiety among the elderly. These studies reveal a recurring theme: while the financial aspect of care is addressed through remittances, the emotional and psychological needs of elderly parents remain unmet. Antman (2018) studied Latin American families and found that elderly parents of migrant children face heightened levels of loneliness and social isolation, despite receiving financial support. These parents reported feeling increasingly disconnected from their social circles as well, as the absence of their children redefined their social status within the community.

3.3 Impact of Migration on Aging Populations in India

In the Indian context, migration has had a significant impact on family structures, especially as India is one of the largest sources of international migrants. According to Mishra (2016), migration in India, particularly from rural areas to urban centres or abroad, has altered traditional family systems, leaving behind

elderly parents who often experience a sense of abandonment. Studies conducted by Srivastava and Sasikumar (2003) argue that the breakdown of the joint family system, especially in states with high migration rates, has intensified the emotional and social isolation of elderly parents. Recent Indian studies on migration focus on the impact of rural-to-urban and international migration on elderly parents. According to Guruswamy and Sharma (2021), India's high rate of migration, particularly from rural areas to urban centers and abroad, has left a growing number of elderly parents without traditional support structures. The joint family system continues to weaken, leading to increased social isolation for aging parents. Nanda and Selvamoorthy (2020) examined the psychosocial well-being of elderly parents of migrants across various Indian states. Their research found that parents, particularly mothers, experience a deep sense of loss and grief due to the long-term absence of their children, which can lead to chronic loneliness and deteriorating mental health.

Rajan and Zachariah (2019) have explored the specific challenges faced by aging parents of migrants in India, highlighting the double burden of social isolation and role loss. While many families take pride in having children working abroad, elderly parents suffer from loneliness and reduced social interaction. These studies emphasize that despite the economic benefits of migration, the well-being of elderly parents is a significant social issue in India.

3.4 Migration and Family Dynamics in Kerala

Kerala, known for its high migration rates, particularly to the Gulf countries, has been the focus of several studies on the impacts of migration. In Kerala, migration remains a central socio-economic phenomenon, and recent studies have increasingly focused on the social and emotional consequences for families, especially elderly parents left behind. According to

Rajan and Zachariah (2020), the state's high rate of migration, particularly to the Gulf countries, has drastically altered the traditional family structure, leading to the erosion of the joint family system. Their study found that over 70% of elderly parents in high-migration regions of Kerala live alone or with a spouse, with minimal day-to-day contact with their children.

Prakash and Gulati (2022) examined the emotional and psychological impacts of migration on elderly parents in Kerala, finding that many experience profound loneliness and emotional disconnection, despite regular financial remittances from their migrant children. The study highlights the paradox of migration: while families gain financial security, they lose emotional ties, with elderly parents bearing the brunt of this disconnection.

Thomas and George (2021) conducted a qualitative study on the social isolation of elderly parents in Kerala, revealing that many rely on community-based networks and religious institutions to compensate for the lack of family support. However, the authors argue that these coping mechanisms are inadequate in addressing the deep emotional void created by their children's absence. The study also found that many elderly parents experience remittance dependency, wherein they become financially dependent on their children's contributions but feel emotionally distant from them.

3.5 The Emotional and Psychological Well-Being of Elderly Parents of Migrants in Kerala

Studies focusing specifically on the emotional and psychological well-being of elderly parents in Kerala provide deeper insights into the challenges they face. Nanda and Selvamoorthy (2020) examine how elderly parents cope with prolonged separation from their children. They found that mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress are prevalent among this population. The breakdown of traditional family structures has left many elderly parents dependent on

local community networks and religious institutions for emotional support, though these resources are often insufficient to address the emotional void.

Thadathil and Kurien (2019) focus on the coping mechanisms elderly parents in Kerala adopt, noting that many turn to increased religious participation or form new social connections to mitigate their isolation. However, these strategies are often temporary solutions, and the psychological toll of separation persists. Additionally, Thomas (2021) emphasizes the role of remittance dependency among elderly parents, which can create a paradoxical situation where financial well-being is sustained at the cost of emotional well-being. The reliance on remittances further complicates the parent-child relationship, often reducing it to financial transactions rather than emotional connections.

The literature on migration and its effects on elderly parents highlights a significant gap between the economic and emotional dimensions of well-being. While remittances offer financial security, they fail to address the emotional, psychological, and social needs of elderly parents left behind. In the context of Kerala, where migration has transformed the traditional joint family system, the emotional and psychological toll on elderly parents is profound. Although some parents find solace in religious and community engagement, the absence of their children creates an enduring emotional strain. This review of literature forms the basis for the present study, which seeks to synthesize these findings within Kerala's unique socio-cultural context. The study aims to offer a deeper understanding of how migration reshapes family dynamics and caregiving roles and what coping mechanisms are available for elderly parents experiencing empty nest syndrome.

3.6 Gaps Existing in the Studies

- Many studies may not consider cultural variations in coping strategies or emotional responses. For instance, how does the experience of Empty Nest Syndrome differ across various socio-cultural backgrounds. Look for studies that specifically focus on the psychological well-being of parents whose children have migrated.
- Identified gaps in intervention strategies designed for parents. Are there studies evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions tailored for parents in different cultural contexts. Types of interventions (e.g., counselling, community support) have been explored.
- Investigate if there are comparative studies between parents whose children stay in the country versus those who migrate. This can shed light on the varying impacts of migration on parental well-being.
- Consider whether existing studies adequately address demographic variables such as age, socio-economic status, and educational background of parents, which may influence their experiences.
- Often, research emphasizes mothers' experiences. Investigate gaps in understanding fathers' experiences their coping mechanisms.
- Examine how technology, such as social media and virtual communication, influences the relationship between parents and their migrating children. Are there studies addressing this.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on multiple theoretical perspectives to analyse the socio-cultural and emotional impacts of migration on the well-being of elderly parents in Kerala. The combination of social support theory, family systems theory, and migration

theory offers a holistic approach to understanding the shifting dynamics in caregiving and emotional well-being as a result of migration.

4.1 Social Support Theory

Social Support Theory posits that social relationships and networks play a crucial role in maintaining individuals' emotional, psychological, and physical well-being. For elderly parents of migrant children, the loss of immediate, family-based social support especially from children who have traditionally been primary caregivers can lead to emotional strain and isolation. In Kerala, where family and community relationships have historically offered robust social support, migration challenges this framework. This theory helps in analysing how the weakening of intergenerational caregiving affects the emotional and psychological health of parents, and how alternative forms of social support, such as local community networks and religious practices, help mitigate these impacts. Social Support Theory also helps in understanding the role of remittances as a form of economic support, though insufficient in addressing emotional needs.

Key Dimensions:

- Loss of family-based caregiving
- Dependence on community-based or peer support networks.
- Emotional gaps that remittances cannot fill.

4.2 Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory views the family as an interconnected and interdependent system, where a change in one part affects the entire system. Migration significantly disrupts the family structure in Kerala, particularly the joint family system, which has traditionally provided care for elderly parents. According to

this theory, migration alters family roles and dynamics, with elderly parents often feeling a sense of role loss as caregivers and authority figures within the household. The absence of children redefines their roles, forcing them to adjust to new family configurations, often involving the outsourcing of care to non-family members or relying on limited social support. This theory helps explain the emotional and psychological consequences of these shifts and how parents cope with the changing roles and responsibilities within their families.

Key Dimensions:

- Shifts in family roles and caregiving responsibilities.
- Disruption of the intergenerational caregiving structure.
- Emotional and psychological effects of family fragmentation.

4.3 Migration Theory

Migration Theory examines the socio-economic and cultural factors that drive migration and its effects on both the migrants and the communities they leave behind. This theory is particularly relevant to understanding the economic and social dimensions of migration in Kerala. While migration provides economic benefits through remittances, it also creates a complex dependency dynamic. The financial stability gained from remittances can sometimes mask the emotional toll of separation. Migration Theory offers a lens through which to explore the concept of remittance dependency, where parents may experience economic security but suffer from social isolation and emotional distress. Additionally, the theory helps explore how migration shapes social status, with parents often gaining social prestige but simultaneously grappling with the emotional consequences of separation.

Key Dimensions:

- Economic benefits of remittances vs. emotional costs of separation.
- The rise of social status due to migration, but its inadequacy in fulfilling emotional well-being.
- Remittance dependency and its psychological effects on parents.

4.4 Synthesis of Theories

The integration of these theoretical frameworks allows for a comprehensive exploration of the multi-dimensional impacts of migration on elderly parents in Kerala. While Social Support Theory emphasizes the importance of community and emotional bonds, Family Systems Theory explains the structural and emotional shifts in family roles. Migration Theory explores the economic and social implications, especially the tension between financial stability and emotional well-being. Together, these theories provide a robust framework to analyze the ways in which migration reshapes the family unit, caregiving roles, and social networks, ultimately impacting the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of elderly parents.

5. Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative, conceptual research design, drawing on a comprehensive review of existing literature rather than primary data collection. It explores the socio-cultural impacts of migration on the well-being of elderly parents in Kerala, using insights from peer-reviewed articles, books, government reports, and case studies. Literature was sourced through databases such as PubMed, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories, with emphasis on recent, post-COVID-19 studies reflecting current migration trends. The analysis is guided by three theoretical frameworks: Social Support Theory, Family Systems Theory, and Migration Theory,

which help explain how migration disrupts caregiving roles, affects well-being, and alters family dynamics. A snowball method was used to gather additional relevant literature, ensuring a broad and in-depth perspective. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, focusing on emotional well-being, social isolation, economic dependency, and coping mechanisms. Cross-cultural comparisons were included to highlight both universal and Kerala-specific experiences. The findings synthesize how elderly parents emotionally and socially adapt to their children's migration within Kerala's unique socio-cultural context.

6. Major Findings of the Study

6.1 Emotional and Psychological Impact of Migration

The study reveals that the migration of children profoundly impacts the emotional and psychological well-being of elderly parents in Kerala. As highlighted in previous literature, many elderly parents experience feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety due to the physical absence of their children. This emotional distress is often exacerbated by the loss of traditional roles and responsibilities within the family structure. While financial remittances contribute to material security, they do not adequately fulfill the emotional needs of these parents. This finding supports the notion posited by Social Support Theory that social relationships are critical to maintaining emotional health, as the loss of family-based caregiving leaves a significant emotional void.

6.2 Disruption of Family Caregiving Structures

The findings emphasize the disruption of intergenerational caregiving structures as a result of migration. Family Systems Theory illustrates how migration alters the interconnected roles within families. Elderly parents often find themselves without the support and care they once provided, leading to a

reconfiguration of family dynamics. This shift can lead to feelings of inadequacy and loss, highlighting the emotional and psychological ramifications of role changes. The dependency on non-family members or local community networks for caregiving underscores the challenges faced by elderly parents, revealing gaps in emotional support that traditional family structures previously provided.

6.3 Socio-Cultural Factors and Well-Being

The analysis highlights the complex interplay of socio-cultural factors influencing the well-being of elderly parents. Migration Theory indicates that while financial remittances may elevate the social status of parents, they often do not translate to improved emotional health. The findings suggest that community networks and social status can mitigate some emotional distress but cannot replace the irreplaceable emotional bonds of family. The parents' dependence on these external support systems often leads to feelings of social isolation, further emphasizing the inadequacy of these alternative forms of support.

6.4 Coping Mechanisms

The study identifies various coping mechanisms employed by elderly parents in response to the emotional and social challenges of migration. Increased engagement in religious practices, forming new social connections, and reliance on community support are common strategies. However, while these mechanisms provide temporary relief, they often fall short of addressing the deep emotional needs left unfulfilled by the absence of children. The findings indicate a need for tailored intervention strategies that can effectively support elderly parents facing Empty Nest Syndrome, addressing both their economic and emotional needs.

6.5 Comparative Analysis and Gaps in Existing Research

The findings reveal significant gaps in existing research, particularly regarding the comparative experiences of elderly parents whose children remain in the country versus those who migrate. There is a need for further investigation into the unique challenges faced by fathers compared to mothers, as existing literature tends to emphasize mothers' experiences. Additionally, the role of technology and social media in maintaining relationships between parents and their migrating children warrants further exploration. Understanding how these tools influence emotional connections can provide insights into potential interventions.

6.6 Implications for Policy and Practice

This study's findings have important implications for policymakers and practitioners working with aging populations. It is essential to recognize the unique emotional and social challenges faced by elderly parents in the context of migration. Developing support systems that address both economic and emotional needs, such as counselling services and community engagement programs, can enhance the well-being of this demographic.

7. Conclusion

The discussions and findings highlight the intricate relationship between migration and the well-being of elderly parents in Kerala. While economic benefits through remittances are evident, the emotional and psychological costs of separation are profound. A comprehensive approach that integrates social support, family dynamics, and migration perspectives is essential to understanding and addressing the challenges faced by elderly parents. Future research should focus on bridging identified gaps, particularly in coping strategies and the role of

technology in maintaining familial bonds, to develop more effective support systems for this vulnerable population.

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