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## **Bridging Borders: The Role of Loka Kerala Sabha in Harnessing Diaspora for Development**

**Dr. Robinson Jose K**

### ***Abstract***

Kerala with significant migration history has been benefitted much from various contributions of its global Malayali diaspora for a long period of time. The State known for its high literacy rate, recognized the immense potential of non-resident Malayalis in shaping the developmental trajectory of the State. Considering this fact, government of Kerala instituted a World Kerala Assembly known as Loka Kerala Sabha as a common platform to foster dialogue, collaboration and policy engagement between the State and its global community. It is a public forum of the global gathering of Malayali diaspora with the representatives of the people of Kerala to channelise financial, social, and intellectual capital of diaspora into Kerala's development process. The major objective of this move is to unite Malayalis across the globe and to harness their diverse talents and capacities and to integrate them with State for the social, cultural and economic development of the State. It was a great endeavour to unite Keralites from other Indian States and from various parts of the world to promote unity and cooperation among themselves. Since its inception in 2018, the Sabha has served as a driving force where ideas, experiences and resources are mobilized from the diaspora for the socio-economic development of the State. It helps the State to integrate

non-resident Keralites the intellectual and financial capabilities of the diaspora into the noble cause of economic development. This paper explores the strategic role of Loka Kerala Sabha in harnessing the diaspora to extract constructive suggestions and to avail different contributions including professional expertise with policy recommendations to strengthen diaspora-led development through institutional reforms, participatory mechanisms, and accountability frameworks.

**Keywords:** Malayali Diaspora, Loka Kerala Sabha, Socio-economic Development, Unity and Cooperation, Non-Resident Keralites, Participatory governance, Policy making, Development Planning.

### **Introduction**

Loka Kerala Sabha is a unique initiative launched by the government of Kerala in the year 2018. It is aimed not only to strengthen the cordial relations of the State with global Malayali diaspora and the Malayalis of other Indian States but also to accept expatriate investment and utilize it in a manner conducive to the development of the State. This conclave provides platform for the non-resident Keralites across the globe to discuss issues concerning policy making and economic development of the State. Its prime concern is to integrate their expertise and financial resources into a remarkable transition in the light of development. The skilful labour of Malayalis and their ability to excel in work with unique performance helped them to grab significant space in foreign lands. They are ready to face challenges and willing to take risks. This condition of their minds had made them coveted workforce in the world with more skills and strategies. The Sabha is aimed at addressing the issues of migration along with other problems of diaspora with a view to strengthen them, policy formation, investment and economic growth, cultural and social integration and the issues concerning their welfare and employment. This platform provides opportunities to make investments in tourism, education, healthcare and infrastructure sectors of the State.

## **Objectives**

1. To examine the genesis, growth, structure, and decrees of Loka Kerala Sabha
2. To explore the role of Government of Kerala in institutionalizing the Malayali diaspora engagement
3. To assess the social and economic contributions of the Kerala diaspora
4. To identify challenges and grievances in diaspora mobilization and redressal mechanism
5. To propose policy recommendations for consolidation of diaspora-led development

## **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the significant social and economic contributions of the Malayali diaspora, particularly through remittances, investments, and knowledge exchange, there remains a structural gap in scientifically integrating diaspora resources through different means into long-term process and over-all development planning. Though the Loka Kerala Sabha was established by the Government of Kerala to commit diaspora engagement, problems persist regarding its implementation effectiveness, policy influence, and developmental impact. In this circumstance, this article seeks to critically examine whether Loka Kerala Sabha functions merely as a consultative forum or as a transformative device for diaspora-driven socio-economic development of the State.

## **Research Questions**

1. How effectively does the Loka Kerala Sabha facilitate diaspora engagement for the sustainable development in Kerala?
2. How does diaspora engagement contribute to economic growth and social development through Loka Kerala Sabha?
3. What are the challenges and grievances which limit its operational effectiveness?
4. How state policies and initiatives integrate Kerala diaspora into governance and development planning in the State?
5. How Loka Kerala Sabha acts as a consultative and advisory body in addressing diaspora concerns and make contributions in health, education, skill development, and infrastructure in Kerala.

## Methodology

This study required narrative and qualitative analysis of Loka Kerala Sabha proceedings and policy documents of various sessions to trace out the genesis, growth, structure, and decrees of the Sabha. Data is collected and analysed from discussions, symposiums, panel discussions during the conduct of its sessions and interviews with diaspora representatives and policymakers of the State. Sufficient secondary data analysis is made on remittances, knowledge exchange and diaspora investment patterns.

## Scope and Relevance

Loka Kerala Sabha has a wider **scope** in institutional mechanisms, diaspora dynamics, development impact and policy frameworks and a high **relevance** on matters relating to economic empowerment, governance, cultural diplomacy, and sustainable development. They discuss their *economic engagement*, transnational identity, and cultural links of millions of Malayalis abroad, particularly in the **Gulf countries, Europe, Americas, and other parts of Asia**. It provides a *platform for dialogue* between the diaspora and policymakers of the State and mechanisms for aggregating diaspora feedback, concerns, and development notions. **Economically, the investments in various sectors, entrepreneurship, technology, skills etc., are specially mentioned in dialogue. The social contributions were to be made in the fields of** health, education and welfare programs through collaborations and funding. **Culturally, the Malayali diaspora engage in** preserving heritage and social networks. Their cultural contributions can help to sustain Kerala's traditions abroad and enhances Kerala's global cultural and social footprint. In terms of **Policy advocacy**, they influence in making policies for migrant welfare. The Sabha promotes participatory governance by hearing the voices of diaspora in policy deliberations and shape policies relating to overseas welfare, social security, and reintegration programs.

The Loka Kerala Sabha began in 2018 with a motto "Unite, Discuss and Progress". The motto has served as a driving force behind session. It sought an enthusiastic support and cooperation of Malayali diaspora spread across various Indian States and other countries. At

present, the Sabha consists of the representatives from 125 countries and 28 Indian States. The Sabha has conducted several conferences with a view to find solutions to the problems of Malayali diaspora in different regions. There are five conferences and three regional conferences have been organised so far.

The first session of the Sabha had recommended the establishment of Overseas Keralites Investment & Holding Limited Company and created the same to promote NRI investments. Under this company four main projects were implemented. First one was “Rest Stop”, which provides 50 travel facility centres with international standard on national highways. Secondly, “Norka Senior Living”, which ensures best accommodation and care for senior citizens. Thirdly, “Sherpa Senior Living”, which sets standards in this sector in collaboration with Social Justice Department. And finally, “Sherpa”, which provides digital systems to facilitate investments.

The second session was held in 2020 which recommended to create an employment exchange for the purpose of identifying experienced professionals among them. The Pravasi Dividend Scheme was established as a long-term investment scheme. This scheme ensures monthly income for NRIs and their life partners and it is implemented with the help of Pravasi Welfare Fund Board. Till 2023, the government has collected Rs.330.39 crores as investments of expatriates for the development of their home land and to provide a secure income to the investors.

The third session was held in 2022 which put forward eight focus areas including welfare, investment and skill development. This conference recommended to launch an online portal and to conduct Kerala migration survey. As a result, an online portal was created to satisfy their demand for a digital space to the interaction with the world. Based on the recommendation of the third session, Kerala Migration Survey 2023 was approved to collect data on expatriate Malayalis. The previous sessions of the Sabha have succeeded in their expectations. Numerous notions and initiatives were proposed concerning safety, welfare and resettlement of expatriates.

The fourth session was held in the month of June 2024 where active participation of expatriate Malayalis spread across in India and abroad was witnessed. The contributions and services of diaspora became inevitable to stimulate economic growth, revitalise the production sectors, modernise service sectors and to build up a knowledge-based society in future. The Sabha made a deep dialogue on Draft Emigration Bill 2021, various Foreign Recruitment Programmes, Innovative ideas on sustainable rehabilitation, vulnerable aspects and security in migration, new employment opportunities and skill development in the context of migration, new models of Kerala development, changing employment and migration laws in foreign countries, transition to knowledge economy and the Malayali diaspora.

The fourth session had recommended Pravasi Mission, Norka Police Station, Mental Health measures, Ayurvedic services, Loka Keralam Online services and Airport Health Desk. These recommendations were successfully implemented from time to time. of the Sabha had discussed migration models, international collaboration and skill development. The delegates also urged the government and Norka Roots to take steps to reduce heavy travel costs. The forum highlighted the problems faced by the Malayali diaspora in the Gulf region as well as other regions including labour rights and legal rights. Because it is alleged that there is widespread mishandling and exploitation by agencies handling visiting visas. The forum provided a common platform to discuss the major issues confronted by Kerala diaspora.

The fifth and the last session of the Loka Kerala Sabha was held in the month of January 2026, in Thiruvananthapuram. Around 500 delegates from 125 countries and 28 Indian states were participated aiming to promote cultural and economic cooperation between Kerala and its diaspora. It created a platform for global Malayali representation with a view to integrate non-resident Keralites socio-politically and economically with the state of Kerala. It highlighted Kerala's global concerns and connections like strengthening diaspora engagement in Kerala's socio-economic development, Migration-related issues, including **fraudulent recruitment prevention** and welfare mechanisms, Proposals on health tourism in collaboration with

embassies and global networks and Implementation and review of diaspora-suggested initiatives from previous sessions. Pinarayi Vijayan, the Chief Minister of the State also highlighted ongoing work on **legislation to regulate education consultancies and a specialised police unit for handling overseas recruitment fraud.**

M A Baby, former Minister for Education, Government of Kerala has said that the emigrants from Kerala imbibe the spirit of universal brotherhood. He also said that Loka Kerala Sabha offers opportunity for identifying and discussing the issues of Pravasis and finding solutions to their problems. The Chief Minister of Kerala has opined that the migration has helped the identity and culture of Kerala to spread far and wide making us a true global community. This journey of culture has created vibrant and distinct characters outside the geographical boundaries of the State.

## **Contributions to Kerala's Development Strategy**

### **1. Economic Growth and Investment**

The economy of Kerala knowingly depends on remittances from its diaspora. The Loka Kerala Sabha can play a crucial role to convert **remittances into structured investments**. The diaspora professionals are able to bring skills, technical know-how, and aid local startups and industries. This forum gave a boost to the diaspora to invest in start-ups and various industrial projects. The government launched investment-friendly initiatives like launching of NRI Chitty scheme and the creation of Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board. The Sabha envisaged to promote special economic zones and Non-Resident Keralites Business Forums. Kerala expected to receive a lion's share of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from remittances.

As part of the investment initiative, NRI chitty scheme was launched by Kerala State Financial Enterprises (KSFE) as a financial saving scheme for Malayali diaspora across the globe. It provides both savings and credit solutions which ultimately contribute to the development of Kerala's economy. It offers online accessibilities to make payments and participate in auctions. It also ensures transparency in the payment options and online auctions they do from abroad.

The government of Kerala created Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board as a statutory body with an aim of mobilising funds for the development of large-scale infrastructure projects. It provides funds to the projects relating to water, sanitation, energy and transportation sectors. This board also acts as a revenue-generating entity by levying tolls on roads constructed under this board.

## **2. Social Development Initiatives**

Loka Kerala Sabha has focussed on improving healthcare and education. It provides extensive support to schools, colleges, Universities and hospitals. In the fourth session of the Sabha, the delegates spoke about the need of providing higher education facilities for students of UAE and Saudi Arabia. Government also launched social welfare schemes like 'Pravasi Pension Scheme'. Members of the forum also sought for a rehabilitation programme for Gulf returnees to prevent unemployment. It is intended to support the aging Non-Resident Keralites coming back to Kerala. This forum provides financial assistance and organises skill development programmes for Gulf returnees.

## **3. Political and Policy Influence**

Loka Kerala Sabha influences the government in the formulation and implementation of various policies relating to migration, employment and other legal rights. This platform has advocated for labour rights and legal protections for them working in foreign countries. The Sabha provides an opportunity for outside Malayalis to give a direct voice in terms of policy formulation and governance. It can provide detailed and substantive advisory recommendations on matters relating to the consideration by both central and state governments.

## **4. Cultural Community Development**

One of the significant challenges for the Malayali diaspora is maintaining their cultural identity abroad. Loka Kerala Sabha promotes various cultural exchange programmes. It ensures that the link between Non-Resident Keralites and Kerala's traditions and languages should be strengthened. The forum also requested to conduct certain cultural activities like Arts festival to maintain their cultural interaction. It has launched other initiatives like Malayalam language promotion, digital

libraries, Kerala cultural festivals and establish Malayali community centres in foreign countries.

## **5. Infrastructure and Tourism Development**

Loka Kerala Sabha promoted tourism industry. It connects Kerala diaspora into tourism-based initiatives and supports heritage conservation projects. The government also launched certain infrastructure projects like roads, airports and Information Technology parks. They make huge investments in public infrastructure. The investments received through Pravasi Dividend Scheme will also be used for infrastructure development projects including KIIFB.

### **Discussion and Findings**

1. It was a pioneering initiative and a global platform to bring Malayalis together from various parts of the world with an intention of bridging the gap between Kerala diaspora and the State government. The Malayali diaspora provides their expertise, financial services and cultural influence for the progress of the State.
2. The State of Kerala has one of the largest diaspora communities in the world including in Middle East, US, Europe and South East Asia. The economy of Kerala is dependent on remittances and which constitute significant portion of GDP of the State. Their investments in tourism, IT, healthcare and educational sectors contribute to achieve sustainable economic development.
3. Most of the Malayali diaspora are professionals in various fields of IT, engineering, medicine and business. They participate in the expansion of international airports to develop global connectivity. They conduct discussions to establish IT parks and Start-up hubs to attract foreign Malayalis. It wanted to integrate global ideas into Kerala's developmental road map.
4. Regarding other challenges, there is an implementation gap. Several policy recommendations bring delay in its implementation. There is a bureaucratic delay in materialising their decisions. Hence demand is raised to establish a permanent Loka Kerala Sabha Secretariat for monitoring and supervising the implementation of various schemes related to Kerala diaspora. The State can create digital platforms for the continuous interaction between them.

Emphasis should be given to implementation of declared plans and schemes.

5. Loka Kerala Sabha is first of its kind in the country. It is a novel initiative which no other Indian State has institutionalised such a platform so far to integrate diaspora into governance and development planning. The States like Punjab, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu have large migrant populations around the world. Undoubtedly, Loka Kerala Sabha can serve as a model for these Indian States.
6. The Sabha foster a sense of pride and unity by strengthening a bond between the expatriate Malayalis with their homeland. It provides an opportunity for the global Malayali community to unite together under a common umbrella. This global Assembly can be considered as both problem-solving forum and an investment summit. It offers a public space to the Kerala diaspora for both connection and collaboration. This interconnects skilled individuals in various sectors offering transformation in every development path.
7. The Malayali Diaspora networks actively conducting certain welfare activities like providing legal aid, emergency repatriation in emergency situations and Norka Covid Alert Registration Portal during Covid 19 pandemic. Such comprehensive welfare and development projects have been planned and implemented under the leadership of Norka. Thus, they played crucial roles during the times of crisis like natural disasters, pandemics etc., both for host countries and homeland.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Loka Kerala Sabha is a novel initiative which brings together Non-Resident Keralites and key stakeholders. The Sabha has grown into an institutionalised platform that extends Kerala's policy dialogues beyond the state and enabling direct engagement with government officials, legislators, and development stakeholders. It addresses the issues regarding economic investment, policy advocacy, diaspora welfare and cultural integration. The major policy recommendations consist of strengthening statutory support and policy integration

mechanisms, enhance inclusivity among socio-economic migrant categories, institutionalize monitoring and evaluation systems, promote diaspora investment facilitation centres and encourage digital participatory platforms for continuous engagement of Malayali diaspora. It has opened doors for Malayali diaspora to be embedded into concrete development strategy. However, the success depends on effective implementation of its plans and schemes by adopting transparent mechanism to track progress. The government of Kerala ensure that Loka Kerala Sabha evolves beyond a symbolic gathering that drives optimum development and meaningful change. Today, the world is an open door of opportunities and privileges. The Malayali diaspora can play good game to assist the State harness the possibilities of the outside world for economic development. This venture opens doors to other Indian States to engage their diaspora for mutual growth and prosperity.

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