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## Diaspora philanthropy and transnational giving among the Mappilas of Kerala

**November, 2022**

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding diaspora giving is significant as we live in an 'age of migration'. While it is difficult to quantify the extent of emigrants' giving in India—as it takes different forms and trajectories—policy reports and local anecdotes point to an increasing trend. However, despite a recognition of its potential, diaspora philanthropy has not received much scholarly attention in India. This study strives to understand the nuances of transnational giving in India by focusing on the philanthropic inclinations, behaviours, and strategies of a leading emigrant community—the Mappilas of Malabar, Kerala. The data collected shows how hometown associations (HTAs) and the emergence of faith-based organisations (FBOs) have transformed the giving landscape of Malabar, providing migrants with ways to engage in strategic giving and promoting a long-term vision of community upliftment and social welfare. However, the findings of this study also suggest that the increasing preference for organised philanthropy, as carried out through migrant collectives and faith-based organisations, is not without its consequences. Reflecting throughout the study is the observation that diaspora philanthropy can be a highly gendered way of giving, where migrants, who are often male, decide what form and pattern charity and philanthropy should take. The paper aims to contribute to the scarce literature on diaspora philanthropy in India. In doing so, it also seeks to challenge and critically analyse some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about community giving in the Global South.

Keywords: diaspora philanthropy; Mappilas; faith-based organisations; social remittances; transnational giving; Kerala

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the philanthropic efforts of diasporas have come to be recognised as an effective way to transfer resources from developed nations to support social development in developing countries (Geithner et al. 2004). Immigrants are praised for the transformative role they play in the development of their home countries (Roohi 2016) by their contributions of money, time, and expertise (De Haas 2010). Understanding diaspora giving is significant as we live in an 'age of migration' (De Haas et al. 2019). While it is difficult to quantify the extent of diaspora philanthropy in India—as it takes different forms and trajectories—policy reports and local anecdotes point to an increasing trend (Kassam et al. 2016). In India, from the year 2003, January 9 has been celebrated as the Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas (Non-Resident Indian Day) to mark the contribution of the Indian diaspora to the country's development in different ways. Since a BJP-led central government came to power in 2014, India has also increasingly been showcasing a strong political desire to engage positively with its diaspora in different parts of the world. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on many occasions, has urged the Indian diaspora, mainly the wealthier diasporas settled in developed countries of the North, to give back to their homeland in all ways possible. Referring to Modi's concerted efforts to communicate with Indians living abroad, an article in The Washington Post read '[f]rom Australia to Canada, from the United Kingdom to the United States, from Dubai to Israel, no foreign leader has courted his country's diaspora as assiduously as Modi' (Kapur 2019).

However, despite a recognition of its potential, diaspora philanthropy has not received much scholarly and policy attention in India (Kassam et al. 2016). Unlike corporate giving through the mandated Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) routes—which are relatively well documented—the lack of annual systematic data drastically limits our understanding of diaspora giving in India. And, in the existing studies of diaspora philanthropy, the focus has been largely limited to organised charities, such as independent foundations, organisations tied to corporate donors, as well as those managed by wealthy families and trusts (see, for example, Agarwal 2008; Kumar 2018). However, this focus on industrialists, professionals, and other high-net-worth individuals settled in developed Western countries offers an incomplete picture of diaspora philanthropy in India, as the giving practices and philanthropic potential of a vast number of low-skilled and semi-skilled migrants (whom I call ordinary migrants) are often overlooked in and considered less for academic and policy discussions. As a result, existing research on diaspora giving in India invariably projects philanthropy as the realm of the rich. It also buys into the neoliberal discourse of organised giving (denoted by the word 'philanthropy') as the only efficient way to promote effective and sustainable development. While ordinary migrants' giving is acknowledged, it is called charity —a one-off response to immediate needs without a long-term strategic vision and, therefore, explicitly different from the organised philanthropy of the wealthy diaspora (Osella 2018).

The giving of ordinary migrants forms the core of this paper. More specifically, this research strives to understand the nuances of transnational giving in India by focusing on philanthropic inclinations, behaviours, and strategies of a leading emigrant

community: the Mappilas of northern Kerala.[2] The migration of the Mappilas to the Persian Gulf region (the oil-rich monarchies of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) began in the second half of the twentieth century. Over the years, Mappilas emerged as one of the largest Gulf migrant communities from India, working primarily in low and semi-skilled jobs and running small enterprises (Purayil and Thakur 2022). Over time, the Mappilas have become known for their hard work, business acumen, and giving (Osella and Osella 2009).

The data collected shows how migrants' home town associations (HTAs) and the emergence of faith-based organisations (FBOs) have transformed the giving landscape of Malabar, providing migrants with ways to engage in strategic giving and promoting a long-term vision. The paper also aims to contribute to the literature on the community practices of giving in India. In doing so, it also seeks to challenge and critically analyse some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about community giving in the Global South. Furthermore, in India, Muslim giving especially is synonymised with zakat and sadaqah (Sundar 2002),[3] despite many studies pointing out the complexity and heterogeneity of Muslim giving practices (Osella 2017). While religiously inspired giving does play an important role, as we will see in the subsequent sections, it increasingly also takes different forms and patterns, suggesting the need to acknowledge the difference between textual Islam and lived Islam. Looking at these complexities, the paper tries to throw some light on the different forms of giving that diaspora and expatriates engage in, as well as the various manifest and underlying factors that greatly influence these thematic areas of giving. The findings of the study also reflect, albeit implicitly, on how diaspora philanthropy can be a highly gendered way of giving, where migrants, who are often male, decide what form and pattern charity and philanthropy should take.

Clearly, different modalities of giving exist, and it is necessary to consider the socio-cultural context in which giving and receiving are taking place to develop a holistic understanding of diaspora philanthropy. Scholars like Osella (2018) have also pointed out that philanthropy studies tend to revolve around the canonised figure of the 'giver'. The latter takes centre stage, while the experiences of the receivers of charity and philanthropy and the power relationships involved between the giver and the receiver are often obscured. The findings of this study suggest that the increasing preference for organised philanthropy, as carried out through migrant collectives and faith-based organisations, is not without its consequences.

[2]The region is also known, unofficially, as Malabar.

[3]Considered the third pillar of Islam, almsgiving (zakat) is a fundamental practice obligatory for all Muslims who are able to give (Muhammad 2019). Zakat is fixed at 2.5% of one's wealth above the nisab (the minimum wealth one should have before they are liable to pay zakat). Zakat is considered as community wealth, and is to be paid and received by Muslims only. Sadaqah denotes voluntary giving and can be given at any time, in any form, and to anyone. Those who are not able to give zakat can compensate by giving sadaqah, by inculcating good intentions and engaging in good deeds, which may not necessarily be donating cash or in-kind but a simple act of helping someone in the street or smiling at people and showing empathy.

# 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To answer the research problem at hand, the paper has drawn mainly from three broad areas of research: diaspora philanthropy and development, transnationalism and social networks, and social remittances. The first stream of literature explores the relationship between diaspora philanthropy and development. Contemporary development and policy discourse on diaspora philanthropy considers migrants as 'agents of development' (Sinatti and Hors 2015). While this view is in no way a new one—as the complex relationship between migration and development has long been recognised—migrants giving to their homeland through different modes has attracted increase interest from academia and policy circles since the 1990s (De Haas 2010). Many scholars have read this change against the backdrop of the triumph of neoliberal ideology and the world dominance of capitalism (Senker 2015). At a time when there is a weakening of state-sponsored welfare programmes and inefficient allocation of resources in the economy, philanthropy is considered as the 'third sector' (Johnson 2007) capable of strengthening human welfare and social justice. Philanthropy by migrants is thus understood as having the capability to effectively resolve the failures of the state and market (Orozco and Wilson 2005).

Studies have primarily looked at diaspora philanthropy as the movement of financial resources from the developed Global North to the developing South. Migrant remittances—money sent by emigrants in the form of goods or cash to their dependents in their home societies—have come to be recognised as having developmental potential (Faist 2008). Thus, migration is encouraged by governments—as observed in the case of high-migration states like the Philippines (Rodriguez 2010) and Bangladesh (Deshingkar et al. 2019)—to reduce unemployment and gain valuable foreign currency remittances, both being seen as promoting socio-economic development. With many countries wishing to capitalise on the developmental potential of these activities, scholars, policymakers, and media pundits have often talked of the untapped possibilities of diaspora philanthropy (De Haas 2010; Upadhya and Rutten 2012). However, some scholars have expressed strong displeasure in considering remittances as philanthropy and argued for the separate treatment of the two. For instance, Guha (2013) differentiates between migrants' private giving in the form of remittances versus private giving in the form of philanthropy. However, a major drawback of such separate treatment is that often only the giving of high-net-worth migrants (businessmen and well-settled professionals) is considered to be socially impactful, while the financial transfers and giving practices of the millions of ordinary workers are seen as family support and charity. While the former are praised for their larger developmental vision, the traditional charity of low-skilled migrants is considered neither empowering nor sustainable from a developmental point of view.

The second stream of literature recognises the changing nature of both migration and giving. Recently, there has been a change in the way migration and resource flows are understood: —from following a fixed trajectory of leaving one's homeland and integrating into the host society to a constant back-and-forth flow of people

and resources. In the words of Portes and Yiu (2013, 79): '[s]tarting in the early 1990s, a novel perspective brought to the fore the continuing and multiple relations sustained by immigrants with their home localities and nations. These take the form of a rising volume of remittances, periodic visits and investments in hometowns, and the emergence of a web of cultural, religious, political, and economic organizations straddling the cross-national space between "there" and "here". Scholars have attempted to make sense of these changes by speaking of 'transnational migration circuits' (Rouse 1992), 'transnational social fields' (Basch et al. 1993), and 'transnational communities' (Levitt 1998). Although termed differently, these concepts all highlight the sustained and constant contact between migrants and their homelands and the socio-economic and politico-cultural implications of this back-and-forth traffic of resources and ideas.

Hence, migrants are now considered transnational beings who are always in motion and connected to their homelands through social networks (Portes 1995; Portes and Yiu 2013). Philanthropy by migrants is understood as taking place within a transnational social field, facilitated and carried out through different forms of personal ties (Upadhya and Rutten 2012). Many empirical studies have identified how social networks and the social capital they bring forth become crucial in facilitating and sustaining migration (Portes 1995; Purayil and Thakur 2022). Unsurprisingly, social networks and social capital have come to be seen as not only a facilitating factor in the process of migration and immigrant adaptation in host societies but also acting 'as conduits for the flow of development aid that interact with state institutions' in the homeland, but without necessarily displacing the state and the market (Faist 2008, 23). While studies of diaspora philanthropy have not considered the role of social networks exclusively, evidence from different parts of the world clearly shows the importance of personal networks in deciding the flow, forms, and patterns of giving. Portes (1995) identifies the importance of bounded solidarity between migrants who help each other survive and eventually 'make it' in the host society. Similarly, Orozco and Garcia-Zanello (2008, 57) have identified how immigrants formed hometown associations (HTAs) 'seeking to support their places of origin, maintain relationships with local communities, and retain a sense of community as they adjust to life in their new home countries'.

While it is difficult to fully capture the complexity of migrant network theory here, suffice it to say that social networks become vital conduits for transferring resources (Upadhya and Rutten 2012). In addition to the resources migrants send through official channels, a significant amount of money is remitted, and gifts are exchanged through informal networks (Purayil and Thakur 2022). Moreover, rotating credit associations, transnational civic organisations, and business networks engage in different forms of charity and philanthropic activities, where older forms of personal ties are rekindled, and new networks are formed. Although such resource flows are encouraged by governments of both sending and receiving countries and well appreciated by local communities, they are often unaccounted for in the official data and only limitedly considered in quantitative and survey-based philanthropy studies.

The transnational framework may also enhance our understanding of philanthropy. Rather than viewing philanthropy and charity as a one-way flow from well-settled diasporas to their homelands (often supporting causes that are dear to them), transnational studies emphasise the horizontal dimension of giving. For example, Osella and Osella (2009, S202) have shown how Muslim transnational entrepreneurs in Kerala not only view lending support as a responsibility towards one's community—an example of their piety and social mindedness—but also approach giving with apparent business interests of producing a class of educated, English-speaking workforce for their enterprises in India and the Persian Gulf. Similarly, Gardner (1995) has observed how Sylhet migrants settled in the UK maintain a close relationship with their relatives back home by financially supporting them as well as investing in their villages with the hope of finding suitable matches for their UK-settled children. Furthermore, recent literature argues that, rather than conducting micro (individual motivations to give) and macro (structural factors such as immigration policy and politics) studies separately, different factors involved should be brought together to develop a holistic understanding of migrants' giving.

The scholarship on social remittances is the third stream of literature informing this study and is closely connected to the transnationalism debate. Levitt (1998, 926) defines social remittances as 'the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- [host countries] to sending-country [migrant] communities'. Apart from monetary remittances, the cultural values and social skills that migrants carry with them during their journeys in and out of their country of origin need to be factored in whenever we discuss the transformative potential of migration (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). Studies have shown that diaspora communities tend to be influenced by religious and cultural factors when donating, and they prefer collective and community events as the primary modes of fundraising (Upadhya and Rutten 2012). Social remittances are transmitted through individuals, formal organisations, informal groups, and social networks. The giving practices of migrants are also greatly shaped by not only economic remittances but also social remittances. Migrants' notions of why, how, and when to give are likely to be shaped by the socio-cultural dispositions in this regard of their destination countries. This partly explains why a Western notion of organised philanthropy is now gaining prominence over the traditional modes of giving found in non-Western societies like India (see Roohi 2016).

Moreover, the change of focus while studying migrant resource flows from economic and financial remittances to social remittances offers the much-needed cultural angle that was missing from diaspora philanthropic studies. Cultural factors are considered messy and are often sidelined or wholly avoided in large-scale studies of diaspora philanthropy. However, the abundant literature in sociology shows that 'culture permeates all aspects of developmental enterprise'—emerging as both an opportunity and challenge (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011, 2). A review of the literature on diaspora philanthropy does not suggest a homogenous pattern of giving among the diasporas (Upadhya and Rutten 2012; Roohi 2016). Social remittances may provide us with a robust analytical tool to make sense of these changes. It enables us to explore the rich tapestry that constitutes migrants' philanthropic activities (Roohi 2016).

It should be emphasised that the micro-politics of giving, which shapes migrants' charity and philanthropy, also affect its socio-economic consequences. Years of staying in the host society may also influence migrants to promote ideas and practices that may be exclusionary in nature or detrimental to the home society. Levitt and Llamba-Nieves (2011) remind us that social remittances can be both a potential resource as well as a potential constraint. In a transnational context, the very meaning of philanthropy gets redefined. Local moralities and dispositions shape giving practices and also, in turn, get shaped by charity and philanthropy. What is accepted and what is not are all influenced by social and cultural factors of both the sending and receiving countries.

# 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study has greatly benefited from economic sociological discussions on the nature of giving. While considering actors' motivations to understand the scale and scope of charity and philanthropy, sociologists highlight the social bases of giving. Following Mark Granovetter's (1985) observation that economic actions are socially embedded, this paper considers migrants not merely as rational economic actors—homoeconomicus striving for utility maximisation—but as social subjects deeply embedded in specific cultural, social, regional, and political contexts. Different histories, ideologies, and cultural configurations shape their giving practices. Recognising the socially embedded character of philanthropy and charity is, thus crucial to understanding migrants' giving.

The study considers and adheres to the theoretical and methodological framework proposed by Carol Upadhya and Mario Rutten (2012). In their attempt to make sense of the complicated relationship among migration, transnational flows, and development in India, Upadhya and Rutten remind us that Indian transnational giving, despite seeking to portray a broader humanitarian and non-partisan character, is often organised on the basis of linguistic, regional, caste, religious, and ethnic identities. From a methodological perspective, it is, therefore, necessary to focus on the particular social contexts while researching migrant resource flows (both tangible and intangible) and their implications in terms of social development for home societies.

Upadhya and Rutten further suggest that migrants' different forms of engagement with their home society, which are often grouped into strictly defined categories in social research such as remittances, migrant investments, and diaspora philanthropy, are, in reality, multifaceted, multidirectional, and multifocal social processes. Such resource flows are invariably 'embedded in, and inflected by, the specific histories, social structures and political-economic formations of the migrant sending regions' (Upadhya and Rutten 2012, 54). In order to go beyond the current discussions on the relationship among migration, philanthropy, and social development, we require an ethnographically thicker and theoretically sophisticated account of transnational connections and flows that recognises the crucial role of regional, linguistic, religious, and caste identities.

# 4. METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted among Mappila Muslims in the Malabar region of Kerala. Considering the research objectives, a qualitative methodology is chosen for data collection and analysis. Acts of giving are greatly influenced by the particular social ethos and values of a society, determined especially by religious and cultural complexes. There are specifically local and regional mechanisms and influences at play here. Without considering these complexities, it would be difficult to understand giving practices. I found that quantitative approaches such as large-scale survey data and statistical techniques provide a limited understanding of how philanthropy operates on the ground.

To understand the nature, extent, and key drivers of diaspora giving, fieldwork was conducted in different 'Gulf pockets' of northern Kerala. This region is selected owing to a high rate of international migration and the presence of Mappila migrant families. Apart from extensive interaction with the people of Malabar, I conducted 35 in-depth interviews and one Focus Group Discussion containing six people. The people interviewed consisted mainly of returned Gulf migrants, those currently employed and/or doing business in the Gulf but on vacation, and young migrant aspirants. I also interviewed migrants' families to understand the household modalities and strategies of Mappila giving. In-depth interviews and participant and non-participant observation enabled me to understand giving from the perspective of the participants: how and when migrants give and how remittances sent to families by migrants are utilised for charity and philanthropy.

Some of the key resource persons were returned migrants who are active by giving money and/or time, figures holding positions in various (transnational) philanthropic organisations, including volunteers, community leaders, local politicians, and beneficiaries. In-depth personal interviews, observation, and secondary sources in the form of publications and reports on philanthropic activities of the reform groups and their philanthropic organisations comprised the key data sources. More importantly, the study is also informed by a detailed ethnography I conducted in Malabar between 2019 and 2021 as part of my doctoral research to study the job search and migration strategies of Mappilas.

# 5. FINDINGS, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

## 5.1 Contextualising Mappila giving: Gulf migration and flow of resources

Modern Mappila giving is deeply intertwined with migration. In pre-colonial times, giving came to be associated with a small class of wealthy landed gentry and coastal traders in Malabar. These were primarily the high-caste Hindu Nairs and Namboodiris, who controlled thousands of hectares of land and waterways in Malabar and also maintained a cordial relationship with the colonial administration (Panikkar 1990). Only a small section enjoyed economic success among the Mappilas, such as the Keyis of Thalassery and Koyas of Kozhikode. The Keyis, especially, were known not only for maintaining financial relationships with the British, including providing them with loans whenever required (Abraham 2017) but also for their selfless giving. But these groups were geographically bounded, and their activities were mostly restricted to a specific area. Many Mappilas who lived in the hinterlands of Malabar engaged in manual labour. Most of them worked as landless labourers and tenants to Hindu landlords (Panikkar 1990). Mainly converts from lower castes, Mappilas in the interiors of Malabar lived in abject poverty and deplorable social conditions (Miller 2015), and any practices of giving occurred within the close circles of family and neighbourhood.

However, social reforms pioneered by religious and community leaders, political awakening under the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and, most importantly, participation in Gulf migration, starting from the 1950s but more actively from the 1970s, resulted in the socio-economic and political revival of the Mappilas in the second half of the twentieth century. Following mass migration to the Gulf, several philanthropic institutions emerged not only in Malabar but all over Kerala. The constant flow of petro-remittance and other financial resources have enabled this south Indian Muslim community to engage in different forms of giving.

During the early days of Gulf migration, giving primarily assumed the form of reciprocal help. The early migration to the Persian Gulf region was primarily undocumented in nature. Those who migrated often smuggled themselves in merchant ships and wooden boats (known locally as lanchi and uru). Early migrants were mostly low-skilled with low levels of education and often had to pay a huge sum to secure a place in merchant ships to cross the treacherous Arabia Sea and reach the Persian Gulf. These migrants came from impoverished backgrounds and they sought help, financial and otherwise, from their family and close friends to migrate and live the Gulf dream. Hence, each migrant shouldered heavy responsibilities while moving to the Gulf in search of jobs. For an early migrant, his immediate concerns were to pay off the debts incurred during the Gulf journey and return the favour to those who helped him 'make it' in the desert land of black gold.

For these reasons, home visits of, especially the first visit following the Gulf migration, migrants often became a spectacle of joy and a celebration of giving. Early migrants carried numerous pieces of luggage, often weighing up to hundreds of kilograms, full of Gulf products meant to be distributed among their families and wider social circle. These early gift exchanges could be considered a precursor to modern Mappila charity and philanthropy. Soon, a migrant enjoying his vacation at home became a person of largesse. His family would never part with visitors without giving them money or some form of gift brought from the Gulf. Not just giving in cash and in-kind, but also job-related information and (in)direct help to secure a Gulf job (known locally as 'Dubai Visa') have always remained a crucial form of extending help among the Mappilas. Helping a male family member migrate is considered the most effective and lasting form of support—the equivalent of educating a child in the family to make inter-generational mobility possible. It is considered better than giving money directly. Owing to social expectations, Gulf migrants also actively donated, even when they did not have enough, to community programmes, family events, festivals, and religious organisations, giving rise to a patronage relationship and proliferation of charitable institutions in high-migration areas. While talking about the importance of giving for Mappila Muslims, M.H, a former migrant who worked in Dubai for almost two decades and is now in his late 70s, told me:

> *It is the Gulf migrants who rekindled the spirit of giving among the Mappilas. Gulf migration allowed Mappilas to achieve collective economic progress in a short time, creating new forms of class hierarchies—between migrants and non-migrants. Migrants became community benefactors that everyone, especially non-migrants, looked up to and aspired to emulate … many migrants became pramanis [rich men of social importance]. Their houses and business enterprises attracted a huge crowd of needy people, many even coming from nearby villages, with the hope of securing help.*

From my interaction with migrants, it becomes clear that one of the major factors that drive migrants to give is their status as the ones who 'made it' through resilience, hard work, and divine blessings. Indeed, many also resorted to giving to announce their arrival from the Gulf—to flaunt their newly acquired wealth to the community, hoping to gain respect and prestige. Gulf migration can itself be seen as a system of social exchanges—with different modalities of giving, receiving, and reciprocal relationships playing out at various levels.

## 5.2 Migrants' giving: purpose, motivations, and patterns

Participants most commonly referred to religious obligations and humanitarianism when asked 'why they give or what motivates them to give'. Extensive studies globally have shown religion as a primary motivator for charity and philanthropy (Osella 2018), and this is no different in the case of Mappilas. Migrants have admitted that they give primarily because their religion demands it—'charity makes a pious Muslim', many migrants told me. Put differently, zakat can be seen as the point of departure for all Mappila giving, and it is no different in the case of migrants.

However, although *zakat* is considered an obligation, in reality, the *zakat* practices of Mappilas often moved away from the ideal types due to interpretations and differences in socio-cultural practices. As confessed by female participants, it is not uncommon for families at times to adopt various strategies to circumvent *zakat* obligations. For instance, personal jewellery used for everyday purposes need not be considered while calculating *zakat*. Those who have a lot of gold—above and beyond their daily needs—wear it once in a while to keep them out of the *zakat* mandate. Similarly, although there is a strong religious stigma associated with dealing with *riba* (usury, interest given or taken), many Mappilas accept interest on their bank deposits and use the money for charitable and philanthropic activities.

Islam is not against capital accumulation and has spoken favourably of trade and commerce. However, through the Quran and Hadees, Islam educates its followers on the need to conduct business in the most appropriate manner.[4] For immigrant entrepreneurs, giving is believed to purify their wealth and enhance their profitability. Migrants criticise the Arabs for not helping the needy like they used to. In the words of a Gulf-returned migrant:

> *When I went to the Gulf in the early 1980s, Arabs used to be extremely generous with their wealth. Indeed, they led a lavish life. But they never forgot the Quranic mandate to share one's wealth. Because of this, Allah showered them with barakath. But as time went on, Arabs became self-centred and even selfish. The modern generation of Arabs only think about themselves and do not help us migrants like their fathers and grandfathers used to. But look at them now, their wealth is shaken.... Those who have little but still give something, however inconsequential the amount is, stand taller in front of Allah than the rich doing only the needful.*

Similarly, a Gulf-based entrepreneur told me:

> *Allah is testing you by bestowing blessings to see if you will fulfil your commitments towards ummah [Muslim community throughout the world].... Our Prophet has set the path clear for us ... but we need to exercise utmost caution here. I have observed that some Gulf migrants who make money through hook and crook think giving zakat and constantly donating a part of their wealth to poor and religious purposes would absolve them of the crimes they committed. It might in the eyes of society, but not in the eyes of Allah.... However, much you give, wealth created through haram [forbidden] activities will never become halal [permissible].*

[4]Conducting business following Islamic principle through halaal—permissible—ways includes strictly avoiding untrustworthy practices in business (such as hoarding goods, deceiving customers, or sourcing money through usury) and staying away from businesses involving and related to alcohol, pork, pornography, and gambling.

These differing notions and local practices point to the differences between scriptural Islam and lived Islam.

However, we cannot equate Mappila migrants' giving to religious obligation alone. Other than religious obligation and community solidarity, moral satisfaction was also cited by my respondents as a primary reason to give. Apart from piety, obligation towards one's social relations (especially the strong ties of family, kinship, and close friends) also motivate migrants to give. Mappila migrants often give back to their community not merely because of a strong sense of social attachment, but also because of their current marginalised existence, which the Government also recognises. In other words, the motivation to give also emanates from a deep sense of duty and obligation towards fellow people, more so if the community is facing a common threat—amplified in the case of Indian Muslims by various national and international political events such as the rise of Hindutva, Babri Masjid demolition,[5] love jihad campaign,[6] Triple talaq[7] and hijab controversies,[8] and widespread post-9/11 Islamophobia. As one community member puts it:

> *Nammal irikunnathinu munpu kaal neetaruthallo.' [We should never put the cart before the horse, should we?] ....We first should take care of the needs of our own community members. Achieve some level of self-reliance and then move on to help others. The conditions of Muslims in Kerala have indeed improved as compared to their situation in, say, the 1960s and even till the 1980s. But in many terms, Muslims are still lagging in many areas and are still behind the Hindus and Christians in terms of socio-economic mobility and status in Kerala.*

Some criticise treating remittances as charity and philanthropy and emphasise the need to maintain a clear distinction between remittance versus money sent explicitly for philanthropic purposes (Milner 2018). However, in the case of Kerala, it is difficult to maintain this distinction, for much of the giving in Kerala is carried out with the help of foreign remittances. No separate distinction is maintained among remittance, charity, and philanthropy at the household level. In the absence of money earmarked for giving, everyday charitable and philanthropic needs are met with monthly remittances.

## 5.3 Giving through faith-based organisations in Malabar

While earlier forms of giving by Mappila migrants were more arbitrary and occurred at the individual level, a new trend started emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first

[5]Refers to the incident in 1992 where the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, Utter Pradesh, was demolished by the Kar Sevaks of the Vishva Hindu Parishad claiming that the mosque was built in the 16th century on the exact site where a Hindu structure previously stood.
[6]A conspiracy theory propounded by the right-wing groups, orchestrated by the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), that accuses Muslim men of wooing non-Muslim women in order to convert them to Islam.
[7]In 2017, the Supreme Court of India banned Triple Talaq (Talaq-e-Biddat), a social practice among the Muslims that allows the husband to divorce his wife by pronouncing talaq three times in one sitting. While touted by many as a much needed legal intervention, many Muslims suspect the real intention of the ruling BJP government, which has constantly tried to portray Islam as barbaric, against this move.
[8]The recent protest by the right-wing Hindu organisations against allowing Muslim women to wear Islamic headscarves in educational institutions in India.

century. Muslim faith-based organisations, influenced by different reform ideologies,[9] are increasingly taking centre stage in charity and philanthropy in Malabar. In other words, the most apparent change in the giving practices of Mappila migrants in the last two decades has been the gradual shift from traditional modalities of giving—more arbitrary and personal in nature—to organised forms of philanthropy and charity carried out through faith-based reform organisations: mainly the Jamaat-e-Islami Kerala (Jamaat), Samastha Kerala Jamiat-ul-Ulema (Sunni Group), and Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen (Mujahid).[10] Mappila Muslims affiliate themselves with one of these reform ideologies and their everyday lives are influenced by their allegiance to different groups. Each of these groups has its own registered welfare and non-for-profit philanthropic organisations—for example, Jamaat has the 'Peoples' Foundation' and the 'Ideal Relief Wing'; Mujahid has the 'Integrated Medical Brotherhood'; and Sunni groups engage in philanthropy through various Mahallu federations and diaspora organisations such as Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre (KMCC).[11]And they compete with each other to gain adherents and resources.

The followers of each reform group engage in open debates—on various issues ranging from theology to the conduct of everyday life—sometimes taking their differences to harmful levels. Unsurprisingly, reform affiliations also play a role in social functions and life cycle rituals, including, but not limited to, marriages, circumcision, birth, and death. I have heard stories of marriage alliances being called off due to differences in reform affiliations, where one party does not approve of the religious beliefs or practices entertained by the other party, despite both believing in the central tenants of Islam. Each reform group also tries to assume credit for the social revival of Muslims in Kerala. The debate about who brought the Islamic renaissance and social reforms, taking Muslims onto the path of modernity and progress, is an ongoing one and one which is more competitive in Malabar than elsewhere in Kerala. Traditionalist Sunni groups are often accused of promoting superstition and un-Islamic practices by the Jamaat and Mujahid, but the former refutes these allegations and emphasises the syncretic and organic character of Islam in Kerala. These differences are reflected in the charity and philanthropy each of these organisations supports, undertakes, and promotes.

While other forms of every day giving continue in Malabar, the idea of effective giving has undergone a transformation. There is a popular view that reform organisations brought much-needed formalism and systematicity to migrants' giving. This change of attitude towards charity and philanthropy by Mappilas is evident in the words of B.P., who worked in Dubai for almost a decade and now runs a small business in Kerala:

[9]While Islamic reform ideologies take different routes and forms in Kerala, two of the most popular reform groups are the Mujahids and Jamaat-e-Islami. Mainstream Islamic reform emphasise the 'condemnation of shirk (attribution of partners to God; idolatry), of bidah (innovations in worship) and of taqlid (blind following), with a stress on the importance of itiha (reasoned interpretation).' (Osella and Osella 2008, 325). Mappila Gulf migrants, owing to their familiarity with the developments in the Arab world and widespread economic success, played a crucial role in the spread and, later, the institutionalisation of reform ideologies and organisations in Kerala. Soon, the Islamic reform groups grew their supporters and organisational base, controlling their own mosques, madrassas, schools and colleges, business enterprises, publications, youth and student's wings, and philanthropic organisations (Santhosh 2015).
[10]It should be emphasised that there are internal factions among the Sunni groups and Mujahid.
[11]Mahallu refers to the local unit of Islamic social organisation, with a Cathedral Mosque (where Friday congregation is conducted) at the pivotal position (Ismail 2019). In localities where Mahallu activities are stronger, their endorsement is required for receiving various forms of community assistance such as securing a burial place in the mosque and solemnization of marriages.

*My father ran a fruit shop in the locality. As a kid, I remember he used to keep a glass jar full of coins. We were not rich by any means. But still, he did so. He made sure that whoever came to the house did not leave empty-handed… If someone comes to the house asking for help, we would scramble and sometimes fight to decide who gets to donate the money… But now that I am grown up, I realise that those forms of giving only addressed immediate needs and were done for personal satisfaction. It never really helped the needy, rather made them more dependable… Mujahid groups are doing excellent philanthropic work and genuinely reaching out to people. During the time of Covid, we also donated oxygen cylinders. I donate periodically to the local organisation and also encourage my children to donate.*

Another migrant, a committed Jamaat-e-Islami follower who is working in Oman as a sales representative, put it this way:

*I read this line somewhere. If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. This logic is fundamental in the Jamaat group's welfare work. To create more significant and lasting change, we need to come together and address the root cause of the problems. Everyday charity to beggars won't take us there. All-round community progress needs to be visualised and executed at a larger level.*

As argued, migrants become the major conduits of resource flows, connecting their home regions to the host land through social networks. They also became catalysts in importing reform ideology from the Gulf regions, providing financial support, and donating their time to the organisations they are affiliated with. I was told that providing help remained personal and informal in the early days of the Gulf migration. Anyone affiliated with a charitable organisation in Kerala could simply travel to the Gulf and start raising money for specific causes. I met one migrant who built three mosques in north Malabar entirely with the help of money donated by wealthy Arabs. In his 70s now, M.H, who worked in the UAE for more than three decades as a helper at an Arab's house, put it the following way: 'During my time in the Gulf, people would come, some representative of a madrassa or yateemkahana [orphanage] asking for donation'. Mosques, migrant residences like bachelor hostels, labour camps, and small business enterprises became major help-seeking arenas. He continued:

*In mosques, one would start a collection drive during prayer, especially during the Friday Jumah prayer, and everyone would donate. But the main donors were Arabs. They would often empty their pockets while coming out of the masjids by dropping into the donation boxes. Those seeking donations would also come to shops run by Mappila migrants…. In fact, it became a nuisance after a point because new people were coming almost every week. It became more like begging and is not encouraged in the Gulf. It was creating a bad image of Kerala Muslim migrants… Eventually governments such as the UAE came up with laws to regulate the donations and fund-raising activities for charities.*

Many Mappila migrants also convinced their employers and sponsors *(arbab/kafeel)* to donate large sums of money for charitable activities at home.

Another pertinent observation from the field is that reform group allegiance often also determines the thematic areas in which giving occurs. Mappilas, especially the educated urban middle-class Muslims, are increasingly preferring organised giving over earlier forms of informal giving which are now equated with begging. In Islam, begging is considered inappropriate, contrary to the provisions of the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet. This is highlighted by reform groups such as Jamaat and Mujahid who strictly discourage begging. This distaste towards begging is extended toward home-based help-seeking by both individuals and organisations (whose money collection process is euphemistically referred to as *'bucket pirivu'* or *'book pirivu*').[12] Hence, there is an increasing distrust towards people visiting homes seeking donations, despite producing proof through pamphlets and receipts. While earlier on, this mode of collection was entertained and even seen as legitimate and productive, the realisation that anyone could forge a receipt book is concomitant with the popularity of reform organisations. This suspicion started emerging when fund seekers moved long distances to collect donations. More concerns are highlighted by M.H, who told me:

> *In the last 10 years, the practice of migrants from other states coming for money, especially for zakat money during the month of Ramadan, has increased. . . . zakat is community money and can only be given to Muslims. But these days, non-Muslims wear a taqiyah [skull cap] or burqa and visit Muslim houses asking for money. These are migrants from the Hindi belt of north India, and many are non-deserving. They can visit up to 50 houses in one street and make a good amount in a day... These worries have led some people to even ask the zakat seeker to recite some verses from the Quran like a small surah or fatiha to determine the identity of the receiver. . . . It is equally important for the receiver to utilise the zakat money for economically productive and halaal purposes. Many of these people could be simply collecting money and using it for drinking or other haram purposes.*

Direct provision of services—ensuring potable water, housing, establishing schools, and so on—are preferred over the transfer of cash to recipients. The fear of the latter squandering cash assistance underscores these practices. This is a middle-class concern resonating with a global trend. Often the major criteria for providing help are one's social conduct, religiosity—social image and reputation as a deeni (practicing Muslim)—and economic needs. Some strongly prefer and vouch for religious organisations citing the efficient work they did during recent times in Kerala, such as during the 2018 and 2019 floods and the Covid-19 pandemic. The Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre's relief work and philanthropy—in the form of collecting large donations of money and materials from Gulf-based migrants of all religions and communities—is especially highlighted by Mappilas. This comes against the backdrop of political criticisms levelled against the ruling party's fund collection (under the Kerala Chief Minister's Disaster Relief Fund), where many argue that the hundreds of crores of donations by the public, mainly by migrants and migrant households, were misused to gain political advantage, help party workers, fund the chief minister's foreign trips and other extravagances (see Scroll Staff 2019). This encouraged many to vouch for faith-based organisations known personally to them for rehabilitation and help.

[12]Bucket pirivu refers to the local practice of using plastic or steel bucket inside the mosque or during social events to collect monetary donations from attendees. Book pirivu is the practice of seeking donations by going to houses and business organisations in the name of a charitable organisation or for a program. Upon receiving donations, a receipt is provided to the donor.

Furthermore, reform organisations have been successful lately in encouraging people to develop a common vision of community upliftment and social welfare. This need came from the realisation that migrant donors often do not have a larger and clearer vision when they donate. The importance of giving and its different modalities are taught to younger audiences in madrassas and through play club activities, whereas to a mature male audience, this guidance is offered through the Friday sermon (khutubah) and public speaking, and for women through weekly classes and pamphlets and magazines, and now through social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups, and YouTube.

'People now want to give to known organisations. Those with a proven record of social service,' said S.M., a lawyer who identifies himself as a staunch Sunni active in the Mahallu affairs of his locality. Giving directly to the beneficiary may give one immediate satisfaction when compared to contributing to an organisation whose activities one may not always be aware of or care to follow up on post-giving. However, the ground-level work of reform organisations have been quite successful in changing this mode of thinking among the Mappilas. As a result, begging has come down, more so in the urban areas where the relatively wealthier people live. However, other factors, such as the emergence of gated communities that may restrict the entry of beggars, also need to be considered.

Furthermore, many *zakat* committees have sprung up in Malabar, managed by the reform groups. While Muhajid has '*Zakat* Cells' for centralised collection and systemati distribution of Zakat, Jamaat collects and utilises zakat money through their organisation called Baithuzzakat. As the Persian Gulf region strongly influenced the Mappila community, some consider these changes an Arabisation/Arabification of Malabar. The Arab notion of Islamic development and community welfare is reflected in the centralisation of zakat management in Gulf countries. For instance, in Bahrain, *zakat* and *sadaqah* are collected by the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MJIA) and used for the welfare of the Muslim community. In Kuwait, *zakat* is collected by the Kuwaiti Zakat House under the Ministry of Waqf and Islamic Affairs. These *zakat* departments then distribute among the *asnaf* (parties eligible to receive zakat) (Muhammad 2019). *Zakat* money is managed separately and utilised only for the welfare of Muslim communities as stipulated by Islam.

Each reform group tends to understand giving differently. While they all follow the Islamic mandate of giving away a part of one's wealth to the needy and helping others, there are differences in the ways of interpreting what activities can be considered impactful giving. Who should be the beneficiaries, and what outcome should a Muslim organisation expect through its welfare activities? Strong association with these reform groups also influence the causes to which a migrant gives. For example, while the traditionalist Sunni groups emphasise more on community development and focus on traditional forms of charity, such as running orphanages, donating money for girls' weddings, sick people's treatment, and so on, the reform-oriented Jamaat and Mujahid engage, apart from other forms of charity, in what is called modern forms of giving with a long-term strategic vision. Start-up funding, vocational training, and skilling programs are some examples of the activities undertaken by Jamaat-oriented NGOs.

Meanwhile, Mujahid has become a pioneer in the field of palliative care and has also emphasised the importance of environmental protection through its activities. Reform affiliation also helps people get job-related information and support to migrate. Moreover, in India, it is often assumed that faith-based giving or giving to the community is undertaken for personal satisfaction with no following up or accountability. However, Muslim reform groups are increasingly trying to change this mentality by encouraging people to seek accountability from the organisations they donate to. Community members and donors are encouraged to participate in meetings and scrutinise the organisations' annual reports made available for the public. For instance, People's Foundation, a Jamaat-affiliated NGO, publishes its annual report in Malayalam on its website. The Sunni groups conduct periodic meetings at the Mahallu level to discuss the charity and philanthropic activities to be undertaken at each locality. Such meetings also see the active participation of *Mahallu* members.

Discussing philanthropy is also used as a way to bring people under the umbrella of a reform group. One migrant, who is working as an accountant in UAE, told me:

> *The Jamaat-e-Islami organisation helped me complete my studies and subsequently secure a job in the Gulf. I was not aware of their activities. But then I started following them and realised that theirs is the true path and they are creating positive changes in the country. . . . now I support and contribute to their philanthropic work in whatever ways possible.*

Years of working in the Gulf also helps migrants build networks and participate in the charity and philanthropic activities of home town associations and transnational civic organisations with links to reform groups.

However, this is not to say that traditional forms of charity have ceased to exist. Among Mappilas, charity still retains its informal and direct nature, especially in rural areas. Individual giving directly to the poor has reduced, but it still exists. For example, helping widows, the sick, and orphans (yateem) is considered a holy act in Islam.[13] Because of this, people tend to donate more to orphanages and consider education less rewarding for the afterlife. But with the involvement of reform organisations, this is changing. Moreover, charity is also given anonymously by many. Giving without making it public is considered the ideal form of giving, as indicated by the frequently used phrase: 'valathu kai kodukkunnath idathu kai ariyan paadilla'—'give as if one's left hand does not know what one's right hand has given'. Faith-based organisations often try to educate people about Islamic humanitarianism. Many agree that touching people's lives with kindness becomes a direct and more effective way to teach people what Islam stands for; this makes more sense in a country like India, where Muslims have to prove their national loyalty repeatedly.

[13]Islam attaches great importance to taking care of orphans. The Prophet himself was yateem and the mistreatment of orphans is considered a serious sin. Consuming orphans' wealth is one of the seven major sins in Islam.

# 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This working paper has looked at the different modalities of giving among the Mappilas of Kerala, India. In the preceding sections, we have seen how Mappila migrants increasingly seek to coordinate their giving through reform organisations. Indeed, these changes are not peculiar to Mappila migrants, but reflect a global trend. However, while inquiring about how effective the new modes of giving are, I received mixed responses from the beneficiaries I interacted with. Students, who constitute a significant beneficiary group, said the scholarship amount they received was too low and, on many occasions, the support was rarely extended continuously. Although great care is taken to review the list of scholarship recipients periodically, there is a tendency to provide scholarships to new beneficiaries, resulting in quantity becoming the primary criterion over quality and outcomes. Bureaucratic procedures and the logic of managerial efficiency make dealing with philanthropic organisations a time-consuming process for the uninitiated. Moreover, migrants trust faith-based organisations on the basis of their reputation. They simply assume that this is a more organised and systematic way of giving. But only a few of those who donate follow up.

While the active presence of reform organisations has popularised organised giving, it is not without consequences. Sociologist Robert Merton (2016) reminds us that even a social act intended to produce positive outcomes may result in unintended negative consequences that may not be readily visible or may take time to surface and produce their effects. While FBOs provide a platform to engage with organised charity, their approach and activities consider beneficiaries as objects of intervention by deciding what is best for them and gradually shaping them into pious Muslims who do good for the ummah. The core of Islamic charity and philanthropy is to reduce people's dependence on external help. They are transforming the beneficiary from a receiver of help to a provider of help. They operate along the assumption that the poor are incapable of handling money and need intervention. Restrictions are put in place to ensure that their recipients do not squander the help received; however, this leaves beneficiaries with little agency to make decisions for themselves. The philanthropy undertaken by reform groups in Malabar with the strong participation of Gulf migrants should also be understood within the context of a discourse of 'Arabisation' of Islam: that is, the projection of the Arab version of Islam as the accurate representation of Islam. Such an ideological import of ideas through migrant networks may produce adverse effects that may harm social stability. While assessing the impact of diaspora philanthropy, it is thus necessary to consider the micro-politics of giving involved.

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# 8. APPENDIX—INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The following broad questions are used to direct the in-depth interviews. Depending on the responses I received, follow-up questions and clarifications were sought.

## Migrants

- Do you engage in charity?
- Why do you engage in charity? What causes do you consider the most important when it comes to giving?
- What are the ways in which you give?
- When do you engage in charity?
- Do you follow any religious reform group, and do you give through them?
- Do you follow up after donating?

## Migrant households

- Who makes the decision to give in your house?
- How do you allocate money for different charity and philanthropic activities?
- Do you support the charity and philanthropic activities of faith-based organisations in your locality?

## Faith-based organisations

- What does giving mean to your organisation? (motto, objective, ideology, and philosophy)
- What philanthropic activities does your organisation undertake?
- How do you collect funding for philanthropic causes?
- How is your organisation linked to Gulf migrants? What role do Gulf migrants play in your organisation?
- What is the role of Gulf migrants in funding the organisation and charity and philanthropic activities? How are funds collected for different programs?
- To what extent do migrants become involved in the activities of your organisation?
- How does the organisation deal with the question of accountability?

## Beneficiaries

- Whom did you approach for help? How did you seek help?
- What kinds of help have you received?
- Have you approached any faith-based organisation for help, and what has been your experience with these organisations so far?
- Have you faced any challenges while seeking help?
- Was the help you received sufficient?