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# **Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf Countries**

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Published by Gulf Research Center

**Gulf Papers**

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**“Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf Countries”** first published May 2006 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, by the Gulf Research Center, as part of the GRC *Gulf Papers* Series.

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ISBN 9948-432-86-X

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## Introduction

In spite of traditional customary prohibition on overseas travel, a large number of Indians have been migrating abroad since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. Indian migration overseas in modern times began with the export of indentured, contract or “coolie” labor in the 1830s when following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire labor was needed to work on sugar, rice and rubber plantations in various British colonies. Until the Second World War, Indians migrated mainly as *indentured* laborers to British Guiana, Trinidad, Surinam (then a Dutch colony), South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, Reunion Island (then a French colony) (Tinker 1974; Jain 1990), and as *Kangani* or *Maistry* laborers to Burma, Malaya, Singapore and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) (Arasaratnam 1970; Mahajani 1960). Indian traders also migrated to Fiji, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and South Africa (Mangat 1969; Jain 1999). Such migration, however, was proportionately very small and was known as “free” or “passage” emigration, the nomenclature being derived from the fact that the emigrants paid their own passage and were free in all respects.

Following the Second World War, Indian migration to the advanced industrialized countries of Europe and North America also began to gain momentum. The postwar economic expansion in these countries created a heavy demand for skilled labor and professionals, while immigration laws were simultaneously relaxed in Canada and the U.S. This form of overseas emigration of skilled and educated Indian personnel - popularly known as the “brain drain” - resulted in the formation sizeable Indian communities in Britain, Canada, U.S., Australia and New Zealand (Helweg 1987; Helweg and Helweg 1990; High Level Committee, 2001). Along with this form of Indian migration which is very much active these days due to the migration of information technology professionals, labor migration to the Persian Gulf countries has also been taking place since at least the mid-1970s (Jain 1982; Jain 2003 a).

Historically, five distinctive patterns of Indian emigration can be identified: (1) indentured labor emigration, (2) kangani/maistry labor emigration, (3) “passage” or “free” migration (4) “brain drain”, or voluntary emigration to the metropolitan countries of Europe, North America and Oceania, and (5) labor migration to West Asia. Whereas the first three forms of migration were the colonial phenomena, the last two are the results of the inherent contradiction of post-colonial socio-economic developments in India (Jain 1989). It is with the last form of migration that we are concerned here in this article.<sup>1</sup>

Although Indian trader migration to West Asia in modern times dates back to at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Ahmed 1969; Allen, Jr. 1981; Chaudhri 1985; Franklin 1985; Lorimer 1915; Marcovits 2000; Miles 1966) and the labor migration to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when oil was first discovered in the region (Seccombe and Lawless 1986), large-scale migration of Indians to the Gulf countries took place only after the escalation of oil prices in 1973 and subsequent years (Jain 2005). Unlike their predecessors who migrated to the various British colonies before India’s independence and the ‘brain drain’ type émigrés who went to live and work in metropolitan countries of Europe and North America after independence, the Gulf migrants are transitory as stringent residency and citizenship laws as well as the contractual nature of their work bar them from permanent settlement in these predominantly Muslim countries (See Jain 2003 a).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The global Indian diaspora is estimated at between 25 to 30 million. Large (50,000 plus) Indian diasporic communities can be found in at least four dozen countries of the world.

<sup>2</sup> A distinction among the Indians abroad is often made between those who continue to hold the Indian passport and those who have adopted citizenship of other countries. The former are referred to as the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and the latter as People of Indian Origin (PIOs). Only recently has the Indian Government started granting dual citizenship to the PIOs in select countries of Europe and North America.

## Migration Process

The process of migration at the individual level can be said to begin with the decision of the person to seek employment abroad. Potential migrants usually seek employment contracts through a network of relatives or friends or through recruitment agents. This is followed by registration of contract with the Protector of Emigrants whose offices are located in a number of major cities in India and whose activities are coordinated by the Office of the Protector-General of Emigrants in the Ministry of Labor and Employment.

Emigration is a costly venture. It usually involves such expenditures as travel costs, visa charges, and costs of procuring a No Objection Certificate (NOC). According to one study, an average emigrant from Kerala spent Rs 44 thousand for going abroad on tickets, visa fees, and agents' commission. In some cases, there was also a cost arising from cheating. A complete breakdown of the total is difficult, as not all emigrants have incurred all the expenses. Among those who have, the average cost of the ticket was Rs 13 thousand, the visa fee was Rs 32 thousand, and the agents' commission was Rs 14 thousand. Those who have been defrauded by the cheats experienced an average loss of Rs 22 thousand (Zachariah et al. 2002: 18). Emigration involves not only cumbersome bureaucratic procedures but also considerable expenditures largely because of the emergence of a black market around it. A number of unauthorized agents operate in this market who not only charge exorbitant fees but at times also issue fake certificates. Invariably, a large majority of emigrants finance their emigration by either borrowed funds or funds obtained from the sale of property. More often than not, prospective migrants have to borrow the money from money-lenders at very high interest rates. In a study in Kerala, it was found that about 27 percent of the emigrants raised the funds for meeting emigration costs from family savings, 50 percent borrowed from relatives, 60 percent through institutional loans and 40 percent sold gold ornaments and jewelry. Some sold land and many combined different sources and methods

(Zachariah 2002: 18). The Gulf workers, particularly those who are semi-skilled and unskilled, are the most vulnerable to exploitation and harassment by the recruiting agents as well as the Government officials during their departure from and arrival to India. Problems in getting visa, passport and emigration clearance are all too well known. In this connection, the Government of India's resolve to amend the Emigration Act of 1983 in order to have an effective instrument of monitoring the flow of Indian labor abroad and protecting their interest still remains to be implemented. Efforts should also be made to minimize the harassment of returning migrants by the customs officials. A long pending proposal to set up special facilitation desks at major international airports for providing information and help to the Indian workers would be a welcome step in this regard.

## **Volume and Destination**

Following the oil price boom in the Gulf countries in 1973-74, large-scale infrastructure and economic development projects were planned and initiated, including the creation of amenities like schools, hospitals, houses, the improvement of transport and communication, etc. These programs created a rise in demand for not only highly skilled technical experts but also for semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Since then, the major outflow of Indian migrant workers and other personnel during the past four decades or so has been to the Gulf countries where about 3.5 million of them are estimated to have been employed, the maximum number of whom are in Saudi Arabia. The number of Indian workers who were given emigration clearance for contractual employment abroad in the past few years and the data on distribution of labor outflow is presented in tables 1, 2, 3 and 4.

**Table 1**  
**Annual Labor Outflows from India to West Asia, 1976-2004**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Workers</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Workers</b>
1977	22,900	1991	197,889
1978	69,000	1992	416,784
1979	171,800	1993	438,338
1980	268,200	1994	425,385
1981	272,000	1995	413,334
1982	224,257	1996	414,214
1983	217,971	1997	416,424
1984	198,520	1998	355,164
1985	160,396	1999	199,552
1986	109,234	2000	243,182
1987	121,812	2001	278,664
1988	165,924	2002	367,663
1989	125,786	2003	466,456
1990	143,565	2004	474,960

*Source: Ministry of Labor, Government of India, Annual Reports, 2002, 2003 and 2005.*

**Note:** The figures given in the above tables do not include the persons who are running the business in partnership with Gulf nationals; those who emigrated on visit visa and stayed on to get a job and those skilled workers and professionals (like doctors, engineers, chartered accountants, computer specialists etc.) in whose case emigration clearance in India is not necessary.

It must be pointed out here that India is not only the second most populous country in the world with surplus labor, but it also has a vast reservoir of well trained and educated manpower. Thus, as soon as the opportunities to earn better wages arose, Indians were the first among groups of immigrants to flock to the Gulf countries. In addition to this, as already pointed out there has been a tradition of 'out migration' from India to various areas including the Gulf region since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Table 1 presents data regarding migration of Indian contract workers abroad. The overwhelming majority of workers have gone to West Asia, and particularly to the six GCC countries. In all, over 6 million contract workers have migrated to these countries over the past four decades or so. Besides these contract workers, during the same period at least 6 million other Indians have gone to the Gulf countries who belong to the following categories: (i) professionals and skilled and semi-skilled workers in whose case emigration clearance is not required such as doctors, engineers, managers, supervisors, drivers, cooks and clerical workers, etc; (ii) businessmen, entrepreneurs, etc; (iii) illegal migrants (those who over-stayed their visit visa and received employment).

Data in Table 1 further suggests four distinct phases of Indian contract workers' migration abroad: 1976-1981 as a period of steady growth; 1982-1991 as a period of declining migration; 1992-1998 as a peak period; and 1999 onwards as a revival phase. Fluctuation in migration figures can be explained in terms of a number of political economic factors, including oil prices, labor demand and supply factors and Arabization labor policies. Thus in 1999 there was a sharp decline in the number of persons migrating for employment to Saudi Arabia primarily due to the determined efforts to indigenize the labor force, though the situation has since improved. The country-wise distribution of Indian labor migration in the Gulf region is more clearly presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

**Table 2**  
**The Distribution of Annual Labor Outflows from India to West Asia by Country of Destination, 1982-1990**

Country	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
Bahrain	17,069	18,894	15,514	11,246	5,784	6,578	8,219	8,520	6,782
Iraq	35,268	13,001	11,398	5,855	5,040	2,330	4,284	5,085	1,650
Kuwait	9,764	11,490	5,466	5,512	4,235	7,354	9,653	5,679	1,077
Libya	10,433	5,900	5,179	2,449	2,552	2,272	593	632	305
Oman	39,792	49,120	43,228	37,806	22,417	16,362	18,696	16,574	34,267
Qatar	14,357	7,772	4,362	5,214	4,029	4,751	4,654	7,991	3,704
Saudi Arabia	78,297	83,235	88,079	68,938	41,854	57,234	85,289	49,710	79,473
U.A.E	19,277	25,559	24,286	21,286	23,323	24931	34,029	26,189	11,962
Others	15,288	7,024	8,410	4,729	4,415	3,544	4,471	5,406	4,345
<b>Total</b>	<b>239,545</b>	<b>219,995</b>	<b>205,922</b>	<b>163,035</b>	<b>113,649</b>	<b>125,356</b>	<b>169,888</b>	<b>125,786</b>	<b>143,565</b>

*Source: Ministry of Labor, Government of India, Annual Reports (Different years)*

**Table 3**  
**The Distribution of Annual Labor Outflows from India by Destination 1991-1996**

Country	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Bahrain	8,630	16,458	15,622	13,806	11,235	16,647
Kuwait	7,044	19,782	26,981	24,324	14,439	14,580
Oman	22,333	40,900	29,056	25,142	22,338	30,113
Saudi Arabia	130,928	265,180	269,639	265,875	256,782	214,068
U.A.E	15,446	60,490	77,066	75,762	79,674	112,644
Others	7,121	13,974	19,974	20,476	28,866	26,162
<b>Total</b>	<b>191,502</b>	<b>416,784</b>	<b>438,338</b>	<b>425,385</b>	<b>413,334</b>	<b>414,214</b>

*Source: Ministry of Labor, Government of India, Annual Report, 2002.*

**Table 4**  
**The Distribution of Annual Labor Outflows from India by Destination 1997-2002**

Country	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Bahrain	17,944	16,997	14,905	15,909	16,382	20,807	24,778	22,980
Kuwait	13,170	22,462	19,149	31,082	39,751	48,549	54,434	52,064
Oman	29,994	20,774	16,101	15,155	30,985	41,209	36,816	33,275
S.Arabia	214,420	105,239	27,160	58,722	78,048	99,453	121,431	123,522
U.A.E	110,945	134,740	79,269	55,099	53,673	95,034	143,804	175,262
Qatar	---	---	---	---	13,829	12,596	14,251	16,325
Others	29,951	54,952	42,968	67,215	45,996	50,015	70,942	51,532
<b>Total</b>	<b>416,424</b>	<b>355,164</b>	<b>199,552</b>	<b>243,182</b>	<b>278,664</b>	<b>367,663</b>	<b>466,456</b>	<b>474,960</b>

*Source: Ministry of Labor, Government of India, Annual Reports, 2003 & 2005.*

The majority of Gulf-bound workers are recruited in the four South Indian States of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka that altogether send about 70 percent of the migrants to the GCC countries. Among other socio-economic characteristics, one must mention the fact that a majority of migrants tend to be male, young and Muslim (Jain 2003a; Nair 1986) and that their average length of stay in the Gulf is about 4-7 years (Nayyar 1994; Zachariah and Rajan 2004). As already pointed out, besides labor, other components of the Indian expatriate community include traders, entrepreneurs, professionals, salesmen and other middle class personnel. In labor-saturated Yemen, there are very few Indian migrant workers, but thanks to the colonial legacy Yemen presently has a permanently-settled Indian community of about 100,000, the largest in West Asia (Jain 2003b).<sup>3</sup>

## Socio-Economic Characteristics of Migrants

**Region and Religion:** During the 1970s and 1980s, the overwhelming majority of Indian migrants to the Gulf countries originated from the four South Indian states of Kerala,<sup>4</sup> Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka (generally in that order). Recently, however, a number of other states - Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat, Bihar, etc. - have also started making inroads into this process in significant ways (See Table 5). As such, the phenomenon is slowly acquiring an India-wide character; only North-Eastern states appear to be immune to it.

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<sup>3</sup> The overwhelming majority of Indians in the Gulf countries belong to the NRI category. About a thousand Indians are citizens of Oman and about 50,000 Indians are UAE citizens. These figures include some members of the old Indian trading communities and those women who married native Arabs over the past three decades or so.

<sup>4</sup> Until the year 2003, Kerala sent the largest number of contract migrant workers to the Gulf countries. Not surprisingly, it is the only state in India where systematic studies on various aspects of migration and return migration have been done since the late 1970s (e.g. Gulati 1986, 1993; Mathew and Nair 1978; Nair 1986, 1989; Prakash 1978; Zachariah and Rajan 2004; Zachariah et al. 2002, 2004).

Even in South India, Kerala no longer sends the largest number of contract workers to the Gulf; it was surpassed in 2004 by Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. There are no statistics on the religious distribution of emigrant workers going to the Gulf but it is generally believed that the Muslims constitute a big majority - roughly 50-60 percent - of such migrants. The Kerala Migration Studies done in 1998 found that “more than one-half of emigrants were Muslims and 13 percent Ezhawas, 12 percent Syrian Christians, 8 percent Latin Christians, and 8 percent Nairs. The Scheduled Castes constituted only 1.4 percent” (Zachariah et al. 2002: 26).

**Table 5**  
**State-Wise Figures of Workers Granted Emigration Clearance/ECNR Endorsement, 2000, 2002 and 2004**

States	2000	2002	2004
Andhra Pradesh	29,999	38,417	72,580
Bihar	6,726	19,222	21,812
Delhi	3,165	4,018	6,052
Gujarat	5,722	11,925	22,218
Goa	1,331	3,545	7,053
Karnataka	10,927	14,061	19,237
Kerala	69,630	81,950	63,512
Madhya Pradesh	1,706	7,411	8,888
Maharashtra	13,346	25,477	28,670
Orissa	576	1,742	6,999
Punjab	10,025	19,638	25,302
Rajasthan	10,170	23,254	35,108
Tamil Nadu	63,878	79,165	108,964
Uttar Pradesh	9,157	19,288	27,428
West Bengal	1,940	8,338	8,986
Others	4,884	10,212	12,150
Total	243,182	367,663	474,960

*Source: Ministry of Labor and Employment, Government of India, Annual Report, 2004-05.*

**Gender:** The overwhelming majority of Indian migrants to the Gulf countries are male. The simple reason for this situation is the fact there are very few job opportunities for women in the Gulf countries; nursing, school teaching and domestic service are some of the few vocations that are open to women and even for these the competition among potential migrants from different countries is intense. Moreover, Indian society still does not favor independent female migration abroad. Studies conducted in Kerala villages in the 1970s found that no more than two percent of migrants to the Gulf countries were women (see Commerce Research Bureau 1978; Mathew and Nair 1978; Prakash 1978); the 1987 state survey of Kerala, however, found this figure to be 7.5 percent (DES 1987). In recent years, the situation in this regard appears to have changed significantly. According to estimates made by the UAE Interior Ministry, of the 585,000 Indian workers in the UAE in 1995, about 122,000 (17.2 percent) were female workers (Zachariah et al. 2004: 2229).

The proportion of women in the Indian population in the Gulf countries is also very low as the majority of Indian migrant workers do not take their families with them. It was estimated that not more than 10 percent of the total Indian migrant workers in 1983 for example lived with their families (Gulati 1986:197). In recent years, the proportion of women migrant workers has gone up, a phenomenon that can partly be explained by the fact that only those workers who earn a minimum prescribed salary are entitled to take their families along with them. Obviously, many eligible workers do not exercise this privilege. High cost of housing, lack of educational facilities for children, the desire to save as much money as possible and inability of Indian women to adjust in the socio-cultural milieu of the Gulf countries are some of the factors which may account for this phenomenon.

**Age and Marital Status:** A majority of migrants to the Gulf countries happen to be young in age. According to a study conducted by Commerce Research Bureau (1978) in Kerala, it was found that 79 percent of the migrant workers were 35 years of age or younger. Another study found that as many as 84 percent of

migrants were under 35 years of age and that about 50 percent of the workers were unmarried; these findings were further confirmed in a Kerala-wide survey done in 1998. Accordingly, about 81 percent of the emigrants were in the age group of 15-34 years at the time of migration. The average age of an emigrant was 27 years and the average age of the return migrant was 34 years (Zachariah et al. 2002: 23).

**Educational and Skill Levels:** Educational and skill levels of Indian migrants to the Gulf countries appear to have been rather low. Data from Kerala state suggests that over two-thirds of the migrants to the West Asian countries in the late 1970s had completed less than 10 years of schooling. The same study also found that about 62 percent of emigrants were unskilled workers (Gulati 1986: 199). If a sample survey of Indian migrant workers in the UAE in 2001 is to be believed, these figures have come down to 29 percent and 36 percent respectively (Zachariah et al. 2004: 2230). On the basis of a few sample surveys done in Kerala in the late 1970s, Nair (1986: 71) suggests that by and large the Gulf migration from India represented “predominantly a flow of excess operative and manual labor” and as “the proportion of highly qualified personnel was small, not exceeding 10 percent for most of the region” it did not constitute a serious problem of brain drain. Notwithstanding the “brain drain” problematic, a recent survey taken in the UAE found that about 20 percent of the Indian immigrants were engaged in professional and technical-related work. The same study had further found that only a minority were technically qualified. “Two-thirds had no technical knowledge at all; one-eighth had some degree of technical knowledge, but without any formal training. This leaves just 20 percent with some technical training” (Zachariah et al. 2002: 24).

**Occupational Status:** A significant proportion of migrants from Kerala (ranging from 33.8 to 69.4 percent) were unemployed at the time of migration during the 1970s. The proportion of those unemployed was found to be low in relatively poor areas where income and educational levels were also low. Conversely, areas with high income and educational levels were the areas from which

white collar workers (clerks, typists, teachers, nurses, etc.) as well as professionally qualified persons migrated. In this vein, Nair (1986: 73) observed that this is “a specific area that has sent similar migrants to countries in the West and to Africa.” A recent study in Kerala suggests that unemployed persons working in the private sector and laborers in non-agriculture occupations displayed a higher propensity to emigrate than the general population (Zachariah et al 2002: 25).

## **The Legal Framework**

Following the ban on indentured labor in India in 1913, efforts were made by the British Government to regulate the migration of Indian workers. This was done by enacting the Emigration Act of 1922 and later the Emigration Act of 1983, which deals with the migration of Indian workers for overseas employment on a contractual basis and seeks to safeguard their interests and ensure their welfare.

Since 1981, the work pertaining to overseas employment is being looked after by the Ministry of Labor, whereas prior to 1981 it was the responsibility of the Ministry of External Affairs. The Emigration Act is administered by the Ministry of Labor through the eight offices of Protector of Emigrants (POEs) located in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Chandigarh, Cochin, Hyderabad and Thiruvananthapuram. The offices at Delhi and Mumbai account for more than 75 percent of the total annual contract labor migration from India.

As per the Emigration Act of 1983, only registered recruiting agents can conduct the business of recruitment for overseas employment after obtaining a Registration Certificate (RC) from the Protector-General of Emigrants. The certificate is granted after taking into account a recruiting agent’s financial soundness, trustworthiness, adequacy of premises, experience in the field of handling manpower export, etc. and after obtaining security ranging

from Rs. 300,000 to Rs. 1,000,000 in the form of a bank guarantee depending on the number of workers to be deployed.

Recruiting agents are allowed to levy service charges from each worker at the following rates: unskilled workers, Rs.2,000; semi-skilled workers, Rs.3,000; skilled workers, Rs.5,000; and other than the above, Rs.10,000. During the period 1984-2001, the Protector-General of Emigrants issued registration certificates to 3,487 recruiting agents. However, in 2002 only 1,250 recruiting agents were found to be engaged in this business with valid registration certificates. Recruiting agents are mainly concentrated in Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai and Thiruvananthapuram. Nine state manpower export corporations established by the states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh also function as labor recruiting agents. Apart from the recruitments undertaken by recruiting agents and various state manpower export corporations, Indian emigrants are also deployed abroad by Indian project exporters on the projects undertaken by them overseas. Workers going abroad on an individual basis - either through recruiting agents, project exporters or directly through a foreign employer - are required to deposit security for one-way-airfare from the place of employment to the place of origin. Besides legal migration, illegal migration of labor has also been taking place from India and other South Asian countries. In turn, the Gulf countries from time to time have either given amnesty and regularized such labor or deported them.

In this vein, it would not be out of place to mention that the channel of recruitment or migration plays an important role in the relative success of workers. A survey of 800 South Asian males employed in skilled or unskilled jobs in Kuwait showed that about 34 percent moved through the network of friends and relatives and about 50 percent through recruiting agents, and that those who went through friends or relatives earned a higher salary, found the job to fit their expectations and were happier than those who went through agents (Shah 2000).

### *Establishment of a Central Manpower Export Promotion Council*

According to the Indian Ministry of Labor, suggestions have been received from time to time regarding the establishment of a manpower export promotion council tasked with promoting the employment of Indian personnel/services abroad, providing technical support services, undertaking publicity and promotional work for Indian manpower abroad, communicating and liaising with international agencies and foreign employers and acting as a focal point for dissemination of information and market intelligence, etc. The proposal to establish such a council is under active consideration of the Government. There also exists a proposal to set up a welfare fund to provide immediate relief to workers in emergency cases.

### *Redressal of Grievances*

Migrant workers face a number of difficulties. Sporadic complaints are received from various quarters regarding non-payment/delayed payment of wages, unilateral changes in the contracts of workers, changes in the employment situation and cases of unemployment (Ministry of Labor 2003).

Complaints against recruiting agents are followed up with the help of POEs, the concerned Indian missions; action is taken in accordance with the provisions of the Emigration Act of 1983. Complaints against foreign employers are taken up with the Indian missions and, if need be, the employer is blacklisted. Action is also taken against the erring agents by way of suspension and cancellation of their registration certificate and forfeiture of their bank guarantee (Ministry of Labor 2003). The Protector-General of Emigrants and other senior officers of the Ministry of Labor hold public hearings for redressal of grievances and for lodging complaints. According to Labor Ministry sources about 1,711 cases were handled at these public hearings in 2001.

## *Return Migration*

Although the POEs maintain proper records of certain categories of Indian migrant workers as the latter are required to seek emigration clearance, there are no such records of returning migrants. Estimates for the late 1980s are provided in Table 6. The 1990-91 Gulf Crisis involving the annexation of Kuwait and the subsequent war in 1991 had greatly accelerated the return migration process; at least 150,000 Indians living in Kuwait and Iraq had been forced to return home (Jain 1991). Even during normal times, and for a number of reasons to be discussed shortly, Indian migrants from the Gulf continue to return home. In recent years, this figure has been running into tens of thousands. In a recent survey report of Kerala, it was found that during 1999, about 740,000 Keralites had returned home; in 2004 their number had gone up to 890,000 (Zachariah and Rajan 2004: 13). A majority of these returnees faced numerous economic and social problems such as unemployment or underemployment, family disorganization, marital discord, neglect of their children's education and psychological strain on the remaining family members. The phenomenon of return migration thus poses a number of problems which require the careful attention of social scientists, social workers, social planners and administrators.

**Table 6**  
**Estimated Return Migration from West Asia, 1984-90**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Migrants</b>	<b>Number of Return Migrants</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1984	198,520	49,455	24.9
1985	160,396	62,790	39.1
1986	109,234	71,178	65.1
1987	121,812	38,409	31.5
1988	165,924	33,784	20.4
1989	125,786	34,600	27.5
1990	143,564	41,644	29.0

*Source:* Nayar (1994: 35). For data of the number of migrants, see Table 1.

There are several factors associated with Indian return migration from the Gulf countries. To begin with, in the late 1980s there was a situation of economic recession in the oil producing and exporting countries of West Asia. Oil price had declined considerably, and as a consequence these countries were experiencing structural changes in their economies which had noticeable impact on their demographic structures. With the exception of essential services like health and education, a number of developmental projects had been stalled, and along with labor retrenchment, welfare measures were being curtailed.

During the past two decades a similar situation had arisen in most of the Gulf countries, which have been implementing measures to reduce dependence on foreign labor. The fear of “cultural pollution” and demographic imbalance were cited as other reasons for reducing dependence on foreign labor. Though the indigenization policy has not been successful, it did create uncertainties in the labor market. Besides economic recession, another reason for the decline in demand for labor was the fact that in most of the Gulf countries infrastructural development programs had more or less been completed.

Another factor responsible for the process of Gulf return migration is the fact that jobs are purely of a contractual nature for a specified period; most of the Gulf countries do not allow change in job sponsorship. Citizenship laws in almost all the Gulf countries are also too stringent to allow permanent settlement of expatriate/immigrant populations. Moreover, a situation of “split labor market” exists in the Gulf countries whereby the laborers are paid differential wages according to their nationalities. Thus, Indian laborers have to face cut-throat competition from the lower-paid laborers from countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and competitively paid workers from Pakistan and the Philippines. Finally, in all Gulf countries expatriate workers are being replaced by their indigenous counterparts who are now willing and/or competent enough to handle various kinds of jobs.

Any combination of these factors contributes to the process of return migration. In this connection, it is interesting to note that in the case of Thai return migrants from the Gulf it was found that as many as 41 percent of them returned home due to the expiration of their contract without renewal. Another 17 percent went back because of the completion of work before their contract had expired, and 15 percent returned because of dissatisfaction with the boss or work. The rest of the returnees were retrenched (9 percent), had wage cuts (4 percent), were home sick (3 percent), or were ill (6 percent) (ESCAP 1986: 93). In the Indian context, a study in Kerala in the 1980s had suggested that about two-thirds of Gulf migrants reported loss of employment as their reason for return and “only one percent reported that they returned after having saved enough” (Department of Economics and Statistics 1987). Another study found the following reasons responsible for the return of Kerala migrants: expiry of contract (30.3 percent), difficult working conditions (22.9 percent), difficult living conditions (12.9 percent), conditions at home required presence (13.7 percent), ill health (11.1 percent), termination of job by employer (10.3 percent), repatriation due to illegal status (5.4 percent), injury/accident (1.2 percent), and political upheaval (1.9 percent) (Zachariah et al. 2002: 127).

There is an element of uncertainty of work and life in the Gulf countries and as such every migrant is potentially a ‘stranded’ returnee. Migrants may be stranded for several reasons, including premature termination of contract, retrenchment, victimization, accident, illness, etc. The solution to the problem lies in the rehabilitation as well as repatriation of such workers. A welcome step in this direction was the introduction by the Government of India of a compulsory insurance scheme which came into force with effect from December 25, 2003 and is applicable to the citizens of India required to obtain an emigration clearance. In order to meet the expenditure involved in repatriation as well as litigation on behalf of the victimized workers it was proposed by the Ministry of Labor to raise a fund by amending the Emigration Act of 1983.

## **Gulf Migration: Impact on India**

The economic and socio-cultural impact of such contractual migration on both sending and receiving countries has not escaped the attention of social scientists. It has been found that the host countries benefit from such migration in terms of the ready availability of skilled manpower which is cheap, unorganized, politically docile, and incapable of creating any law and order problem. In the sending countries, the impact of international migration can be seen in terms of reduction in unemployment and underemployment, occupational mobility, a construction boom and the generation of new enterprises. Foreign employment can also lead to a drain of skilled workers, increased concentration of land holdings, higher land prices and social problems among family members left behind; many of these problems occur simultaneously along with the beneficial effects.

Available data on the social and psychological impact of international migration in Asia suggests that such migration has both positive and negative impacts on the family and community life of the migrants. In a study of the socio-economic conditions and problems of the Korean return migrants from the Middle East it was found that the father's absence had a negative impact on the children's education because of a decrease in discipline and motivation. Contrary to this, studies in the Philippines and Thailand suggested that education was one of the major objects of expenditure, and remittances obviously helped in this regard (ESCAP, 1986).

Similarly, if on the one hand, international migration results in emotional problems for the spouse left behind who either has to live alone or in the joint family, then on the other hand migration may be fostering a significant change in the status of women. Non-migrant women acquire a more independent outlook by having to manage the household and financial transactions. This is confirmed by an empirical study of the impact of male migration on women in the Indian state of Kerala that found that although such women start

with a number of handicaps, they tend to become self-reliant over a period of time; they take on increased responsibilities for running the household on their own, and even for the management of money and property. Furthermore, the study observes that the “migration of men breaks down women’s isolation, increases mobility and brings them into contact with a wider network of institutions than were not in their purview before” (Gulati 1993: 144). On the whole, Gulf migration appears to have had a positive impact on the women in India that far outweighs such negative consequences as incidences of infidelity and divorces, which are not very frequent. A United Nations study on return migration in the Asia Pacific region concluded in 1986 that “the very weak evidence so far available does not indicate a higher prevalence of family problems related to temporary labor migration...” (ESCAP 1986: 8).

Perhaps this is no longer the case now, at least in so far as social problems are concerned, as a recent study conducted at the Centre for Development Studies of Thiruvananthapuram has revealed. The study, conducted in Kerala and involving about 900 women from eight of the 14 districts, highlighted the plight of the so-called “Gulf wives” and found that 43 to 55 percent of them - depending on the age group - cited loneliness as their number one problem (Zachariah et al. 2002: 81). Consequently, a large number of them have been suffering from such disorders as insomnia (Santosh and Raghaviah 2000; see also Zachariah et al. 2002: 77-84). Counseling centers and help lines have obviously ad hoc measures in this regard; attempts should be made to find better solutions to the problem.

Remittances and their use or misuse constitute one of the most important aspects of economic impacts of international migration. At the macro-economic level, remittances and investments made by non-resident Indians (NRIs) have played an important role in India’s economic development. India’s foreign exchange receipts from remittances have increased several times since 1990-91, when foreign exchange reserves had dipped to less than one billion dollars. NRI deposits have immensely helped India in averting its balance of payment crisis. The private transfer of foreign exchange

from the year 1981-82 onwards is given in Table 7; one can observe that there has been a steady increase in the remittances save a couple of years due to a decline in migration of Indian labor.

**Table 7**  
**Private Transfer (Receipts), 1981-1982 to 2003-2004**

Year	Remittances in	
	US \$ million	Rs. Crores
1981-82	2,333	2,082
1982-83	2,525	2,431
1983-84	2,568	2,648
1984-85	2,509	2,981
1985-86	2,219	2,715
1986-87	2,339	2,990
1987-88	2,724	3,532
1988-89	2,670	3,865
1989-90	2,295	38,239
1990-91	2,069	37,110
1991-92	3,587	94,189
1992-93	2,651	81,240
1993-94	5,265	16,513
1994-95	6,200	25,416
1995-96	8,506	28,660
1996-97	12,367	43,968
1997-98	11,830	43,764
1998-99	10,341	43,494
1999-2000	12,290	53,280
2000-2001	12,873	58,756
2001-2002	12,125	57,821
2002-2003	14,807	71,642
2003-2004	18,885	86,764

*Note: Remittances include gifts also.*

*Source: Reserve Bank of India. See also, Ministry of Labor, Government of India, Annual Reports, 2002, 2003 & 2005.*

Indian workers in the Gulf save most of their earnings as they are provided with free food, accommodation and transport during their stay in the Gulf countries. Remitted money is mostly spent on the upkeep and maintenance of the households, paying outstanding debts, purchasing land, building houses and buying consumer durables. Lavish expenditures on marriage and other festive occasions have also been reported from the Gulf migration areas in Kerala and elsewhere (Rahman 2003). It appears that only a small proportion of remittances is used for economically productive purposes (Nair 1989: 344).

Gulf countries have emerged as the launching pad for Indians emigrating to more liberal destinations like Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the U.S.A considerable number of NRI children in the Gulf take undergraduate courses in institutions run by Western countries that offer transfer facilities to the USA, Australia, UK or Canada; some of them eventually settle down in these countries.

## **Impact on the Gulf Countries**

Historically speaking, as traders, entrepreneurs, money lenders, bankers, customs farmers, pearl-financiers, etc. Indians have exerted a significant impact on the economic development of the Gulf region that has been continuing to this day (Jain 2004a, 2004b). The role of Indian labor since the oil exploration days has been equally significant. Indians constitute the largest expatriate community in the Gulf countries and are employed in all the job categories: professional, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled. The current level of economic prosperity in the Gulf countries owes in no small measure to Indian manpower and their hard work and entrepreneurial skills. It is difficult to imagine the contemporary Gulf economic scenario without taking into account the role played by the Indian manpower (Jain 2003a, 2004).

**Table 8**  
**GCC Population and Workforce, 2000 (in thousands)**

Country	National Population	Expatriate Population	Total Population	Population Growth Rate (%)	National Workforce	Expatriate Workforce	Total Workforce
Bahrain	400	270	670	1.6	100	200	300
Kuwait	900	1,500	2,400	3.3	200	1,100	1,300
Oman	1,900	600	2,500	3.4	300	600	900
Qatar	200	500	700	2.9	30	250	280
S. Arabia	15,500	7,300	22,800	3.3	2,800	5,300	8,100
UAE	900	2,700	3,600	1.6	200	1,700	1,900
Total/Average	19,800	12,870	32,670	2.7	3,630	9,150	12,780

*Source: Middle East Economic Digest, April 9 – 15, 2004.*

**Table 9**  
**Indian Expatriates in the G. C. C. countries, 2004**

Country	Number of Indian expatriates	Percentage
Saudi Arabia	1,600,000	42.5
UAE	1,000,000	26.5
Oman	450,000	11.9
Kuwait	400,000	10.6
Qatar	170,000	4.5
Bahrain	150,000	4.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,770,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Author's own estimates based on a number of sources.*

All the GCC countries have experienced the tremendous impact of immigration during the past three decades or so. The most noticeable impact has been on the demography of the region; immigration has created a sizeable population of non-nationals who hail from all parts of the world. The size and nationality composition of the expatriate populations, however, vary from country to country. In the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait, the expatriate population far outnumbers the national population. In the other Gulf countries the proportion of non-national populations is also significant, ranging from about 26 percent each in Saudi Arabia and Oman to over 37 percent in Bahrain (Table 8). In this context, it is significant to note that in the Gulf countries Indians constitute about 30 percent of the total expatriate population and about 10 percent of the total population (Tables 8 and 9).

The socio-cultural impact of India and the Indians on the Gulf countries has also been significant. India has played a major role in the modernization of the Gulf countries during the inter-war period (Elmadani 2003). With the influx of a large number of Indian workers in the Gulf countries, Indian films and music, Indian languages (particular Hindustani and Malayalam), Indian cuisines, etc. have become popular in the Gulf (Jain 2003a). As a result of regular migration from India, the Gulf countries share a very close cultural affinity with India.

## Implications for Indo-Gulf Relations

Although the overwhelming majority of the Gulf migrants by and large tend to strengthen international relations between India and the various Gulf countries, a few of them occasionally act as proverbial 'black sheep'. These latter NRIs are primarily involved in such criminal activities as smuggling, trade in narcotics and arms, extortions, and other subversive activities.

Dubai has long been associated with smuggling of gold, silver, precious metals, and electronic goods, and until recently a number of Indian and Pakistani smugglers used to operate their activities from there. An estimated 150 tons of gold and 1300 tons of silver used to be annually smuggled into India from the U.A.E. Profits from smuggling were huge, ranging from Rs. 40,000 to Rs. 50,000 per kg of gold after deducting landing costs, *hawala* transaction charges, bribes, salaries/commissions, etc. The Emirate's policy with regard to smuggling appeared in those days to be one of turning a blind eye to such activities as long as there was no breach of peace. If such activities do cause a disturbance, the local authorities are known to come down with a heavy hand on troublemakers. Thus about 3,000 Pakistanis and 5,000 Indian Muslim immigrants, mostly illegal,) had to face deportation for their involvement in a demonstration against the demolition of the Babari Mosque in Ayodhya in India on December 6, 1992.

One recent irritant in Indo-UAE relations involving some NRIs was the March 1993 bomb blasts in Bombay in which 257 persons were killed, over 700 were injured and property worth Rs. 27 crore was destroyed. Whether this was a reaction to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992 is not known, but the fact remains that the Government of India had carried out a massive crackdown on the cartel of Dawood Ibrahim, a notorious Dubai-based Indian smuggler.

An extradition treaty has been signed between India and the U.A.E. and has been helpful in solving some bilateral issues. India's request for the extradition of prime suspects in the Bombay

blasts case is still pending with the U.A.E. government. On its part, the Indian government has also been dithering over two important cases involving former NRIs who had fled the UAE and therefore could not be punished under the Emirates' laws. One case relates to one G.R. Sitaram who was implicated in an embezzlement case; the other relates to hijacking of an Indian Airlines aircraft to Dubai in 1984 by seven persons.

The smuggling of South Asian children for camel races in the Gulf countries, Arab marriages to poor, young Muslim girls and the clandestine flesh trade are some other dimensions of undesirable Indo-Gulf trade which, when reported in the press, usually tend to create adverse public opinion in India against Arabs in general. Some wealthy Arab visitors lure young girls into so-called "marriages" in which *kazis* and agents also happen to be in league with the Arab "buyers" (Gogate 1986: 50). These Arab men are usually quite old and have already married several times. A number of such cases have been reported from Hyderabad, Mumbai and some other cities of India.

## Conclusion

Indian labor migration to the Gulf countries is a phenomenon that is about a century old. Indians initially went to Iran, Iraq and Gulf states to work for international oil companies in various capacities. Their number remained small, perhaps not more than 15,000, until the Second World War. During the 1950s and 1960s, the number of Indian workers in the Gulf countries increased to about 50,000. Since then, as a result of the booming oil economies as well as a shortage of indigenous manpower in the Gulf countries, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of Indians working there. Presently, there are about 3.5 million Indian workers in the Gulf countries who mostly hail from the South Indian states and are employed in a wide variety of jobs.

In spite of drastic reduction in pay and benefits, harsh and sometimes humiliating work conditions, changing requirements of

manpower and increasing indigenization of workforce, an ever-increasing number of Indians have been making a beeline to the Gulf destinations. The phenomenon, however, appears to be understandable given the fact that besides unemployment and under-employment, there are two to three times overall wage differentials between India and the Gulf countries. In other states of India, the situation is more or less the same. Be that as it may, Gulf migration is still an attractive prospect to the individual migrants and their families; governments also encourage this because of the remissions involved. As such, the Gulf countries continue to remain the *El Dorado* for an overwhelming number of Indian migrants. Minor fluctuations apart, the upward trend in Indian labor outflow to the Gulf countries is likely to continue. The following categories of workers will be in demand in the Gulf countries: professional, technical and related workers; administrative, executive and managerial workers; clerical and related workers; service workers; production and related workers; transport equipment operators; and laborers.

At present, the GCC as an economic bloc has assumed much wider significance for India not only in terms of pure trade and commerce but also as an assured partner in India's energy security planning. The countries are a reliable source for India's crude oil, LPG, kerosene and other products meeting more than three quarters of its needs. The GCC countries are also important to India as attractive markets for Indian products, especially agricultural products, manufacturing goods, services and manpower. These countries serve as a second home for about 3.5 million Indian expatriates who make up about 31 percent of total expatriate population in the region and about 10 percent of the total GCC population. A study carried out by the Central Economic Intelligence Bureau of India pointed out that the GCC countries as a bloc are the biggest sources of NRI remittances into India, which presently average about \$10.0 billion annually.

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