



## Indian Expatriate Community in Gulf Region

**For Prelims:** Types of Trade Agreements, India & Gulf Countries

**For Mains:** India and its Neighbourhood, Bilateral Groupings & Agreements, Significance of Indian-Gulf Relations

**Source:** IE

### Why in News?

Recently, a devastating fire broke out in an apartment building near Kuwait City, resulting in the tragic loss of at least 49 lives, with around 40 of the victims being Indian nationals.

- The apartment building housed over 195 workers, the majority of whom were Indian nationals hailing from the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and various parts of northern India.

### Expatriate

- It is an individual **living and/or working in a country other than their country of citizenship**.
- The arrangement is often **temporary and for work reasons**.
- An expatriate can also be an **individual who has relinquished citizenship** in their home country to **become a citizen of another**.

### What is the Current State of Workers in the Gulf Region?

- **Evolution of Indian community in Kuwait:**
  - The **1990-1991 Gulf War** has led to a mass exodus of the Indian community from Kuwait. After Kuwait's liberation, most members of the Indian community gradually returned and became the largest expatriate community in Kuwait.
  - Prior to the liberation war, the Palestinians constituted the largest expatriate community in Kuwait.
    - **"Kuwait's liberation"** refers to the **military operations in 1991 that resulted in the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait**. This event marked the end of the Gulf War, when a coalition led by the United States launched a military campaign to free Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. The successful liberation of Kuwait restored the country's sovereignty and independence.
- **Indians in Gulf Countries:**
  - According to data from the Government of India, as of 2021, there were approximately **8.9 million Indian migrants** residing in the Gulf countries.
  - **25% of overseas Indians** and **56% of NRI** reside in 6 Gulf countries (UAE, Saudi Arabia,

Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain).

- **NRIs (Non-Resident Indians)** are individuals who hold Indian citizenship but live outside of India.
- **Overseas Indians or Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs)** are individuals from foreign countries with **ancestral ties to India**. They are **not considered Indian citizens** but are granted specific privileges akin to those of permanent residents in India.

▪ **Inward Remittances:**

- Of the total foreign inward remittances, **28.6%** originated from the **Gulf countries**, with **Kuwait** alone accounting for **2.4%** of these remittances.

▪ **Trade Relations:**

- The gulf region contributes to about **one-sixth** of India's total trade.
- In FY 2022-23, India's trade with GCC countries stood at around **USD 184 billion**, marking a **20% increase** as compared to FY 2021-22.

▪ **Partnership in Energy Cooperation:**

- The Government of India has announced plans to develop a comprehensive relationship with the GCC countries in the area of **energy cooperation**.
- This will involve encouraging **participation in India's strategic petroleum reserves**, **negotiating long-term gas supply agreements**, **seeking concessions in oilfields**, and collaborating on **renewable energy projects**.

## Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

- **GCC is a regional organisation comprising 6 nations:** Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. The GCC was established in **1981**, with the **aim of promoting cooperation, integration, and interconnectivity** among its member states, based on their regional and cultural proximity.
- Presently, the **primary source of revenue for the GCC countries** is derived from the **export of oil**.
- The GCC member states have been **heavily reliant on their oil resources**, which have been the backbone of their economies for decades.

## What are the Challenges Faced by Indian Diaspora and Migrants in Gulf Countries?

- **Kafala System:** It is a practice of **tying a migrant worker's visa to their employer (sponsor)**. It is prevalent in many Gulf countries. This creates a **power imbalance and misery to workers who face issues like confiscation of passports, difficulty changing jobs and exploitation and abuse by their employer**. This has led to **forced labour situations**.
- **Security Concerns:** In 2014, during the insurgency in Iraq, 40 Indian construction workers were abducted and killed by the [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria \(ISIS\)](#) which highlights the potential security risks faced by Indian workers in volatile regions.
- **Unsafe Working Conditions and Labor Exploitation:** Migrant workers, particularly in construction and manual labour sectors, often face **unsafe working environments with inadequate safety gear** and protocols. This can lead to accidents, injuries, and even fatalities.
  - In 2019, several Indian workers died due to **heatstroke** in the UAE, highlighting the dangers of working in extreme heat without proper precautions.
  - They also **face issues regarding non-payment of salaries, denial of overtime pay**, and longer working hours.
- **Limited Rights and Abuse:** Indian expatriates are **not granted citizenship or permanent residency in most Gulf countries** which restricts their ability to own property, access

**social security benefits, and participate in political processes.**

- Domestic workers are vulnerable to **physical and psychological abuse** by employers.

## **What are the Measures taken by the Indian Government to Protect its Migrant Workers Abroad?**

- **Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs):** The government has signed BLAs with several countries **to ensure the protection and welfare of Indian migrant workers.** These agreements **cover aspects like minimum wages, working conditions,** repatriation, and dispute resolution.
- **Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBBY):** This is a **mandatory insurance scheme** that provides life and disability cover to all **Emigration Check Required (ECR)** category Indian migrant workers going abroad for employment.
  - It provides coverage of up to **Rs. 10 lakh in case of accidental death or permanent disability** of Indian migrant workers abroad.
- **Minimum Referral Wages (MRW):**
  - MRW has been set by the Indian Government for Indian migrant workers abroad in nations that **do not have minimum wage laws.**
  - It ranges around USD 300 to 600.
    - It is the **lowest acceptable salary** set by the Indian government for its migrant workers (especially unskilled) going to specific countries.
    - It ensures migrant workers from India receive a minimum salary in certain countries.
      - This **prevents them from being exploited** by employers offering much lower wages than the norm.
    - The MRW rates are **advised by Indian missions in the destination countries,** considering the prevailing cost of living and wage rates prescribed by the relevant ministries. During the **Covid-19** pandemic, it was briefly lowered to protect Indian worker's jobs in the Gulf.
- **eMigrate System:** This is an online platform that **streamlines the emigration process.** It provides **pre-departure orientation, registers job contracts,** and tracks the status of migrant workers.
- **Migrant Resource Centers:** Set up in several states to provide information, counselling, and support services to prospective and returning migrant workers.
- **Grievance Redressal Mechanisms:** Platforms like the eMigrate system and the Overseas Workers Resource Centre allow migrant workers to file complaints and seek assistance from the government.
- **Repatriation Assistance:** In cases of distress or conflict, the **Indian government provides repatriation assistance to Indian workers abroad,** facilitating their safe return to India.
- **Restrictions on Women's Emigration:** **Women below the age of 30 years are not granted emigrant clearance for employment as housemaid, domestic worker, hairdresser, beautician, dancer, stage artist, labourers, or general workers.**

## **Gulf Region**

- The lands around the Persian Gulf are shared by 8 countries namely, **Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates (UAE).**
- These all eight countries are members of the **United Nations.**
  - UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait are members of the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).**
  - Out of the Persian Gulf countries, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, UAE and Saudi Arabia are members of the **Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).**
- **Strategic Importance:** The Persian Gulf is one of the most strategically important regions globally. This is due to two main reasons.
  - **Oil and Gas Reserves:** The Persian Gulf region holds the **world's largest proven reserves of oil and natural gas.** This has made the region a vital source of energy for many countries worldwide.
  - **Strategic Location:** The Persian Gulf is a **crucial shipping lane for oil exports** from

the region to other parts of the world. The **Strait of Hormuz**, a narrow waterway between **Iran and Oman**, is a chokepoint through which a significant portion of the world's oil travels.



**Drishti Mains Question:**

Discuss the challenges faced by Indian workers employed in other countries, and analyse the measures taken by the Government of India to address their issues and protect their interests.

**UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question**

**Q. Which of the following is not a member of 'Gulf Cooperation Council'? (2016)**

- (a) Iran
- (c) Oman
- (b) Saudi Arabia
- (d) Kuwait

**Ans: (a)**