

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

trade between the Indus civilisation and Europe (Rawlinson 1916). Over time, the scope of India-Arab relations expanded beyond trade and population exchange intensified as a result of the multifaceted cultural exchanges between both regions. The discovery of oil reserves in the region in the 1930s markedly changed the nature and volume of this migration. Most notably, with the oil price hike of 1973 and the tremendous economic prosperity and infrastructural development in the region Indians of all ages, gender, classes, and skill categories migrated to the Gulf in search of lucrative jobs to improve their livelihoods. The majority of them were from Kerala and other South Indian states (Jain 2005; Oommen 2017; Seacombe 1983; Seacombe & Lawless 1986).

Currently, out of the total 18 million Indians dispersed globally, 8.8 million Indians are living and working in the Gulf States. As per the estimates of Indian Missions in Gulf countries, the UAE and Saudi Arabia host the largest number of Indians in the Gulf, over 3.6 million and 2.5 million, respectively (Lok Sabha 2022). Accordingly, the largest share of remittances to India comes from these states (Bhaskar 2013). However, the gap in the availability of accurate, comparable, and disaggregated data on Indian migration to the Gulf is a critical issue that needs to be addressed at the source and destination countries to frame evidence-based migration and return policies.¹

Table 1: Estimated Number of Indians in Gulf Countries (as of December 09, 2022)

Bahrain	308,662
Kuwait	924,687
Oman	653,500
Qatar	844,499
Saudi Arabia	2,465,464
United Arab Emirates	3,554,274
Total	8,751,086

Source: Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 583; Answered on 09.12.2022

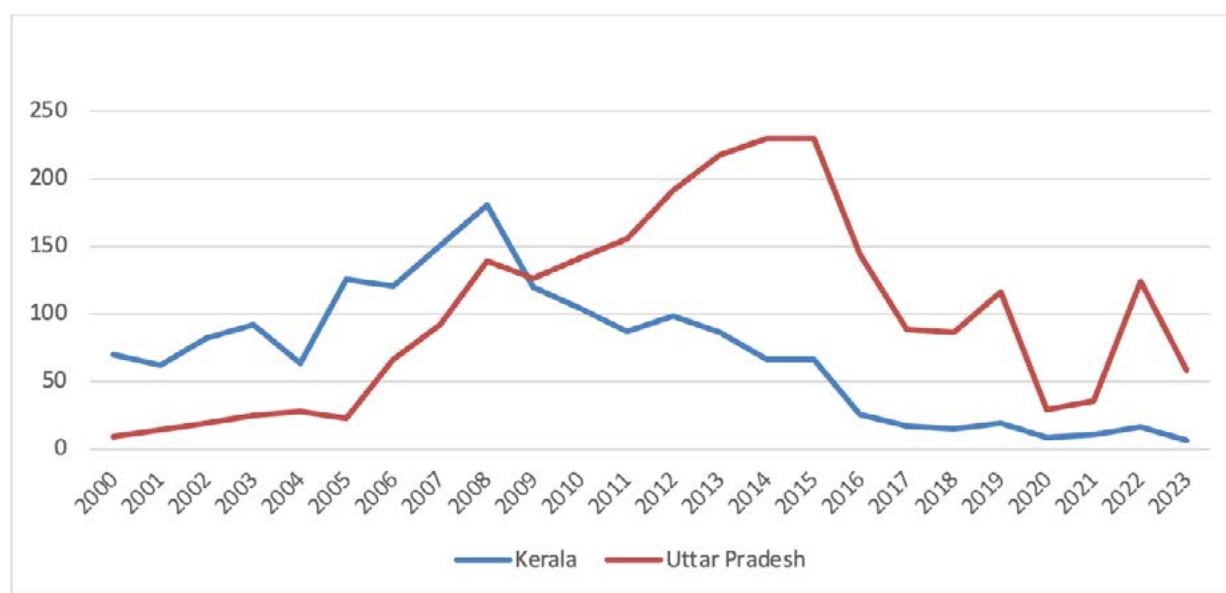
Gulf migration has contributed to the gradual upward social and economic mobility of migrant households in India and strengthened the national economy and its banking system through individual-level remittances they send home. India is heavily reliant on foreign-exchange remittances, with USD100 billion received in 2022, of which its Gulf expatriates sent home an estimated USD50.2 billion (Slater, Fahim, & McQue 2020; World Bank-KNOMAD 2020). The gradual growth in the number of Indians working in professional jobs with higher wages in the Gulf, including women migrants, contributed significantly to these figures. The temporary nature of their migration motivates them to live frugally in destinations and retain the maximum of their earnings for agricultural land, housing, and gold investments for the family and their post-retirement

¹ For instance, as shown in the Table below, the Government of India (GoI) estimated 24,65,464 Indians in Saudi Arabia while the Saudi Census 2022 recorded only 18,84,476 Indians residing in Saudi. For details, see <https://gulfmigration.grc.net/saudi-arabia-non-saudi-population-by-country-of-citizenship-and-sex-selected-countries-2022/>. Similarly, the National Centre for Statistics and Information has an underestimated data of 5,29,884 Indians in Oman in 2022 as against the GoI estimation of 6,53,500. See, <https://gulfmigration.grc.net/oman-employed-foreign-workers-by-country-of-citizenship-all-sectors-selected-nationalities-2013-2022/>

life in India. Investment in productive business and start-up projects is still minimal due to the inadequate investment-friendly structures and Non-Resident Indian (NRI) and returnee schemes in most Indian states.

The state of Kerala continued to be the largest sending state; however, a decline in migration of 11 percent was noted between 2013 and 2018 due to stagnated wages in most skill categories and tax reforms that negatively affect the savings of Indians in the Gulf. Consequently, they started looking for emigration channels to the West, Europe, and elsewhere (Rajan & Zachariah 2019a; 2019b; Rajan and Oommen, 2020a; 2020b). Concurrently, the emigration of semi- low-skilled migrants from the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar gained momentum, as illustrated in the below graph of Emigration Clearance Data for Kerala and Uttar Pradesh. Emigration clearance is obtained through the eMigrate Portal of the Government of India and is applicable only for those persons who have not completed 10 years of schooling in India and are leaving for the Gulf to work.

Graph 1: Emigration Clearance per 1000: Kerala Vs Uttar Pradesh, 2000-2023



Source: Emigration Clearance Data, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

Likewise, specific local spatial patterns of Gulf migration exist within the states. For instance, in the case of the State of Telangana, the northern districts of Karimnagar, Rajanna Sircilla, Nizamabad, Adilabad, and Warangal are hubs of migration to the Gulf from the second half of the 1980s. The state-specific push factors were the perpetual droughts, lack of irrigable water and the resultant agricultural distress, as well as instances of armed rebellion and police encounters (Balan 2021). In addition is the existence of state-wise religious, caste, gender, and class dimensions of the Gulf migration as well as the differential levels of education and social development between states. These are illustrative of the fact that each sending state in

India has its idiosyncrasies that determine the nature and characteristics of Gulf migration.

The job profile of the Indian expatriates in the Gulf is also diverse, though the majority work in an array of low-paid, semi or low-skilled sectors. Mobility was majorly male-dominated until the early twentieth century, with those aged between eighteen and forty five from the middle and lower classes migrating for blue-collar occupations. Commonly referred to as “married bachelors” in the Gulf, the majority of them were married and have their families back in India. This was not only due to the income-based policy restrictions imposed on family migration and the gender-based preferences of the Gulf labour market but also the undeniable fact that only the upper-middle and professional class can afford to support having their families with them (Shah, Al-Kazi, & Husain 2018).

Having said that, female migration from the South and Central Indian states of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra to the Gulf has intensified in the past three decades to work in such low-skilled sectors as domestic help and cleaners as well as in the skilled sectors as nurses and care professionals, hospitality and tourism staff (Percot 2005; Sasikumar & Thimothy 2015). Some women followed their husband in migration and remain as homemakers either to take care of their children and family or because they do not have the necessary skill sets to join the professional workforce.

2. Second-Generation Indians in the Gulf

Second-generation migrants, born to Indians in the Gulf, offer a unique perspective on India’s Gulf migration as their lived experiences differ from their parents. Their parent-sponsored residence visas/permits are linked to the residence permit validity of the sponsoring parent. Hence, their migration status is also temporary unless the parents secured a long-term residency as per the rules and requirements in Gulf states. However, these Gulf-born expatriate generations feel at home in their host countries and do not really undergo the same level of alienation as their first-generation/parental-generation Gulf migrants. They are better integrated into Gulf society than their parents and are conditioned to the Gulf way of life.

Though they do not have any citizenship rights, their social identification and sense of belonging is often transnational, with the Gulf being their home and India being their parental/ancestral home country visited during vacations. They are exposed to multicultural interactions and learning at educational institutions and social domains they navigate daily, hence are multilingual and cosmopolitan in outlook. Their Indian (and subnational) consciousness is not weakened; the close relationship with India is never lost and invariably kept alive by rekindling the cultural memories handed down to them by their parents (Fieldwork Notes, Balan 2019).² For them, return to India is often considered short-term and temporary for pursuing graduation or forced return due to unforeseen emergencies like wars or the COVID-19 pandemic. Their reluctance to return is not just shaped by their socialisation in the Gulf where they grew up, but also the negative preconceptions about Indian society stemmed from the parental conversations and/or their limited exposure during brief vacations.

² This section is based on fieldwork conducted and notes prepared by one of the authors, Divya Balan, in 2019 in the UAE among the first and second-generation migrants from the South Indian state of Kerala.

3. Major Fault Lines in India-Gulf Migration

The experiences of Gulf migration are substantially different from migrating to western or European countries. Their emigration was never smoothsailing, and it impacted not only the migrants but also the families left behind. The reports of labour contract/rights violations, exploitative and abusive work environments, deplorable living conditions in overcrowded labour camps, inaccessibility to social services, and other severe hardships blue collar migrants endure in the Gulf are illustrative of the precariousness of the 3D jobs - “dirty, dangerous, and difficult” - they undertake within the fold of the much-criticised *kafala* system (Hanieh 2015). The case of women domestic workers is concerning as they work in unregulated private environments. They are vulnerable to inhuman treatment, physical and mental abuse, and exploitation (Pattadath 2020).

The feeling of loneliness they suffer in the socially alienated spaces of the Gulf, job insecurity due to the contractual visa system, stagnated wages and delayed salary payments causing financial distress and debt, and the constant worry about the family they left behind in India put unexplainable pressures on Gulf migrants, especially the lower skilled ones. This affects their physical and mental health, which has even lead to migrant suicides (Dervic et al. 2012).

Regrettably, the agency of the Indian embassies in the Gulf region is limited and often criticised for not involving themselves enough in the legal and humanitarian issues faced by Indians in the Gulf. The oversight of the Indian government and its agencies to ensure the protection and welfare of its citizens in the Gulf and the limited support extended in the issue of wage theft during the pandemic lockdown indicates the structural fault lines in the existing migration governance system. What can be read together are the critical gaps in India’s four-decade old Emigration Act (passed in 1983), which is outdated and largely ineffective in facilitating safe and rights-based emigration opportunities for its citizens in the present context. The act has largely failed in curbing the fraudulent recruitment agencies, which are facilitating irregular migration and coercing migrants to work in exploitative conditions. A Draft Emigration Bill was proposed in 2021 to replace the 1983 Act but it is yet to be introduced in the Indian Parliament.

4. Return and the Question of Reintegration

The return is inevitable for most Indians since their migration is transitory with no possibility whatsoever of becoming citizens due to the inherent contractual status of employment tied to the matrix of the *kafala* and the citizenship laws in the Gulf states (Gardner 2010; Sater 2013; Vora 2013). The return migration trend from the Gulf seemed to have begun in the 1980s due to the then enforcement of labour and residence regulations and a fall in wage rates (Birks, Seccombe, & Sinclair 1988). Nambiar (1995) recorded the return of Indians at around 86,475 in 1985. Many more returned during the 1991 Gulf War and the post war years as the wages were affected resulting in financial distress among the migrants and drop in savings.

The COVID-19 pandemic-induced systemic changes have greatly exacerbated the return of Indians, especially those at the lower occupational and income levels. They are more vulnerable to any such shocks than those in the high-level positions as there are possibilities for the latter to stay on a semi-permanent status

by taking advantage of the long-term residence visa policies of Gulf States, such as the UAE Golden visa. As per the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) estimates, many lost their jobs at the onset of the pandemic and about 716,000 Indians have returned under the Vande Bharat Mission (Jayashankar 2021). For those who returned before the pandemic on the expiry of their labour contract and during the pandemic, re-migrating to the Gulf now seems like a challenging prospect. This is mainly due to the fall in job opportunities for Indians in the Gulf due to the labour nationalisation policies intended to reduce the dependency on immigrant labour in public and private sectors, such as *Nitaqat* in Saudi Arabia, and the availability of labour from other parts of Asia (Rajan & Zachariah 2019). To grapple with this, the Indian government is proactively attempting to diversify the migration channels by facilitating migration to destinations in Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Other issues that persist are a dearth of reintegration policies on return to India and the feeling of being compelled to resort to fraudulent recruitment agents to facilitate their later re-migration to the Gulf or elsewhere. The recruitment agencies licensed by the MEA are fewer in number considering the high demand for emigration from Indian states. The issues of human smuggling and trafficking are rampant in the India-Gulf corridor, a fact less addressed by the policymakers of both India and the Gulf destination states. Further, the paucity of reliable data on Gulf migrants and the returnees and the gaps and inconsistency in the available estimates from different and often overlapping sources are other major roadblocks in formulating evidence-based policies for the welfare of the migrants.

There is a public and policy attention deficit regarding the omissions in the governance of the India-Gulf migration corridor and how it affects the welfare of the migrants and their dependents. This is due to the prevalent approach of treating migration as an individual act of sustenance and all the related ordeals as personal ill-fate. Issues get projected as human interest stories in media but fail to emerge as mainstream policy and public conversation in India. All these raise pertinent questions regarding the sustenance of the India-Gulf migration corridor as a rights-based and migrant-centric pathway.

5. Possible Ways Forward

As mentioned, the India-Gulf migration corridor is not only long-established and dynamic but also a crucial contributor to the development of both Indian sending states and the receiving states of the Gulf region. However, the persisting migration fault lines are undermining the benefits of the Gulf migration from India. The possible ways forward are:

- Ensure regular migration data collection, proactive governmental interventions, and concrete policy outcomes to establish a sustainable and more humane labour migration channel to the Gulf.
- Enhance the welfare outcomes of the India-Gulf labour outflow by removing the crippling roadblocks in realising a migrant-centric and rights-based mobility channel with formal instrumentalities that ensure labour rights, access to social services, and decent work conditions in the destinations and reintegration prospects on return.
- Gender mainstreaming of public and policy conversations on migration based on the intersectionality

approach is a requisite to address the issues faced by women migrants, especially those working in the precarious sectors in the Gulf, such as domestic work.

- The role of Indian embassies and consulates in the Gulf region needs to be well defined in such a way as to improve public accessibility and strengthen its interventions on employment-related and other issues faced by Indian expatriates. The synergy between governmental agencies and civil society organisations based in the Gulf is crucial in this regard.
- Provisions to provide free-of-cost mental health practitioner services (online/telephonic) to the migrants in distress need to be ensured, along with regular health check-up facilities in the host countries.
- Proactive support from the central and federal governments and other stakeholders – civil society organisations and academia – to empower and up-skill the migrants at all stages of migration and return.
- There should be a strict check on the operations of unregistered recruitment agencies to curb migrant trafficking and smuggling.
- A comprehensive and supportive reintegration and rehabilitation policy for the returnees needs to be rolled out at the central, state, and local levels, along with holistic welfare schemes that cover all major needs of migrants and their families.
- Establish social support mechanisms for left-behind family members, including wives and elderly parents.
- Lastly, gather public and policy attention to the critical deficits in the current migration governance system and mainstream the now fragmented conversations on the fault lines in the Gulf migration from India.

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