



Unveiling the Compassion: A Comprehensive Media Investigation into Ashraf Thamarassery's Pioneering Repatriation Service for Gulf Migrants

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Abstract

Ashraf Thamarassery, an Indian migrant in the UAE, is dedicated to repatriating deceased migrants, transcending borders and religions. His mission has brought back over 5000 individuals to their home countries between 2000 and 2017, offering solace to their families. Witnessing the despair of two young men at Sharjah's Kuwait Hospital was the pivotal moment that spurred his remarkable endeavor. Despite receiving the prestigious Pravasi Bharatiya Samman in 2015, he selflessly continues his work. This study underscores Thamarassery's extraordinary solo global humanitarian efforts and their impact through media analysis and the study offers a comprehensive view of a man's mission to provide serene farewells, and its broader implications for migrant issues in the UAE.

Key Words:

Ashraf Thamarassery, Repatriation, Migrant community, Migrant Dead Body Repatriation, Repatriating Dead Bodies from the UAE -Deceased Migrant Repatriation - Repatriation procedures.

Introduction:

1. Ashraf Thamarassery: Guardian of Serene Farewells

Ashraf Thamarassery's name resonates with a sense of unparalleled altruism within the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) migrant community. A 44-year-old automotive industry worker by profession, but his life is dedicated to assisting the repatriation of deceased migrants from the UAE, an undertaking that has brought solace to many grieving hearts across borders and cultures.

Thamarassery says that he ensure that every soul's departure is a tranquil voyage, granting solace to grieving hearts. Families should find solace in their mourning, free from worldly concerns. Thus, I assume the role of the ferryman." (Personal interview With Thamarassery in 2017).

He dedicated his life to repatriating the remains of migrants who have died in the UAE. Regardless of the time of day, he responds to calls related to deaths with firm compassion and dedication and his service is free. (Badam, R. T. 2018, May 27).

Even in the face of the media attention generated by the death of renowned Bollywood actress Sridevi in Dubai, Thamarassery remains humble and is not interested in fame. He stresses that he is not interested in personal recognition, but in supporting expatriates in the UAE who need help repatriating their loved ones. He firmly believes that death is the great equalizer, emphasizing that ultimately, we are all just bodies in a coffin. His acts of kindness have led to a growing number of requests, and Thamarassery is happy to help, having already transferred thousands of dead bodies to 38 countries. (Ravindranathan, S. 2019, April 7)

Though a school dropout, language barriers have never deterred Thamarassery, as he always finds ways to bridge communication gaps. His good reputation with embassies and consulates in the United Arab Emirates ensures that paperwork is processed efficiently. The Indian Embassy knows him as the go-to guy for anyone dealing with a loss. His help simplifies the complex repatriation process, which often involves going through ten different departments. He handles the paperwork so grieving families can focus on healing without added stress. (Gokulan, D. 2018, March 10).

The Solemn Escort

In situations where the deceased has no one to accompany them, Thamarassery personally escorts the body to its final resting place. During his service, he witnessed destitution to the extent that some families couldn't even afford a proper burial. Thamarassery mentioned that on numerous occasions, when he escorted the deceased, he encountered situations where family members declined to accept the deceased's body. In some instances, they showed more concern about the deceased's belongings and earnings, often due to their lack of awareness regarding the deceased's circumstances in the migrant countries. In other cases, illiterate family members hesitated to collect the body out of fear that they would be required to cover the associated costs. (Personal communication with Thamarassery in 2018)

He stands as a symbol of compassion and selflessness in a world where death often goes unnoticed. His commitment to helping others find closure and peace in their moments of loss is a testament to the profound impact one individual can have on the lives of many. (Thikkodi.B 2014).

This study examines the media coverage and portrayal of Thamarassery's contributions in the media and illuminates how his humanitarian efforts have been portrayed and recognized in the media.

1.1 Thamarassery's Background

In 1999, Thamarassery came to Ajman, a state 30 km away from Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, as a driver and initially worked at the Ajman Sea Port before opening a vehicle workshop. However, now he completely focusses on assisting in the repatriation of the deceased.

Before coming to the UAE, a school dropout, he led a simple life as a cab driver and ran a small sugar store in his hometown Thamarassery in Calicut, India. He was considered lazy during his school years; His path took an unexpected turn when he moved to the Gulf (personal interview with Thamarassery).

He has helped over 5,000 families worldwide repatriate their loved ones who died abroad. For his humanitarian efforts, he was awarded the prestigious Pravasi Bharatiya Samman by the Indian government in 2015 and received recognition from various Indian and international associations. (Kavil, S. 2018, March 5).



Ashraf Thamarassery receives the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman from then Vice President Hamid Ansari as External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj looks on. The event happened on 9th January 2015 in Ahmedabad, India.

Thamarassery 's efforts have been recognised from various quarters, including the Dubai Police and the Dubai Orthodox Christian Youth Movement. He received an honorary doctorate (DLitt) from Kings University in the United States.

1.2 Books about Thamarassery

His inspiring life story has been recorded in several Malayalam and English books including Bashir Thikkodi's '*Paretharkkoral*' (For the Deceased), O M Abubacker's '*Maranapusthakam*' (The Death Ledger). Saleem Noor's '*Mruthyuvin Karampidichu* (Helping the deceased) and KP Sudheera's '*Swargavathil* (Door to Heaven). In addition Filmmaker Reshel Shah Kapoor made a documentary film titled '*The Undertaker*' that showcases Thamarassery's extraordinary journey.

All the books illustrate Thamarassery's efforts and service over the last 18 years. The books narrate the tale of migrants and their sorrows, portraying Thamarassery as their savior, a one-man army supporting them without financial motives.



Book covers from left: '*Maranapusthakam*' (*The Death Ledger*), '*Paretharkkoral*' (*For the Deceased*) and the '*Swargavathil*' (*Door to Paradise*),

1.3 The Undertaker, Documentary on Thamarassery

Reshel Shah's short documentary, (Newbould, C. 2017, June 26) *The Undertaker*, explores why someone would dedicate their life to repatriating the deceased without seeking profit. Shah portrays Thamarassery, a UAE resident, as a man driven by a deep sense of duty and highlights his unwavering dedication in the face of constant requests for assistance. Thamarassery's motivation extends beyond seeking recognition; he aims to inspire others to follow his path. Shah also notes his skill in maintaining a delicate balance between work and family life, disconnecting from the emotional toll of his job when at home. The six-minute-long documentary has a comprehensive view of his work, including emotional conversations and the

Methodology

To conduct this study, I collected media reports and articles related to Thamarassery's humanitarian efforts from various sources, including newspapers, television broadcasts, online news websites, and social media platforms. The focus was on reports published between May 2015 and May 2019. A qualitative content analysis was employed to identify key themes, trends, and patterns in the media coverage. I also discussed and conducted unstructured interviews with Thamarassery several times between January 2017 to February 2019. Unstructured interview was conducted with Dr. Puthur Rahman, president of Kerala Muslim Cultural Center (KMCC) in the UAE, who is actively involved in humanitarian works for migrants.

2 Review of Literature

2.1 Thamarassery's Compassionate Mission

Migrants in the UAE often face significant challenges when confronted with the unfortunate situation of the death of a family member. Repatriating the deceased to his or her home country can be a complex and stressful process, involving bureaucratic hurdles, numerous offices, and extensive paperwork, even if the employer offers financial assistance.

In a personal communication, Thamarassery ratified that the challenges faced by migrant workers in the UAE have increased, including job insecurity, stagnant wages, unhealthy lifestyles, and work-related stress.

Amidst these challenges, Thamarassery ensures a smooth repatriation process and saves grieving families from bureaucratic hurdles and the exploitative practices of for-profit agencies. His dedication to this humanitarian cause exemplifies his tireless efforts to provide comfort and support to those living abroad in moments of profound loss.

2.1 Thamarassery's mission, complicated paperwork, and repatriation

The death of a migrant living in the United Arab Emirates can be a complex and harrowing experience due to the complicated repatriation procedures and uncertainty involved. Several agencies are involved in these procedures, including the hospital, police, employment office and immigration, to obtain death notices, terminate employment contracts and passports, depending on the circumstances and location of the death. Clear documentation of the cause of death is important to avoid delays in transfer, and handling the deceased's belongings is also part of the process. It becomes even more complicated if the deceased had an illegal immigration status or legal issues that require additional authorization. The embalming certificate is a critical step before transporting the body to ensure that it's suitable for air or sea transport. The body is usually placed in an airtight casket designed for this purpose.

If the family decides not to transfer the body, there is the option of local burial in the UAE, a Christian Cemetery in Jebel Ali, Hindu Crematorium, and the Dubai Municipality Muslim Burial Ground.

This repatriation process can be complicated and time-sensitive, adding to the pressure on those already grieving. Thamarassery provides invaluable assistance by seamlessly handling the transfer of documents, overseeing embalming, arranging transportation, and ensuring that the deceased reaches his or her destination.

Many individuals are unfamiliar with these procedures, and sometimes, there is no one available to manage them. Thamarassery's dedication to this service alleviates the burden for grieving families and expatriates, making a challenging situation more manageable.

Understanding the paperwork, mortuary expenses (including embalming or autopsy, if required), transportation costs, and other fees associated with repatriating your body to your home country can ease at least a portion of the emotional burden.

Thamarassery outlined the procedure to Tesorero, A of Khaleej Times (2018, March 10) that a death must be reported to the police. The police contact the morgue of the hospital in question, where the coroners examine the body and submit a report to the police station detailing the circumstances of the death. The paperwork is then forwarded from the police station to the hospital, where the death certificate is issued and submitted to the Immigration Department (Directorate General of Residency and Foreigners Affairs in Dubai) for visa cancellation. A visit to the embassy or consulate is then required to cancel the passport. After that, you return to the police station to obtain three reports - for the airport, the embalming centre and the police mortuary - before the body is released. After that, someone must book a ticket in the cargo department of the airport and go to the Sonapur Embalming Centre with the report from the police station. From there, another report is obtained to retrieve the body from the police mortuary.

Finally, one visits the airline's cargo office in Cargo village in Dubai, submits the paperwork, pays the fees and the process is completed. Thamarassery mentioned that the cost of taking bodies back to India "ranges from AED 5,000 to AED 5,500 (US\$ 1,365 to 1500), depending on the weight of the body. In addition, there is AED 50 for issuing the death certificate, AED1,000 for preparing the body in the coffin and AED100 for transferring the body from the mortuary to the airport.

According to the Indian Consulate, several documents are required when sending human corpses to India. These requirements include an original death certificate and seven copies, an original embalming certificate with seven copies, a certificate from the Directorate of Preventive Medicine, Ministry of Health, for body transportation, along with seven copies. Additionally, a letter from the sponsor is needed to request the body's dispatch to India for last rites, as required by the next of kin. The original passport of the deceased, along with two photocopies of the first two and last two pages, as well as visa pages, must be provided. Two photocopies of the passport (first two, last two, and visa pages) of the person accompanying the body are also necessary. The accompanying person must be present during registration to sign the death register. Furthermore, a letter from the sponsor of the deceased is needed, detailing any outstanding dues to the deceased person using the prescribed proforma. A confirmation from the airline regarding space booking and authorization from the deceased's next of kin designating a representative to receive the body are also part of the necessary documentation. (Consulate General of India Website).

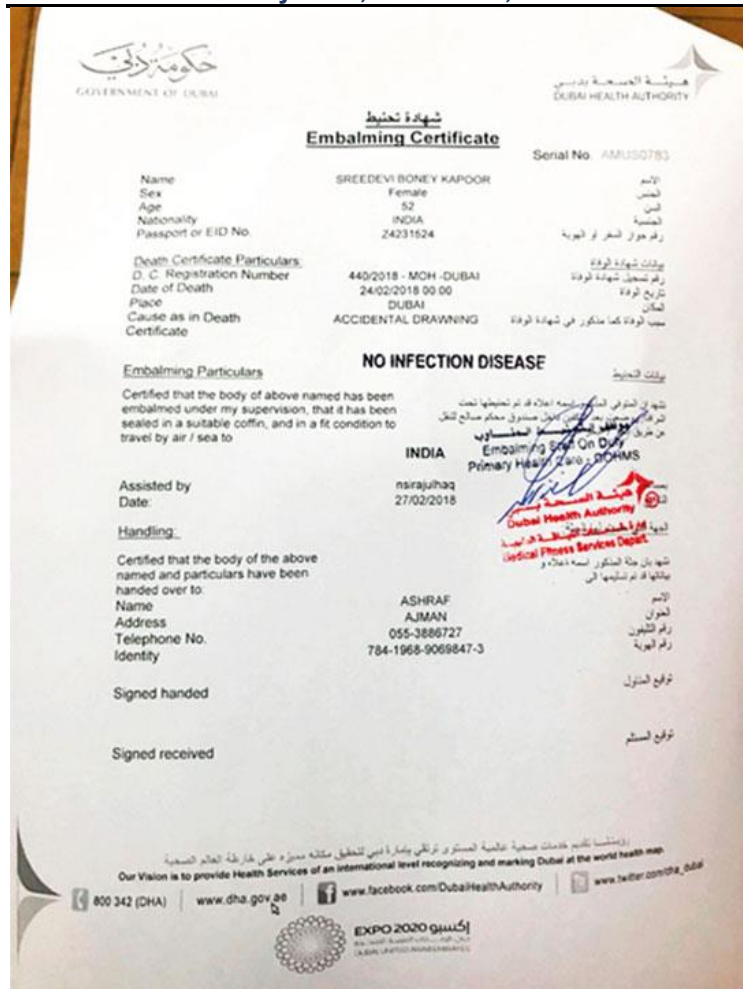
2.2 Thamarassery Becomes a Guardian of the Deceased:

In 2000, during a visit to a hospital in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, Thamarassery encountered a young man struggling to transfer his father's body. This chance encounter marked the beginning of Thamarassery 's mission (Warrier, S. 2015, May 18). He helped the young man through the complicated procedures involved, from the hospital to the police station, to the court, to the embassy, to airlifting the body. From then on, people asked Thamarassery for help in transferring the bodies of their loved ones to various countries, including Nepal, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, all of which can be very costly when handled through agencies. In cases where there was no one to cover the cost, Thamarassery turned to humanitarian organizations and groups of foreigners for assistance. (Ravindranathan, S. 2019, April 07).

2.3 The tragic death of renowned Indian actress Sridevi:

The world mourned when renowned Indian actress Sridevi tragically died in Dubai in 2018. The circumstances of her death were described by Dubai police and prosecutors as accidental drowning in a hotel bathtub. As a result, Indian authorities acted quickly to cancel her passport and prepare the necessary documents for her repatriation. An Indian billionaire even organized a private jet to expedite the process. (Associated Press & HT Correspondent. 2018, February 28). However, because an important police permit was required, there was a delay that resulted in numerous calls to Thamarassery from concerned citizens, journalists, and officials.

Thamarassery used his knowledge of various government agencies to obtain important police clearance. Once the clearance was obtained, the embalming unit embalmed Sridevi's body and handed it over to Thamarassery with an embalming certificate that read, "Transferred to Ashraf."



Her remains were then taken by ambulance to a private jet, which was used to fly her to Mumbai for cremation. Thamarassery pointed out that the longer delay was because the matter was pending with the public prosecutor's office in Dubai and took about three days to complete (S. Kavil, 2018).

He described her appearance as resembling a "sleeping beauty" during her final journey. Thamarassery, known for 'witnessed Sridevi before her embalming and transfer to Mumbai. He clarified that there were no head injuries, contrary to some media reports, and emphasized that Sridevi's face retained its on-screen beauty. (Saseendran, S., & Chaudhary, S. B. 2018, February 27).

2.4 Equality in Repatriation:

On the same day, he efficiently completed the paperwork for three other cases. Thamarassery stresses that in the eyes of officials, whether in Dubai, Sharjah or any other state in the UAE, everyone is equal. Regardless of status or origin, the repatriation process is always the same. Thamarassery's commitment to his mission is driven by his belief in equality, in which the value of repatriation is the same for everyone, whether an ordinary person or a celebrity like Sridevi. (Associated Press & The National. 2018, February 28).

2.5 Thamarassery, an activist

Thamarassery, who is also an activist, has been working to bring about changes in the way airlines handle the transportation of deceased individuals. He proposed a fixed charge system, where individuals under 30 years are charged AED 1,000 (US\$273), and older individuals are charged AED 1,500 (US\$409). His efforts resulted in Air India implementing a fixed charge of US\$360 for transporting bodies, regardless of weight. (Kavil, S. (2018, March 5).

During a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on January 8, 2015, just before the Pravasi Bharath Samman awards ceremony, Thamarassery, had expressed his concern about Indian airlines charging to repatriate the deceased. He contrasted this with Pakistan, where such services are free for expatriates. This encounter left a deep impression, showcasing Modi's patience and compassion. Thamarassery's mission transcended nationality and religion, focusing solely on ensuring the deceased returned home. His story speaks of compassion and dedication, resonating across borders and beliefs. (This personal account was shared by Thamarassery in 2017)

2.6 Media Coverage

Thamarassery frequently garners media attention in Malayalam print publications, channels, and radio programs. Notably, even local English media outlets such as Gulf News, Khaleej Times and The National feature him regularly due to his involvement in repatriating a minimum of four to seven dead bodies each week. His popularity extends to social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube, where he boasts a substantial fan base. There is an online platform- Big News Network, which primarily focuses on Thamarassery's humanitarian activities.

Thamarassery's moment in the international spotlight came when he assisted Sridevi's family with official procedures during her case. Indian media hailed him as a hero, and even international news agencies like the Associated Press covered his story. The New York Times, following a report by Manorama on this dedicated social worker, also featured his remarkable journey from Thamarassery to the UAE. (Kavil.S, 2018))

2.7 Indian Expatriate's Last Journey: A Story of Rejection and Redemption

In an article from The Telegraph from Calcutta, India (Rakesh KM 2017), Thamarassery's remarkable mission is spotlighted. He undertook the solemn duty of repatriating the body of an Indian expatriate laborer who had tragically passed away due to a heart attack in Sharjah. After landing at Calcutta Airport, Thamarassery carefully placed the coffin in a van for a 150-kilometer journey to a small town, the name of which eludes his memory. Thamarassery firmly believes that every migrant's final resting place should be in their own native village. This conviction drives his mission, The Telegraph quoted him as saying. Thamarassery's intervention was crucial, as the laborer from Bengal had languished in the mortuary for nearly six agonizing weeks. He remarked that instances like these are even more distressing than death itself. (Rakesh, K.M. 2017, January 10).

3 Results of the study

The analysis of media reports unveiled pivotal findings about Thamarassery's humanitarian efforts. His work garnered widespread media attention, especially after his involvement in repatriating the late Bollywood actor Sridevi's body from Dubai, prompting changes in airline policies, including Air India's, regarding the transportation of deceased bodies. Several heartwarming stories highlighted Thamarassery's role in assisting families during times of tragedy and his commitment to providing solace to grieving expatriates. He facilitated the repatriation of over 5000 migrants' deceased bodies to various countries, predominantly India.

The media portrayal of Thamarassery's humanitarian efforts underscores the significance of his work in alleviating the challenges faced by expatriates in the UAE. His selfless commitment to facilitating the repatriation of deceased individuals has not only earned him recognition but has also inspired changes in policies and practices. The media's role in amplifying his mission serves as a powerful testament to the impact of compassion and dedication in addressing the complex issues surrounding death and repatriation in a foreign land. His commitment to assisting grieving families and streamlining the repatriation process has earned him the well-deserved title of the 'Friend of the Dead.'

The comprehensive examination of Thamarassery's work in repatriating the deceased within the UAE's migrant community yields several poignant outcomes. Foremost, Thamarassery's dedication has significantly reduced the emotional and bureaucratic burden on families during times of grief. His efforts have been instrumental in streamlining the complex process of repatriation, thereby providing a model of efficiency and compassion in international humanitarian work. The research also highlights his role in promoting equality in death, treating every case with the same respect, regardless of the deceased's socioeconomic status. Media portrayal of Thamarassery has been overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing his humility and selflessness, which has inspired books, a documentary, and numerous accolades. Moreover, his actions have sparked a broader discourse on the vulnerabilities of migrant workers and the importance of community support in foreign lands. In essence, Thamarassery's work not only aids in the immediate logistical needs of repatriation but also resonates deeply within the social fabric, fostering a culture of empathy and respect across national and cultural divides.

Thamarassery embodies the spirit of selfless service, offering a ray of hope to those facing the darkest moments of expatriate life. His contributions underscore the need for compassion and efficiency in the face of death, offering a model for humanitarian work that transcends cultural and national boundaries. As his story continues to inspire and his actions comfort those in need, Thamarassery's legacy is one of profound humanity, reminding us of the impact one person can have in a world that often feels indifferent to individual suffering.

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