

INDIAN WORKERS IN GULF COUNTRIES

In honour of the dignity and hard work of workers, in his renowned poem titled,

"Ode to the Worker", Neruda writes:

**Hard hands that shape the world,
Bearing the weight of countless dreams,
Your toil gives life to the silent earth,
Invisible threads woven through time it seems...**

**...With calloused palms and tired eyes,
You build the structures that touch the sky,
Yet your worth remains unseen by some,
Lost in a world where profits lie...**

INTRODUCTION:

"Gulf Countries", generally refer to the countries located in the Arabian Gulf, also known as the Persian Gulf. They typically include nations such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE). They have the largest population of migrant workers among all the nation states. It is because of two main reasons; first being the closeness of the Arabian Peninsula and Indian Peninsula, and the second is the "Oil Boom" during 1970s, which led to the movement of large number of migrants from various countries which in turn led to two-fold results. On one hand, the migrants found a source of income which they sent back as remittances to their home countries which not only helped in the upliftment of their families but also strengthened the foreign currency reserve of their countries. While on the other hand, utilization of manpower led to the economic development of the gulf countries.

Out of all the migrants, the migrants from the Asian Countries and particularly India played a significant role in the development of Gulf nations. As of today, millions of Indians have already migrated there as workers, most of them come from states like Kerala, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. One of the major reasons of the existence of huge number of workers from Asian countries is the availability of cheap labour. Most of the migrants work there as service providers of lower rang, such as labourers, drivers or servants. According to the Organisation for the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), India is one of the largest migrant providers to the gulf countries.

While few of Indian migrants are in advantageous positions in gulf countries as they get better employment opportunities in sectors like construction, engineering, healthcare, IT, finance, hospitality, and more, which comes with higher wages and better standard of living; Majority of them live in poor conditions. The factors which lead to their migration includes are: *Urbanization, Unemployment, Political Disturbances, and Economic Factors* etc.

WHAT IS MIGRATION?

In layman terms, Migration refers to the process of people or animals moving from one place to another with the intention of settling or temporarily residing in a new location. It is a fundamental aspect of human history and has been happening for various reasons throughout time.

Human migration can occur within a country (*internal migration*) or involve crossing national boundaries (*international migration*). People migrate for a multitude of reasons, including economic opportunities, seeking better living conditions, escaping conflict or persecution, reuniting with family, or pursuing education and career prospects.

Migration can be *voluntary* or *forced*. Voluntary migration occurs when individuals or families make a conscious decision to move to another place. Forced migration, on the other hand, happens when people are compelled to leave their homes due to factors such as war, political instability, environmental disasters, or human rights violations.

Migration patterns can be *temporary* or *permanent*. Temporary migration involves individuals moving to another location for a limited period, such as seasonal work or study abroad programs. Permanent migration, as the name suggests, involves individuals or families relocating with the intention of establishing a long-term or permanent residence in the new place.

VARIOUS TYPES OF MIGRANTS:

There are various types of migrants, who migrate for different reasons. Here are some common types of migrants:

Economic migrants: These individuals move to a different country or region in search of better economic opportunities, such as employment, higher wages, or improved living conditions.

Refugees: Refugees are forced to leave their home countries due to fear of persecution, conflict, or violence. They seek protection in another country and are granted refugee status under international law.

Asylum seekers: Similar to refugees, asylum seekers flee their home countries due to persecution or other serious threats. They seek refuge in another country and apply for asylum, hoping to be recognized as refugees and granted protection.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs): IDPs are individuals who are forced to leave their homes but remain within the borders of their own country. They are often displaced due to armed conflict, natural disasters, or human rights violations.

Environmental migrants: These individuals migrate due to environmental factors, such as natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes, floods, and droughts), climate change, or environmental degradation. They may move within their own country or cross international borders.

Family reunification migrants: Family reunification is a common reason for migration, where individuals or families migrate to join their relatives who are already residing in another country.

Students and educational migrants: Students and educational migrants move to other countries to pursue higher education or attend educational institutions. They may return to their home countries after completing their studies or choose to stay and work.

Seasonal or temporary workers: Some individuals migrate temporarily to work in specific industries or sectors, often in jobs that are seasonal or require specific skills. They may return to their home countries after a certain period.

Diasporas: Diasporas are communities or populations of people who have migrated or are descendants of migrants from a specific geographic or ethnic origin. They often maintain connections with their home countries and can contribute economically, socially, and culturally to both their host and home countries.

PLIGHT OF INDIAN WORKERS IN GULF COUNTRIES:

Majority of the Indian workers in Gulf countries face several disadvantages, including:

Low wages: Many Indian workers in Gulf countries often receive lower wages compared to their counterparts from other countries. This is due to factors such as the large supply of Indian workers and the willingness of some to work for lower salaries, creating a competitive environment.

Poor working conditions: Some Indian workers in Gulf countries experience poor working conditions, including long working hours, lack of proper safety measures, inadequate living conditions, and limited access to healthcare facilities. These conditions can adversely affect their physical and mental health.

Limited job security: Indian workers in Gulf countries often face limited job security, as they are primarily employed on a contractual or temporary basis. They may not have the same employment rights and protections as local workers, making them vulnerable to exploitation and unfair treatment.

Language and cultural barriers: Communication and cultural differences can pose challenges for Indian workers in Gulf countries. Many workers may not be fluent in the local language, which can create difficulties in understanding instructions and interacting with colleagues. Cultural differences may also result in a lack of familiarity with local customs and norms.

Separation from families: Many Indian workers in Gulf countries have to leave their families behind for extended periods of time. This separation can take an emotional toll on workers and lead to feelings of loneliness and homesickness.

Discrimination and mistreatment: Instances of discrimination and mistreatment against Indian workers in Gulf countries have been reported. This can include unequal treatment, denial of basic rights, and instances of verbal or physical abuse. Workers must be treated with dignity. In this context a few renowned quotes may be referred:

"No work is insignificant. All labour that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance." - Martin Luther King Jr.

"Work is not only a necessity for survival but also the source of our self-esteem and dignity." - Dalai Lama

Legal and bureaucratic challenges: Indian workers in Gulf countries may face challenges navigating legal systems and dealing with bureaucratic procedures. Language barriers and unfamiliarity with local laws can make it difficult for them to access justice or seek help when faced with problems or disputes.

Kafala System: it is mostly prominent in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and United Arab Emirates, under which the worker's visa of the migrants are kept with their employers so that they cannot change their job without the employers'

consent. If a worker tries to flee from an abusive employer, he can be fined, deported, or even imprisoned. This system has been censured by the International Labour Organisation.

<https://www.law.upenn.edu/live/blogs/99-the-middle-eastern-consensus-on-the-kafala-system>

Exploitation of women: Women migrant who work as domestic workers are often ill-treated. They have to work overtime, and are harassed psychologically, physically, verbally, sexually. They do not even have any legal protection.

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/10/22/i-already-bought-you/abuse-and-exploitation-female-migrant-domestic-workers>

ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION:

The ILO is a specialized agency of the United Nations. The International Labour Organization was formed even before the formation of the UN, in the year 1919 following the First World War. The ILO plays a crucial role in addressing the plight of Indian workers in the gulf countries. It sets international labour standards, develops policies, and provides guidance to member states on labour-related issues, including those affecting migrant workers.

Here are some keyways in which the ILO addresses the challenges faced by migrant workers:

Development of International Labor Standards: The ILO establishes and promotes international labour standards that safeguard the rights of all workers, including migrants.

Protection of Migrant Workers' Rights: The ILO advocates for the protection of Migrant workers' rights by encouraging member states to ratify and implement relevant international labour standards.

Data Collection and Research: The ILO collects and analyses data on labour migration to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by migrant workers. This research helps identify trends, inform policy development, and guide interventions to improve the conditions of migrant workers.

Policy Development and Technical Assistance: The ILO provides technical assistance and guidance to member states in developing policies and programs that promote the rights and well-being of migrant workers.

Tripartite Dialogue: The ILO facilitates dialogue and cooperation among governments, employers' organizations, and workers' organizations to address the specific needs and concerns of migrant workers.

Capacity Building: The ILO assists member states in strengthening their institutional capacity to manage labour migration effectively.

Through these various initiatives, the ILO strives to ensure that migrant workers are treated fairly, provided with decent work opportunities, and protected from exploitation and abuse. It emphasizes the importance of promoting social justice, equality, and respect for human rights in the context of labour migration.

Some important migrant specific instruments of ILO include the following:

Migration for Employment Convention, 1949 (no. 97)

Migration for Employment Recommendation, 1949 (no. 86)

Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (no. 143)

<https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/migrant-workers/lang--en/index.htm>

OTHER ORGANISATIONS WORKING FOR MIGRANT WORKERS:

There are numerous other organizations around the world that work to support and advocate for the rights of migrant workers. Here are several well-known organizations that focus on this issue:

International Organization for Migration (IOM): The IOM is an intergovernmental organization that provides services and advice concerning migration to governments and migrants alike. It works to ensure the orderly and humane management of migration, including the protection of migrant workers' rights.

<https://www.iom.int/>

Migrant Rights Network (MRN): MRN is a UK-based alliance of organizations working to combat racism, advocate for migrants' rights, and support migrant workers. It focuses on policy advocacy, public awareness campaigns, and grassroots organizing to bring about positive change.

<https://migrantsrights.org.uk/>

International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF): The IDWF is a global federation of domestic workers' organizations that aims to improve the living and working conditions of domestic workers worldwide. It advocates for the rights of domestic workers, including migrant domestic workers who often face exploitation and abuse.

<https://idwfed.org/>

Solidarity Center: The Solidarity Center is a U.S.-based non-profit organization affiliated with the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations). It works to promote and protect workers' rights globally, including those of migrant workers, through union organizing, education, and advocacy.

<https://www.solidaritycenter.org/>

Human Rights Watch (HRW): HRW is an international non-governmental organization that conducts research and advocacy on human rights issues worldwide. It investigates and exposes abuses against migrant workers, advocates for their rights, and seeks policy changes to address systemic issues.

<https://www.hrw.org/>

Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA): MFA is a regional network of non-governmental organizations, associations, and trade unions working on migration issues in Asia. It aims to protect and promote the rights of migrant workers, particularly women migrants, through capacity-building, research, and advocacy.

<https://mfasia.org/>

STEPS TAKEN BY INDIAN GOVERNMENT:

The Indian government has been taking various measures to address the plight of Indian workers in Gulf countries. These actions aim to protect the rights and welfare of Indian workers and provide them with necessary support. Here are some key initiatives undertaken by the Indian government:

Bilateral Agreements: The Indian government has signed bilateral agreements with Gulf countries to ensure the protection of Indian workers. These agreements include provisions for fair employment practices, minimum wages, decent working conditions, and legal recourse in case of disputes. Some of the agreements signed by India with various Gulf Countries are as follows:

United Arab Emirates (UAE) Agreement: In 2016, India and the UAE signed a bilateral agreement called the "Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Contractual Employment of Indian Workers." This agreement aims to streamline the recruitment process, improve working conditions, and protect the rights of Indian workers in the UAE.

Qatar Agreement: In 2021, India and Qatar signed a labour agreement known as the "Qatar-India Agreement on Recruiting Indian Workers." The agreement seeks to safeguard the welfare and rights of Indian workers in Qatar by ensuring fair recruitment practices, providing employment contracts, and establishing a joint committee for dispute resolution.

Oman Agreement: India and Oman signed a bilateral agreement called the "Agreement on Manpower Cooperation" in 2008. This agreement focuses on promoting cooperation between the two countries in the field of labour and aims to protect the rights and welfare of Indian workers in Oman.

Kuwait Agreement: In 2016, India and Kuwait signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Labor Cooperation to facilitate the recruitment and employment of Indian workers in Kuwait. The agreement covers various aspects such as recruitment procedures, employment contracts, and the welfare of Indian workers.

Similarly, there are other bilateral agreements signed by India with different countries to protect the rights and welfare of migrant workers.

<https://pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?relid=45164>

Welfare and Support Services: Indian embassies and consulates in Gulf countries provide welfare and support services to Indian workers. They assist in addressing issues related to employment, wage disputes, health, accommodation, and legal matters. They also organize awareness campaigns and counselling programs to educate workers about their rights and responsibilities.

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has launched the 'Surakshit Jayne Prashikshit Jayen' – 'Go Safe, Go Trained' campaign to raise awareness and facilitate Safe and Legal migration. On 9th January 2023, on the event of 17th Pravasi Bhartiya Divas, India's Prime Minister released a commemorative stamp for the same.

<https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=116819>

<https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=90111>

<https://mea.gov.in/icwf.htm>

<https://www.eoiriyadh.gov.in/page/welfare-schemes-for-workers-abroad-pbby-icwf-gosi/>

Registration and Regulation: The Indian government has implemented a registration and regulation system for Indian workers going to Gulf countries. This system ensures that workers are recruited through licensed recruitment agencies, and their contracts are verified and authenticated. It helps prevent fraudulent practices and ensures better protection for workers.

<https://indembassyuae.gov.in/employer-registration.php>

Skill Development and Pre-Departure Training: The government has introduced various skill development programs and pre-departure training initiatives for Indian workers going to Gulf countries. These programs aim to enhance their employability, provide them with necessary job-related skills, and make them aware of the local laws and customs of the destination country.

In light of Ministry of External Affairs motto 'SurakshitJaaye, PrashikshitJaaye, Vishwas ke Saath Jaaye' MEA started its flagship program, Pre-Departure Orientation Training (PDOT) in 2018. Under this program, the emigrant going abroad for employment is given a free of cost 8 hours Orientation training in order to apprise him with the Dos and Don'ts of the country of employment, his rights and welfare measures made available to him by Government of India.

<https://www.msde.gov.in/en/schemes-initiatives/schemes-initiatives-through-nsdc/pre-departure-orientation-training-pdot->

Grievance Redressal Mechanism: The Indian government has established a robust grievance redressal mechanism to address the complaints and grievances of Indian workers in Gulf countries. Workers can register their complaints through dedicated helplines, online portals, or directly at Indian embassies and consulates. The government ensures prompt action on these complaints and works towards resolving the issues faced by the workers.

In pursuance of "Good Governance" initiatives, MEA launched an online Consular Grievances Management System named MADAD on 21 February 2015 to extend a helping hand to Indians abroad requiring consular assistance. All Indian Missions and Posts abroad and the MEA's Branch Secretariats in Chennai, Guwahati, Hyderabad and Kolkata, are

associated with this portal for consular grievance tracking and follow-up. The MADAD portal represents a qualitative improvement over existing procedures for handling of consular grievances, through online forwarding, tracking and escalation until their eventual resolution.

<https://www.mea.gov.in/consular-complaints-and-grievances.htm>

Campaigns Awareness: The Indian government conducts awareness campaigns through various media channels to educate potential workers about the risks and challenges of working in Gulf countries. These campaigns provide information about legal rights, safe migration, and caution against illegal recruitment practices.

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) set up the India Centre for Migration (ICM) formerly known as Indian Council for Overseas Employment, as a 'not for profit' society under the Societies Registration Act 1860, in July 2008. The India Centre of Migration (ICM) serves as a research think-tank to Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on all matters relating to international migration and mobility. The Centre undertakes empirical, analytical and policy related research, and undertakes pilot projects to document good practices. Over the years, ICM has expanded its scope of work, by following a multi-pronged approach by actively organizing workshops, research studies and seminars in collaboration with academic institutions, state governments and international bodies.

<https://mbstamps.blogspot.com/2023/01/surakshit-jayen-prashikshit-jayen.html?m=1>

CONCLUSION:

The plight of Indian workers in Gulf countries has been a longstanding issue that requires attention and resolution. While it is challenging to provide a definitive conclusion to such a complex problem, several key points can be made.

Firstly, Indian workers in Gulf countries face various challenges, including exploitation, poor working conditions, limited legal protection, and inadequate access to healthcare and social welfare. These issues are often exacerbated by factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, and a lack of awareness of their rights.

Efforts have been made by both the Indian government and Gulf countries to address these challenges. The Indian government has taken steps to improve the recruitment process, provide pre-departure orientation programs, and establish mechanisms for redressal of grievances. Gulf countries have also introduced reforms to enhance labour rights, such as implementing minimum wage policies and improving living conditions for migrant workers.

However, despite these efforts, there is still much work to be done. The Indian government should continue to strengthen its collaboration with Gulf countries to ensure the effective implementation of labour laws and regulations. Regular monitoring and inspection of workplaces, as well as stricter enforcement of penalties for labour law violations, are crucial.

Furthermore, it is important to promote awareness among Indian workers about their rights and provide them with access to legal aid and support services. Efforts should be made to improve communication channels and establish mechanisms for workers to report grievances without fear of reprisals.

International organizations, civil society, and the media also play a significant role in raising awareness about the challenges faced by Indian workers in Gulf countries. By highlighting these issues, they can advocate for policy changes and encourage dialogue between governments, employers, and workers to find sustainable solutions.

In conclusion, the plight of Indian workers in Gulf countries is a multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Efforts from governments, employers, civil society, and international organizations are necessary to improve working conditions, protect workers' rights, and ensure their well-being. It is crucial to continue addressing this issue with urgency and persistence to create a more equitable and humane environment for Indian workers in Gulf countries.

Thus, there is no denial of the fact that the dignity of workers should be kept on the highest pedestal when talking about the rights of the works. In this context, to conclude this article,

there can be no other better way than going back to the beginning itself. We began this through the verses from a poem by Neruda, which speaks of the relevance of workers who do not cease even in the dire conditions. The poem ends in the same context as this article, thus, talking about recognizing their efforts as also providing them with respect and dignity that they deserve, once again, in the words of Neruda:

.... So, here's to the worker, a beacon bright,

A symphony of strength, unyielding will,

May your efforts be recognized in full light,

And your dignity cherished, honoured still.

For the world owes you a debt of gratitude,

For the fruits of your labour, we must repay,

In unity, let's strive for a better attitude,

Where justice and dignity forever hold sway.

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