

Indians in the Gulf: The Migration Question and the Way Forward



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Executive Summary

The India-Gulf migration corridor is centuries old and built upon the historic trade and commercial routes to and via Arab lands. Principally for economic reasons, the modern-day Gulf migration from India was prompted by the discovery of oil reserves in the region in the 1930s. However, the mass migration of Indians through formal and informal channels kick-started with the oil boom of the 1970s. There has been an uninterrupted migration flow since then and today India is among the top sources of migrant workers in the region. Multitudinous studies have explored the political economy of Gulf migration from India and the crucial role of its migrant workers in driving the migration-development nexus and the infrastructural and societal transformation both India and the Gulf States have witnessed in the past many decades. However, a critical gap exists in drawing public and policy attention to the fault lines in the long-established India-Gulf migration corridor. This is particularly crucial in the post-pandemic context as COVID-19 has exposed several previously neglected but prevailing barriers in ensuring rights-based legal mobility between India and the Gulf, decent work conditions for white and blue-collar Gulf migrants, and their reintegration upon returning to India. The pandemic has worsened the migration synergies, and hence it is imperative to re-evaluate the Indian labour migration to the Gulf to mainstream the conversations related to the issues migrant workers face while in employment and upon their return. There is a vital need for migrant-centric and sustainable policies at home and in host countries to humanise the corridor and realise the potential and welfare of the migrants and returnees.

The engagement that stood the test of time between South Asia and West Asia was the labour migration from the countries of the former to the Gulf States of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Amongst the various migration pathways that exist between both regions, the India-Gulf corridor deserves particular regard due to its historical significance, the sheer amount of Indian emigrants working and staying in the Gulf region, and their contribution to the socioeconomic transformation in the Gulf States and India.

1. Trends and Patterns of India-Gulf Migration

The Indian presence in the Gulf region dates back to historic times when the Arab merchants mediated