



MIGRATION STUDIES

Indian Migration to the Gulf: Trends, Challenges and Policy Responses

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Abstract

India has long been a key contributor to global migration, sending skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labour abroad. A significant aspect of this broader migration pattern is the India-Gulf migration corridor. Since the oil boom of the 1970s, Gulf countries have become a primary destination for Indian workers. This Article explores the India-Gulf migration relationship, emphasizing the impact of policies on these migration patterns. It examines the trends and characteristics of labour migration from India to the Gulf, along with the policy measures implemented by India to support Indian migrants in the region. It highlights initiatives and various skill development and pre-departure orientation programs, which aim to regulate migration flows, safeguard migrant rights, and enhance their welfare. This includes bilateral efforts aimed at improving migration management and maximizing the benefits of such flows. This also examines the challenges encountered by Indian migrants in the Gulf and analyses the multilateral commitments of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. It further explores how bilateral agreements with these nations can enhance the welfare and rights of Indian workers in the Gulf region. It discusses the challenges faced by Indian migrants, including contractual issues, wage disparities, and social vulnerabilities. The conclusion highlights necessary steps to address gaps in the existing policy framework, aiming to establish a robust, fair, and mutually advantageous labour mobility partnership between India and the Gulf countries.

Keywords: India-Gulf migration, labour migration, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Migration trends, migration policies, migrant welfare, labour rights, India-Gulf relations.



Dynamics of Indian Migrants to the Gulf: Trends and Characteristics

The history of emigration from India to the Gulf dates back centuries, originating with interactions between Arab traders and Travelers. Over time, migration trends have evolved through several phases, shaped by economic shifts and changing immigration policies in the Gulf. During the initial phase, up until the mid-1990s, there was a significant surge in migration from India, driven by increased oil revenues in the Gulf and the resulting economic growth, infrastructure projects, and job opportunities. In the late 1990s, migration rates declined due to stricter immigration rules, localization efforts to limit the non-Arab workforce, and the completion of large-scale projects, leading to a more saturated labour market. However, between 2000 and 2008, demand for semi-skilled and unskilled workers rebounded as oil prices rose, supported by Indian government initiatives that facilitated international migration at the state level. Throughout these periods, the flow of migration between India and the GCC countries has seen both growth and contractions.

Equitable Bilateral Relations: Understanding Mutual Engagement

A key aspect of the India-Gulf relationship is the mutual importance each side holds for the other. The Gulf region serves as a vital host market for Indian workers, while India remains a crucial source of labour for this region. In 2021, approximately 18.9 million South Asian migrants lived in the GCC countries, constituting 59 percent of the total migrant population. Among these, India was the largest contributor, with about 6.8 million migrants, representing 51 percent of South Asian migrants and 30 percent of the overall migrant stock. The number of Indian migrants has grown substantially, rising from 2.4 million in 1990 and 3.1 million in 2000 to nearly 18 million by 2024 (World Migration Report 2022). Throughout this period, India's share of the region's migrant population has remained relatively stable, highlighting its ongoing role as a significant source of labour for the Gulf region.

There has been a noticeable shift in the distribution of Indian migrants within the GCC, moving away from Kuwait and towards the UAE and Oman. In 1990, Saudi Arabia represented 40 percent of all Indian migrants in the GCC, followed by Kuwait at 23 percent and the UAE at 19 percent. However, by 2015, Saudi Arabia's share had decreased to 35 percent, while Kuwait's share dropped significantly to 9.7 percent. In contrast, the UAE emerged as the leading destination for Indian migrants in the Gulf and worldwide, accounting for over 33 percent of all Indian migrants in the GCC countries in 2018 (Grant Thornton India LLP 2019).



Rising Female Migration; Trends and Implications

The increasing involvement of Indian women in migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries signifies notable socio-economic changes. Between 1990 and 2018, the Indian female migrant population in the region grew substantially, from 0.7 million to 1.6 million. This trend of feminization is especially evident in countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where women accounted for 30% and 25% of the Indian migrant population in 2018, mirroring proportions observed in 1990. The demand for gender-specific labour in certain sectors, such as healthcare, education, and domestic work, has driven this increase. These jobs align with the needs of GCC labour markets, where women are recruited for roles that cater to particular socio-cultural and economic contexts.

The rise in female migration reflects the changing aspirations of women seeking economic independence and professional growth. Women from states like Kerala and Andhra Pradesh dominate nursing and caregiving roles, highlighting their skillsets' relevance to global labour market demands. However, low-skilled female workers, especially in domestic services, remain vulnerable to exploitation, poor working conditions, and isolation due to their employment in private households.

Despite these challenges, women's migration has brought significant benefits, such as the economic upliftment of families through remittances and the strengthening of informal support networks among migrant communities. These developments also call for better policies, including stricter regulations on recruitment agencies, improved legal protections, and bilateral agreements to safeguard women's rights and welfare. The feminization of migration thus underscores the evolving dynamics of global labor mobility, offering both opportunities and challenges for Indian women in the Gulf.

Occupation and Skill Characteristics of Migrants

A key characteristic of India-Gulf migration is its occupational and skill profile, which largely consists of low-and semi-skilled positions. Approximately 70 percent of Indian migrants in the Gulf are engaged in semi-skilled jobs, such as craftsmen, drivers, artisans, and other technical roles, or in unskilled occupations like construction, domestic work, farming, and cleaning. Many of these workers are employed as manual labourers in the oil and gas industry.

The female migrant workforce primarily works as housemaids, cleaners, and nurses, with a significant presence in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait due to the high demand for these roles. The substantial number of emigration clearances granted to



Indian migrants heading to the Gulf underscores the predominance of low-skilled jobs in this migration flow, as such clearances are typically required only for less educated migrants, not for those in skilled or professional categories.

However, there has been a gradual shift in the occupational and skill profiles of Indian migrants to the Gulf over the past few decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, around 90 percent of Indian migrants were blue-collar workers. Today, the proportion of white-collar expatriates has risen to 30 percent or more in some countries (based on Khadria (2013) and Parween (2018)). This group includes professionals in various service sectors, such as doctors, engineers, IT specialists, teachers, architects, accountants, and managers.

Furthermore, there is an increasing number of knowledge-based workers from India and other countries being employed in high-tech industries, particularly in banking and financial services, especially in the UAE. Additionally, many Indian entrepreneurs and business owners have successfully established businesses in the region, some of whom have become self-made billionaires. Reflecting this diverse occupational landscape, the majority of Indian migrants in the Gulf hold employment-based or business and trade visas.

Region and Community Characteristics

The dynamics of Indian migration to the Gulf have seen a notable shift in recent years. While Kerala and Tamil Nadu were historically the leading sources of emigrants, their proportions have declined as workers increasingly migrate from economically weaker states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand. This shift reflects the role of poverty, limited job opportunities, and low wages in driving migration from these less developed regions. In contrast, socio-economic advancements in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, including improved living standards and access to education, have reduced the compulsion for low-skilled workers to seek opportunities abroad.

Male migrants predominantly find employment in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and services, while female migration, though smaller in scale, is growing. States like Kerala and Andhra Pradesh are notable sources of female workers, particularly in professions like nursing and domestic services, reflecting both global demand and targeted recruitment practices.

Religion and community also shape the experiences of Indian migrants in the Gulf. A majority of Indian expatriates are Muslims, followed by Christians and Hindus, with religious and cultural ties influencing their social interactions



in host countries. Community associations based on shared regional, linguistic, and religious identities provide essential support networks, enabling migrants to preserve their cultural heritage and find solidarity in unfamiliar environments.

The benefits of migration, such as remittances, have significantly impacted states like Kerala, boosting household incomes and funding education. However, in poorer states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, these benefits are unevenly distributed, often leaving migrants trapped in low-skilled labour cycles. Additionally, challenges such as exploitative labour practices, limited legal protections, and cultural barriers remain prevalent for many Indian workers in the Gulf, particularly those in low-skilled occupations.

The changing migration patterns underscore the need for state-specific strategies to better equip workers with the skills required for global opportunities. Simultaneously, policies like Saudi Arabia's Nitaqat, which aim to reduce foreign labour, demand adaptive responses from both sending states and migrants. The increasing participation of women in migration also highlights the importance of gender-sensitive policies to ensure their protection and well-being.

Indian Government Policies for Managing Migration to the Gulf

The Emigration Act of 1983 provides a framework to regulate the safe emigration of Indian workers seeking employment abroad, focusing on their protection and welfare. The Act is implemented through the Protector General of Emigrants (PGE), a statutory authority responsible for overseeing emigration processes, providing necessary services, and ensuring the safety of emigrant workers, particularly those who fall under the Emigration Check Required (ECR) category.

While the Indian government does not have a dedicated policy specifically for migration to Gulf countries, it has incorporated elements that support and protect Indian migrants in the Gulf through various general policies and programs. These initiatives, aimed at ECR countries, address both the facilitation of migration and the safeguarding of migrants' rights and welfare.

Broadly, these governmental measures can be categorized into two types: those that promote and facilitate migration, and those that focus on the protection and welfare of Indian migrants in the Gulf region. Many of these policies serve a dual purpose, supporting both objectives. Although these measures are not solely targeted at migrants to the Gulf, some are specifically designed for ECR nations, which include the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

The Indian government has implemented several initiatives and policies



to support and facilitate the migration of Indian workers to Gulf countries. Key programs and measures are outlined below:

1) E-Migrate system

The E-Migrate system is a significant initiative by the Indian government that aims to digitize and streamline emigration processes. This online platform simplifies the emigration journey for Indian workers seeking employment abroad. It integrates various stakeholders, including the Protector General of Emigrants (PGE), Protectors of Emigrants (PoEs), Indian missions, recruiting agents (RAs), foreign employers (FEs), project exporters (PEs), insurance providers, the Bureau of Immigration (BoI), and the passport system managed by the Ministry of External Affairs. The platform requires foreign employers to register and submit job demands, specifying terms and conditions for employment. They can then recruit workers directly or through authorized agents using this system.

2) Pravasi Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PKVY)

This program focuses on upskilling Indian workers to meet international standards, making them more competitive for jobs abroad. The PKVY emphasizes skill development in various sectors, aligning training with the needs of ECR (Emigration Check Required) countries, including the Gulf region. It offers training, certification, and learning materials in fields such as domestic work, driving, and construction, thereby equipping workers with skills that are in demand overseas.

3) Pre-Departure Orientation & Training (PDO)

Pre-Departure Orientation is a key aspect of the government's efforts to protect Indian migrants by preparing them for their new environment. These sessions are provided alongside skill training to ensure that workers are aware of the local culture, laws, and norms in their destination countries. PDO aims to promote safe and legal migration, help workers integrate into their host communities, and minimize potential challenges they might face abroad.

4) Overseas Workers Resource Centre (OWRC)

The OWRC serves as a centralized hub offering support and information for Indian workers planning to migrate for employment. It provides a 24/7 helpdesk and responds to queries in 11 Indian languages, addressing grievances and offering information about the emigration process and recruiting agents. The OWRC is connected with five Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) to further support migrant workers.



5) Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs)

These centres function as walk-in counseling facilities, providing guidance and information to potential migrants and overseas workers. Located in key states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh, MRCs offer advice on the legal and regulatory aspects of migration, documentation, and procedures. They serve as an important resource for those seeking overseas employment, helping them navigate the challenges they may face while working abroad.

6) Media Campaign: Surakshit Jaaye Prashishkit Jaaye

The Ministry of External Affairs has launched this media campaign to promote safe and informed migration practices. The campaign disseminates information through advertisements across various platforms, including television, radio, and digital cinema, in multiple languages like Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil, and more. It specifically targets states with high rates of emigration, aiming to raise awareness about safe and legal migration processes among potential migrants.

These initiatives together ensure that Indian workers are better prepared, more informed, and safer during their migration journey to the Gulf region, ultimately aiming to enhance their overall well-being and experience abroad.

Major Policy Responses for Political Implementation

The Indian government has implemented several initiatives to ensure the safety, welfare, and rights of Indian migrants working in Gulf countries. These efforts have been aimed at providing both direct support to migrants in need and establishing a framework for their long-term protection. Here are some of the key initiatives:

1) Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBBY)

The PBBY is a mandatory insurance program designed for the protection of Indian workers in ECR countries. It provides coverage of up to Rs. 10 lakhs in the event of work-related death or permanent disability. The insurance is accessible with a one-time premium of Rs. 275 for a two-year policy and Rs. 375 for a three-year policy, ensuring affordable coverage for overseas workers.

2) Mahatma Gandhi Pravasi Suraksha Yojana (MGPSY)

This social security scheme specifically targets unskilled and semi-skilled Indian workers holding ECR passports who are employed in ECR countries. MGPSY facilitates contributions towards savings for return and resettlement in India, pension savings, and provides life insurance coverage during the period of



overseas employment. It encourages long-term financial security for workers even after their return.

3) Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF)

The ICWF aims to support Indian nationals abroad who find themselves in distress. Managed by Indian missions and posts, the fund assists with a range of needs, such as repatriation for stranded individuals, emergency shelter and food, initial legal aid, urgent medical treatment, and the repatriation of deceased workers' remains. This initiative has provided assistance to over 80,000 beneficiaries, offering crucial support in emergency situations.

4) Open House Sessions by Indian Missions/ Posts

Indian missions and consulates abroad conduct regular Open House sessions, where Indian citizens can meet officials without prior appointments. These sessions serve as a platform for workers to voice their concerns, lodge complaints, and seek resolution of grievances directly from the diplomatic mission.

5) Emigration Of Women for Employment in ECR Countries

To ensure the safety of women migrating for work, the Indian government has set a minimum age of 30 years for ECR category female workers traveling to ECR countries. Additionally, Indian women workers in these countries must use state-run recruitment agencies for their placement. Foreign employers wishing to hire Domestic Service Workers (DSW) directly are required to provide a bank guarantee of \$2,500 with the relevant Indian mission. This ensures a layer of protection for Indian women working abroad and helps to prevent exploitation.

6) Labour Agreement Between India and GCC Countries

India has signed labour agreements with each of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, starting with Qatar in 1985 and the most recent being Saudi Arabia in 2014. These agreements, typically renewed automatically unless terminated, outline rights and obligations for both employers and employees. They include provisions on working conditions, entitlements, dispute resolution mechanisms, and the right of workers to remit savings. Additionally, a Joint Working Group is often established to oversee the implementation of these agreements.

While these measures significantly enhance protection for Indian workers who follow authorized migration channels, a considerable challenge remains with those who migrate through unauthorized agents. These workers are at a higher risk of exploitation due to a lack of formal protection, sometimes facing harsh conditions



that drive them to desperation. Addressing this issue requires continued efforts to raise awareness about legal migration pathways and strengthen enforcement against unregistered recruiters.

Challenges Faced by Indian Migrants in The Gulf

Indian migrants in the Gulf face various challenges throughout their migration journey from initial recruitment to their stay and eventual return. These issues often stem from systemic practices like the kafala system and other structural vulnerabilities. Below is a summary of the key problems faced by Indian migrants in the Gulf region:

Exploitation by Recruitment Agents and Employers

Indian workers often encounter exploitation from recruitment agents who charge exorbitant fees for processing their visas and securing employment. During their time in the Gulf, many migrants face exploitative practices by employers, such as the confiscation of passports, making it difficult for them to change jobs or return home. The kafala system in the Gulf countries further exacerbates these issues by tying workers' legal status to their employers, making it difficult for them to leave abusive situations.

1) Poor Working and Living Conditions

Blue-collar Indian workers frequently endure poor working conditions, including low wages and lack of safety at work sites, particularly in construction sectors where accidents are common. Their living arrangements are often inadequate, with many residing in overcrowded labor camps that lack basic amenities like clean drinking water and sanitation facilities. Such conditions create a stark disparity between the experiences of low-skilled laborers and their white-collar counterparts.

2) Mental Health Struggles and High Suicide Rates

Many Indian workers in the Gulf face severe psychological stress due to financial difficulties, harsh working conditions, and isolation. These factors have contributed to a significant number of suicides among Indian migrants. The financial burden and inability to escape from oppressive employment situations add to their mental distress, leaving them feeling trapped.

3) Legal Issues and Imprisonment

Indian workers are disproportionately represented among those imprisoned in Gulf countries, with many facing legal issues due to lack of proper documentation



or as victims of recruitment scams. Indian migrants make up about 27% of the diaspora but account for nearly 45% of Indians imprisoned abroad, highlighting the vulnerabilities faced by these workers. Although India signed a prisoner exchange treaty with the UAE in 2011 to allow Indian prisoners to serve their remaining sentences in India, the implementation of this agreement has been slow, and few have been able to benefit from it.

4) Contrast with the Experience of White -Collar workers

In contrast, white-collar Indian workers in the Gulf typically experience much better conditions. These professionals often live in comfortable accommodations and enjoy a higher standard of living. Many reside in well-maintained residential areas and participate in the region's consumer economy, frequenting malls, parks, and cultural sites. Studies, such as those focusing on the Indian community in Qatar, indicate that white-collar workers are generally satisfied with their security, social life, and access to facilities.

5) Educational Opportunities for Families

White-collar workers often earn well above the minimum wage, which allows them to bring their families to the Gulf and invest in their children's education. To meet the needs of this community, many schools affiliated with the Indian education system have been established in the Gulf, offering primary and secondary education. These schools, staffed by Indian educators, provide a familiar curriculum to the children of Indian migrants and are also open to non-Indian students. Additionally, several Indian universities, particularly private ones, have set up campuses in the region to cater to the growing demand for higher education among the Indian diaspora.

This contrast between the experiences of low-skilled and white-collar Indian workers in the Gulf underscores the disparities in opportunities and living conditions within the Indian expatriate community, reflecting broader socio-economic divides. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated approach, including better regulation of recruitment practices, stronger diplomatic interventions, and the enforcement of agreements to protect migrant workers' rights.

Conclusion

The Gulf region remains a key destination for Indian migrants, significantly contributing to India's remittance economy. India has implemented various policies and measures to support the welfare and protection of its migrants throughout the stages of emigration—pre-departure, at their destination, and upon their return.



Despite these efforts, many Indian migrants, especially those who are unskilled or low-skilled, continue to face exploitation and unfair treatment in the Gulf. The power dynamics between employers and migrant workers remain skewed, even after multiple policy interventions. Additionally, misinformation and deceit by recruitment agents often lead Indian workers into irregular migration status, making them more vulnerable to abuse, as they are typically unable to access legal assistance from Indian missions.

The economic slowdown caused by declining oil prices has led to increased job losses for Indian workers in the Gulf. This downturn could further exacerbate the exploitation of unskilled Indian migrants through reduced wages and diminished access to essential services. To address these challenges, both the Indian government and the Gulf nations must adopt proactive measures to enhance the protection of migrant workers.

Key Policy Recommendations include the following:

- Enforcing minimum wage laws to ensure fair compensation for workers.
- Issuing work permits that are not employer-specific, allowing workers greater freedom.
- Empowering workers to renew their own permits and end employment contracts independently without losing their residency status.
- Enabling workers to switch employers without needing their current employer's consent.
- Allowing workers to exit the country without requiring employer approval.
- Imposing strict penalties on employers who seize workers' passports or travel documents.
- Introducing severe consequences for recruitment agents who mislead migrants or charge excessive visa fees, including barring them from future recruitment activities.
- Furthermore, existing bilateral labour agreements should be implemented thoroughly, with the establishment or strengthening of institutional support structures. Given the importance of the India-Gulf migration corridor in maintaining a robust bilateral relationship, it is crucial to address the challenges faced by migrant workers while maximizing the potential economic and social benefits of this relationship.



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