

Research Article

# Navigating Indian Diaspora Dynamics in Gulf Countries: Challenges and Opportunities

Zahoor Ahmad Dar<sup>\*</sup> , Shanaza Janbaz

Department of Political Science, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India

## Abstract

India has had a longstanding relationship with the Gulf region that is variously understood as part and parcel of 'neighbourhood policy', 'civilisational affinities in the peninsular regions', and historically as exorable from the colonial space. India also made several bilateral agreements with Gulf countries after bifurcation; thus, it has minimal exports to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The intricate tapestry of Indian expatriate communities in Gulf nations epitomises a confluence of demographic shifts and socio-economic transformations. This discourse endeavours to elucidate the multifaceted challenges and latent opportunities arising from the evolving population dynamics of Indian nationals in these territories. Against the backdrop of labour migration, cultural integration, and geopolitical factors, this analysis seeks to illuminate the social and cultural implications as well as the entrepreneurial opportunities inherent within this diaspora. By delving into the intersections of identity, economic contribution, and transnational affiliations, this examination posits that a nuanced understanding of these dynamics is imperative for harnessing the benefits while mitigating the adversities encountered by Indian populations in the Gulf region. This paper focuses on Indians working in the GCC countries. It covers the historical backdrop of Indian settlement in the Gulf, the contemporary demographic profile, and the economic and social contribution to their host countries, the challenges they face in the Gulf countries, and the emerging opportunities as India continues to grow and the Gulf countries seek to diversify their economies.

## Keywords

Diaspora, India, UAE, Gulf, Migration

## 1. Historical Context of Indian Migration to Gulf Countries

The migrant workers from India have played a crucial role in shaping the demographics, culture, and economy of the Gulf region. The historical migration patterns from India to the Gulf region extend over several centuries, underscoring the significant trade and social relationships that have developed between these two areas. This intricate interplay not only illustrates the flow of human capital but also reflects the

broader economic and cultural exchanges that characterise the interactions throughout history. The Arab merchants conducted extensive explorations of the Indian subcontinent, leading to the establishment of strong economic partnerships and fostering rich cultural exchanges. Over time, multiple waves of migration from India to the Gulf region have occurred, each influenced by distinct historical and socio-

<sup>\*</sup>Corresponding author: [Zahoordar.psscholar@kashmiruniversity.net](mailto:Zahoordar.psscholar@kashmiruniversity.net) (Zahoor Ahmad Dar)

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economic factors, which have significantly contributed to the vibrant diversity characteristic of this area. The 1820s marked a significant milestone in the history of migration patterns between India and the Gulf region, particularly with the arrival of a substantial influx of Indian labourers in Bahrain and Mauritius, primarily as pearl divers. This pivotal event not only represented a transformative moment in the dynamics of labour migration but also initiated a sustained period of Indian engagement with these regions. The recruitment of Indian labourers during this era was largely driven by the burgeoning demand for pearl diving, which had become a lucrative industry in Bahrain and Mauritius. Indian divers, recognised for their skills and resilience, contributed significantly to the pearl trade, thereby shaping the economic landscape of these island nations. Moreover, this migration marked the onset of a broader trend in Indian diasporic movements, laying the foundational framework for future migrations that facilitated cultural exchanges and socio-economic collaborations.

The discovery of oil was the catalyst for the Gulf's profound economic transformation, fundamentally reshaping labour dynamics and the region's identity. With the influx of petrodollars, Gulf states initiated ambitious construction projects that ignited a tremendous demand for a substantial foreign labour force. Acknowledging the vast potential and expertise of Indian workers, these states actively sought to engage the Indian labour market, attracting skilled and dedicated individuals to contribute to their expanding economies. [1] The arrival of Indian migrant workers brought not only their labour but also their rich cultural heritage and traditions. Their presence enriched the vibrant multicultural fabric of the Gulf, fostering a diverse and inclusive society that celebrated contributions from people of all backgrounds. Over the decades, the partnership between India and the Gulf countries has further strengthened, with both sides recognising the mutual benefits and shared responsibilities inherent in their cross-border collaborations. Presently, Indian migrant workers play a crucial role in the development of the Gulf region, contributing significantly to various sectors, including construction, healthcare, technology, and hospitality. [2]

The significant role of Indian emigrants, estimated to number around 9 million, in enhancing both the economic and diplomatic stature of India is profoundly important. The influence of the diaspora on India's political and economic dynamics is evident, particularly in the context of the U.S. government's persistence in advocating for economic changes in India. This effort involves close collaboration with entities such as the Saudi Arabian government and the Gulf Cooperation Council States. Currently, Indian remittances from the Gulf region are estimated to reach approximately \$48 billion annually, constituting about half of India's total remittance inflows. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that one-third of all global remittances are directed toward the Gulf States, underlining the critical need for India to cultivate robust relations with the GCC States. In response, India has actively

entered into numerous strategic partnership agreements with these nations to strengthen their collaboration and promote shared economic prosperity. By reinforcing these partnerships, India seeks to drive its economic growth and enhance its prominence on the international stage.

## 2. Current Demographic Profile of Indian Population in Gulf Countries

According to the 2010 data, the Indian community represents the largest segment among all immigrant groups in the Gulf countries. The majority of Indians in these nations are working and are over 25 years old, with approximately 40% falling within the 25-34 age range. This indicates a relatively youthful population composition. Regarding educational qualifications, while a significant proportion of Indians employed in the Gulf hold semi-skilled positions, there is also a noteworthy presence of professionals. Based on the socio-occupational matrix, it is evident that, apart from three categories—'Skilled Service Work', 'Elementary Occupations', and 'Not Classifiable'—Indians are active in nearly all other occupational fields, including 'Managers & Senior Officials', 'Professional Occupations', 'Associate Professional Occupations', and 'Clerical Support Worker'. This matrix offers insights into the regional distribution of the Indian workforce. Notably, the Indian population is predominantly concentrated in the 'Not Classifiable Occupation' category, particularly in Oman and the UAE, where over 50% of the Indian community is classified in this way. [3] They are engaged in various economic activities, encompassing trading, services, manufacturing, construction, and agriculture.

In the United Arab Emirates, the Indian community holds a prominent position across nearly all commercial and financial sectors. Non-resident Indian businesses in the UAE primarily focus on wholesale trade and the manufacturing industry. In Bahrain, management and information technology are the most appealing employment fields for both men and women. Analysing the occupational structure within the six assemblies across the country, it becomes evident that many Indians work as 'Sales Staff' in Kuwait and as 'Skilled Workers' in Qatar, among other roles. The Indian population is diverse, encompassing various regional, religious, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. The majority of Indians reside in the Arabian Peninsula, followed by those from the North-Eastern and Western States, while the southern regions contribute the least to the expatriate population in the Gulf countries. Predominantly, Indian nationals in these areas are labourers, with the skilled occupational class being most significant in Bahrain, Oman, and Kuwait, where they occupy professional, managerial, and executive positions. [4] Conversely, semi-skilled and unskilled workers are primarily found in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

### 3. Economic Contributions of Indian Expatriates in Gulf Countries

Indians constitute the largest expatriate community globally, with an impressive 85% residing in countries near the Gulf region, particularly within the Gulf Cooperation Council nations. These countries depend significantly on foreign expatriates for executing projects, providing services, and maintaining supply chains. The contributions of Indians are vital to the Gulf's development, with over three million employed in the healthcare sector alone. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, India provided critical medical oxygen assistance to Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. [5] According to UNCTAD data from 2020, India remains a leading source of skilled labour for Gulf nations. Moreover, migrant workers often manage to save an impressive 55%-75% of their wages, reinforcing the economic benefits they bring back to India.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Indian workers primarily engaged in low-skilled and semi-skilled labour, including construction, transportation, and infrastructure. During this period, Indian domestic helpers also began to arrive. However, as education and skills improved, many Indians transitioned to higher-skilled and more prestigious positions by the early 1990s. By 2008, Indians had gained recognition as white-collar professionals, securing employment in significant numbers across various fields, including engineering, medicine, education, and information technology. Many have also become successful entrepreneurs, establishing businesses predominantly in the Gulf region and beyond. From 1990 to 2010, it is estimated that they generated over 100 billion USD in business and remitted more than 220 billion USD collectively from the Gulf. [6] The Singapore Economic Development Board has identified and supported more than 1,500 Indian firms using Singapore as a regional hub, as noted in the Economic Survey 2016-17. These firms contribute over 70 per cent of the manufacturing sector's output in Singapore, as reported by the Singapore Business Federation. India's impact is so substantial that the nation can rightfully be referred to as Singapore-India.

### 4. Challenges Faced by Indian Workers in Gulf Countries

Expatriates in the Gulf face systemic challenges regarding their job permanency, impacting their legal and labour rights. A considerable portion of the Indian diaspora in these countries grapples with feelings of discontent, insecurity, and uncertainty about their futures. The tension between an individual's right to seek opportunities abroad and the state's failure to provide adequate social protection or assistance in dire situations is a significant issue. Moreover, the integration of the Indian diaspora into the host nation raises crucial questions. [7] Whether temporary or permanent, the key con-

cern is understanding how much of the diaspora adopts the values, beliefs, and lifestyle of their new country, often at the expense of their own culture and traditions. Ultimately, the struggles faced by expatriates are deeply rooted in social dynamics. The most challenging borders to cross are those shaped by human judgment, reflecting beliefs and attitudes rooted in self-interest rather than universal values. The cultural adaptation of expatriates presents a significant challenge.

#### 4.1. Legal and Social Rights

In the Gulf Cooperation Council nations, national labour laws are in place to govern the entry and employment conditions for foreign workers. To work legally, expatriates must obtain a work permit, known as an iqama, which requires registration with the Ministry of Interior or any designated authority. This permit specifies the employer and the sectors of employment allowed for Indian expatriates. However, numerous workshops organised by the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs across six states have revealed alarming reports of Indian workers facing exploitation and hardship. Many find themselves trapped in situations where they cannot work as stipulated by their work permits or return home to India. This predicament not only affects the individuals but also poses a challenge to the economic well-being of their home country. Unfortunately, the legal frameworks in many host countries often fail to offer the necessary protection and solutions to these stranded workers, leaving them in a precarious situation. [8]

The discussions held at the workshops, combined with presentations from state governments, have highlighted a troubling surge of complaints regarding governance in GCC countries. Many workforce members who arrived with valid work permits find themselves victims of draconian national laws that have resulted in job losses. This pressing matter has been escalated by the Ministry of External Affairs, engaging Indian ambassadors and consulates in the Gulf states, especially given the increasingly stringent legal environment. Both the Ministries of External Affairs and Overseas Indian Affairs have pledged to advocate for the rights and interests of these individuals with the governments of Oman, UAE, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait, aiming to ensure that laws there do not unintentionally facilitate trafficking networks. However, a puzzling shift in policy reveals that many GCC nations continue to embrace forceful agents. [9] The anguish and suffering faced by distressed Indian workers seeking to contest these harsh laws often require time and effort and, sadly, may become insurmountable due to the rigid stance of the ruling authorities or may diminish as new challenges arise back home. The interplay of emigration laws, broader societal attitudes, and individual rights adds yet another layer to this complex issue.

## 4.2. Cultural Adaptation and Integration

Cultural adaptation and integration represent a critical aspect of migration, highlighting the rich tapestry woven from the diverse languages, customs, traditions, and beliefs of both host and home countries. Regardless of the education and training migrants receive beforehand, cultural differences will inevitably arise, giving rise to new identities. Culture transcends mere practices and knowledge; it profoundly influences personal backgrounds, preferences, and emotional responses, ultimately shaping one's identity. This has significant implications for expatriates in the Arab Region. Many Gulf Arab states host a substantial number of migrant workers, who often find themselves amid a cultural landscape that can feel overwhelming. Despite calls for greater integration of long-term expatriates into society, public sentiment in numerous Gulf states remains unsupportive, suggesting a pressing need for policies that encourage a more inclusive approach to cultural coexistence.

On the other hand, we must consider the vital importance of strengthening the bond between Indian and Arab cultures through a deeper understanding of Indian heritage and history. This endeavour could significantly improve language proficiency not only in Arabic but also in various Indian languages. Cultural integration encompasses a wide array of dimensions, and for Indian expatriates, this means navigating complex layers of relationships and perspectives. [10] While the aspiration for greater cultural integration—merging the essence of both native and foreign cultures into a cohesive identity with shared values and beliefs—may seem ideal, it is not always feasible or outright desirable. Furthermore, the process of cultural assimilation is often lengthy and challenging. It is crucial to proactively foster a culture that champions both Indian and Arabian identities, especially in the face of forces that aim to weaken these connections. Regardless of the circumstances, it is essential to tackle the potentially harmful impacts of acculturation.

## 5. Opportunities for Indian Expatriates in Gulf Countries

Residing in the Gulf region offers Indian expatriates a multitude of benefits. However, the socio-economic landscape, shaped by the Arab world, oil sheikhs, and a divided society, significantly influences individual lives in a hierarchical manner. The interconnectedness, social acceptance, mobility, personal aspirations, and progress-oriented attributes collectively create a 'spillover effect,' facilitating the adoption and internalisation of different cultures, regions, and countries. This phenomenon can be seen in the experiences of a Bachelor of Engineering entering the oil sector and a retail salesman aspiring to join an emerging online trading community. [11]

The Gulf region offers numerous opportunities for Indian groups and the private sector, characterised by competitive

salaries. It boasts an appealing lifestyle and a robust service industry, supported by well-established legal frameworks and a favourable sovereign risk profile. A new generation of Indian expatriates has emerged, capable of accessing consistently high-quality commercial housing services, which include amenities such as spas, health clubs, and security. Individually, they also enjoy a vibrant retail environment catering to their leisure interests. [12] An Indian expatriate in the Middle East encounters a wealth of opportunities across various sectors. These include industrial roles, skilled and semi-skilled positions in contracting and hospitality, services like transportation, and engaging in the dynamic blue-collar and domestic workforce. Additionally, there is significant potential for self-employment, especially in retail and business management. Individuals can thrive as performers or entrepreneurs—or even both—in diverse fields such as marine operations, retail, software, supply chains, banking, finance, and services. Notably, an increasing number of visitors to the Gulf are entrepreneurs attending international conferences or conducting business rather than simply touring. This shift highlights the region's growing appeal as a hub for commerce, with many visa options facilitated through hotels or local sponsors, making it more accessible than ever.

Indian expatriates have abundant opportunities to enhance their career development in the GCC countries. Various organisations offer a range of professional training programs that allow individuals to acquire skills across multiple fields, including business, administration, finance, engineering, and more. For instance, a mechanical supervisor in engineering is likely to earn a substantial, tax-free salary. In terms of career advancement, expatriates can progress into middle management positions, leveraging their technical expertise. Factors such as the progress of ongoing projects, the availability of essential infrastructure, robust order books, and rapid advancements in technology and management are contributing to a dynamic and growth-focused environment. Additionally, pursuing further education, such as an M.B.A. or studies in management, financial management, risk assessment, quality control, and environmental management, can significantly enhance career prospects. [13]

The primary advantage for all employees is the invaluable on-site training they receive in safety and health protocols. For those willing to invest, labourers can also access vocational skill training at construction yards throughout India. Skilled Indian workers, such as plumbers, masons, and carpenters, equipped with the latest training in installing bathroom fixtures, fittings, and enhancements, as well as in floor and wall installations, including granite laying, are highly sought after in markets like Dubai, Muscat, and Bahrain. Moreover, the Construction Industry Training Board in the UK has partnered with employment agencies to offer vocational courses in India through a premier employment bureau at a reasonable fee. This unique opportunity allows expatriates to leverage the capital they earn in their initial years to launch their own ventures.



## 6. Role of the Indian Government in Supporting Expatriates

The Indian government may not influence the domestic policies of host countries, but it consistently offers vital support to Indian origin residents living abroad. This assistance includes crucial services such as healthcare, educational and re-skilling opportunities, personalised counselling, repatriation of deceased individuals, financial aid, food, shelter, legal advice, and psycho-social intervention through phone support—all provided by Indian Missions across Gulf nations. [14] In the Indian context, numerous national and international policy instruments exist to support citizens abroad. Recently, the Government of India has launched twenty-six significant initiatives aimed at employing both sectoral and clustered experimental approaches. These initiatives include services like Country-of-Origin Services, e-migrate, Migrants Resource Centres, transportation solutions, skill development, NRI Registration, wage protection, and Emigration Check Required clearance. Additionally, the government proactively engages in treaties and memoranda of understanding with various regional states, fostering mutual assistance, commercial partnerships, development cooperation, and trade relations. Through these efforts, India is committed to safeguarding the welfare and prosperity of its citizens globally. [15]

Another significant policy application involves the visits and diplomatic discussions of top bureaucracies in international forums to address issues and collectively negotiate migrants' rights. For example, the World Economic Forum has emerged as a leader in promoting international and public-private cooperation on global, regional, and industrial system challenges, which encompass interstate and migratory diplomacy. [16] Furthermore, the government's role in facilitating the movement of its citizens to foreign countries, driven by international portfolio transformation, is a vital component of the broader policymaking framework—particularly in areas related to trade and emerging portfolio-driven economic policies, such as expatriation, remittances, and small industries.

## 7. Future Prospects and Trends

The emergence of new trends presents a complex array of information and insights. By delving into these developments, we can identify the challenges at hand and explore potential solutions. It is crucial to consider the short-term and long-term trends across various sectors that will likely influence the Indian expatriate community. Economically, the landscape is changing, particularly in the Gulf region, where the dynamics of the Indian workforce are evolving. The demand for skilled workers has decreased, leading to a situation where opportunities for less educated and less skilled migrants are becoming more limited. However, given India's

impressive growth trajectory, projected in double digits, there is potential for this scenario to change in the future.

Politically, the Gulf states are also adapting their labour policies, which could further impact the flow and settlement of expatriates. Socially, shifts in demographics, including a reduction in the number of non-Indians in countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain by 2025 and beyond, indicate a transformation in the workforce composition. Technologically, advancements are likely to influence the labour market as well, potentially favouring those with technical skills. Legally, changes in immigration and labour laws will play a vital role in shaping the opportunities available to Indian expatriates. Environmental concerns may also prompt shifts in labour practices and the types of employment available in these regions.

Ethically, the treatment and rights of migrant workers will continue to garner attention, influencing both public perception and legal frameworks. In summary, the intra-Gulf migration market stands as a significant area of focus that will require careful monitoring and strategic planning as we move toward 2025 and beyond.

The demand for highly skilled professionals is expected to grow significantly, while opportunities for supervisory roles, skilled workers, and unskilled labour will be quite limited. In Kuwait, there will still be a steady need for expatriates willing to undertake jobs typically associated with unskilled and domestic positions. As the Indian community in the UAE evolves, it will likely become more diverse, leaning heavily towards professional and business-oriented sectors. The middle class and skilled professionals are poised to become the predominant segments of the Indian population across all Gulf nations.

In the United Arab Emirates, there will be an increasing reliance on multinational expatriate managers, with a notable influx from regions such as Europe, the UK, the United States, and Australia, along with some recruitment from India. However, towards the end of 2015, the Middle East may face a wave of layoffs, particularly affecting expatriates employed by multinational corporations. This forecast suggests a challenging landscape for expatriate workers in the region as companies reassess their staffing strategies.

## 8. Conclusion

The Indian diaspora, particularly from India, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, offers a comprehensive examination of the conditions faced by Indians within these nations. Despite a shared linguistic bond through Hindi, this diaspora represents a remarkably diverse demographic exceeding ten million individuals. These individuals function as a fundamental component of the economies within Gulf countries. This role persists despite varying laws and political contexts related to nationality, citizenship, and visa regulations. It is, therefore, imperative to critically analyse how the triad of Indian population dynamics—

migration, settlement, and return—is influenced by state policies, which may place these populations at significant risk. This analysis underscores the urgency of addressing the nexus between policy frameworks and the lived experiences of the diaspora in promoting their well-being and stability.

The dynamics of the Indian diaspora in Gulf countries reveal a multifaceted landscape marked by both significant challenges and substantial opportunities. The Indian community, which is one of the largest expatriate groups in the Gulf region, plays a critical role in shaping the socio-economic fabric of these nations. However, they face a range of issues, including labour rights violations, lack of access to social protections, and cultural alienation, which can undermine their contributions and well-being. The challenges are compounded by varying local policies regarding expatriate employment and residency, often resulting in precarious employment situations for many migrants. The Kafala system, for instance, has long been criticised for creating an environment that can lead to exploitation and marginalisation of workers. Despite these hardships, the resilience of the Indian diaspora is noteworthy. Many community organisations and non-governmental entities have emerged to advocate for workers' rights and provide essential services, thereby fostering a sense of solidarity among expatriates.

The opportunities for the Indian diaspora in the Gulf region are equally compelling. The region's rapid economic development and diversification efforts have led to a growing demand for skilled labour—especially in sectors like healthcare, engineering, and information technology. This shift opens avenues for professional growth and enhanced income prospects for Indian workers, encouraging many to invest in education and skill development. Moreover, cultural exchange and soft diplomacy play a crucial role in bridging the gaps between communities. Initiatives that promote cultural understanding, such as Indian festivals and cultural events, not only enrich the local landscape but also help forge a positive identity for the diaspora. Furthermore, the increasing trend of corporate partnerships and business networks is enabling Indian entrepreneurs to explore new markets and venture opportunities in the Gulf, thus solidifying the economic ties between India and the region. To harness these opportunities while mitigating the challenges, a collaborative approach involving governments, community organisations, and the diaspora itself is essential. Enhanced dialogue on labour reforms, support systems for migrant workers, and proactive community engagement can create a more equitable landscape for Indian expatriates in the Gulf. The multifaceted nature of the Indian diaspora thus calls for tailored policies and support mechanisms that recognise their contributions and address their unique challenges.

## Abbreviations

GCC      Gulf Cooperation Council

UAE      United Arab Emirates  
UK      United Kingdom  
MBA      Master of Business Administration

## Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statement

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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