

Changing Patterns of Indian Out-Migration to GCC Countries: A Sociological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolving patterns of Indian out-migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries from a sociological perspective, highlighting historical trajectories, demographic shifts, regional trends, gender dynamics, and the socio-economic impact on sending communities. Indian migration to the Gulf, which initially stemmed from colonial-era trade networks, intensified post-1970s in response to the oil boom and labor demands in the construction and service sectors. While Kerala dominated early migration flows, recent decades have seen the rise of states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh as major labor suppliers. These shifts are driven by localized economic distress, unemployment, and aspirations for upward mobility. The paper underscores the diversification of the migrant workforce in terms of skills, sectors, and gender. A growing number of Indian women—particularly from southern and eastern states—are entering the Gulf labor market as domestic workers, nurses, and teachers. However, gendered vulnerabilities persist due to the exploitative kafala system, inadequate legal protections, and irregular recruitment practices. The impact of migration extends beyond individuals to families and communities left behind, producing complex outcomes including increased household prosperity, transformed gender roles, emotional strain, and changing community aspirations. Remittance flows contribute significantly to local development, yet often reproduce social inequalities and emotional dislocations. Drawing on data from governmental and academic sources, the article concludes that while Indian migration to the Gulf continues to serve as a crucial livelihood strategy for millions, it is increasingly shaped by shifting labor policies in host countries, national-level migration governance, and global economic fluctuations. The paper recommends a multi-pronged policy approach: improving pre-departure training, enhancing female migrant protections, regulating recruitment, fostering bilateral cooperation, and addressing the emotional and developmental needs of migrants' families. It advocates for a rights-based, gender-sensitive, and development-oriented migration framework that aligns national policy with the lived realities of migrants.

Keywords: Changing pattern, Indian out-migration, GCC countries

INTRODUCTION

The Indian migration to the Gulf is one of the largest sustained labor movements in the contemporary world. Historically rooted in colonial-era trade and mobility networks, migration from India to the Gulf states intensified following the oil boom of the 1970s. The socio-economic dynamics of this migration are multifaceted, reflecting shifts in global labor demands, domestic push factors, and bilateral relations. Today, Indian migrants

comprise the largest expatriate population in most Gulf countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Qatar (GLMM, 2022; Rajan and Sumeetha, 2019).

Historical and Demographic Shifts of Indian Migration to the Gulf:

Indian presence in the Gulf predates the oil era, with Gujarati traders, Konkani merchants, and Malabari Muslims maintaining trade relations with port cities like

Muscat and Dubai in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Osella and Osella, 2007). Migration during this time was limited and elite-driven, centered around commerce and religious pilgrimage.

The 1973 oil crisis led to massive infrastructural development in GCC countries. This created an unprecedented demand for manual and semi-skilled labor, especially in the construction and service sectors. Kerala emerged as a leading source region, facilitated by high literacy rates and Gulf cultural familiarity (Zachariah and Rajan, 2012). Migration was largely temporary, male-dominated, and mediated by recruitment agents. Workers were employed under the kafala (sponsorship) system, which often exposed them to labor exploitation and limited mobility (GLMM, 2022).

The 1990s witnessed a diversification in source states—Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Punjab joined Kerala in contributing to the Gulf workforce. Concurrently, segments of skilled and semi-skilled workers such as technicians, nurses, and IT professionals also began migrating. This period also saw increasing return migration, especially to Kerala, resulting in substantial social change and remittance-driven development (CDS, 2018). However, returnees often struggled with reintegration due to skill mismatch and lack of policy support (Rajan and Sumeetha, 2019).

In the post-2010 period, GCC countries began to nationalize their labor markets (e.g., Saudi Nitaqat policy), leading to declining recruitment of low-skilled foreign workers. Meanwhile, Indian migration to the Gulf has continued, albeit with a gradual shift toward professional and service sector employment (MPI, 2022). Additionally, increasing numbers of Indian women, particularly nurses and domestic workers, have migrated to the Gulf, bringing gender into focus in migration debates (IOM, 2024).

State-wise Patterns:

Kerala remains a leading contributor, but northern and central Indian states now constitute a growing share of migrants. The 2018 Kerala Migration Survey noted a decline in emigration rates from Kerala, while emigration from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar increased significantly (CDS, 2018). Indian migration to the Gulf has exhibited distinct regional patterns that have evolved over the decades. While Kerala pioneered large-scale labor migration in the 1970s, recent decades have witnessed a diversification of source states, driven by changing labor market demands in the Gulf and socioeconomic push

factors within India.

Kerala:

Kerala has historically led Gulf migration from India. The state's relatively high literacy rates, social networks in the Gulf, and favorable attitude toward foreign employment facilitated a mass exodus beginning in the 1970s (Zachariah and Rajan, 2012). According to the *Kerala Migration Survey 2018* (CDS, 2018), about 89% of Kerala's emigrants were located in the Gulf region. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar were the top destinations.

However, since 2011, the proportion of Keralites among Gulf migrants has slightly declined, attributed to:

- Saturation of migration networks
- Rising education and aspirations for white-collar jobs
- State-level welfare improvements reducing push factors

Despite the decline, remittances from the Gulf continue to significantly support Kerala's economy, accounting for 19% of its net state domestic product (CDS, 2018).

Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh:

Tamil Nadu and undivided Andhra Pradesh (now Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) became prominent contributors from the 1990s onwards. Migrants from these states primarily occupy roles in construction, hospitality, and retail in the UAE, Oman, and Qatar. Many are employed through informal broker networks and often migrate under the ECR (Emigration Check Required) category, exposing them to recruitment-related exploitation (MEA, 2023).

Uttar Pradesh and Bihar: The Rising Senders

In recent years, northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have emerged as major suppliers of labor to the Gulf, especially for low-wage, low-skilled jobs in construction, sanitation, and domestic service sectors.

According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA, 2023), Uttar Pradesh has become the single largest state in terms of emigration clearance for Gulf-bound workers. This shift is primarily driven by:

- High levels of rural poverty
- Lack of employment opportunities in agriculture and manufacturing
- Well-established migration corridors in Saudi

Arabia and the UAE

However, migrants from these states often face greater vulnerability due to lower levels of education, inadequate pre-departure orientation, and fewer community support networks abroad (GLMM, 2022).

Punjab and Haryana:

Punjab and Haryana have also contributed to Gulf migration, albeit at a smaller scale. Punjabi migrants often enter via irregular channels or tourist visas before transitioning to low-skill jobs, particularly in the UAE and Qatar. Unlike southern migrants, their motivations often include escape from debt and land-related disputes rather than chronic unemployment (Rajan and Sumeetha, 2019).

Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Others:

- Maharashtra has a moderate level of out-migration, particularly from its underdeveloped Vidarbha and Marathwada regions.
- West Bengal shows rising trends of Gulf-bound migration, especially among Muslims from rural districts such as Murshidabad and Malda.
- Jharkhand, Odisha, and Rajasthan are recent additions to the Gulf migration map, with domestic workers and construction laborers

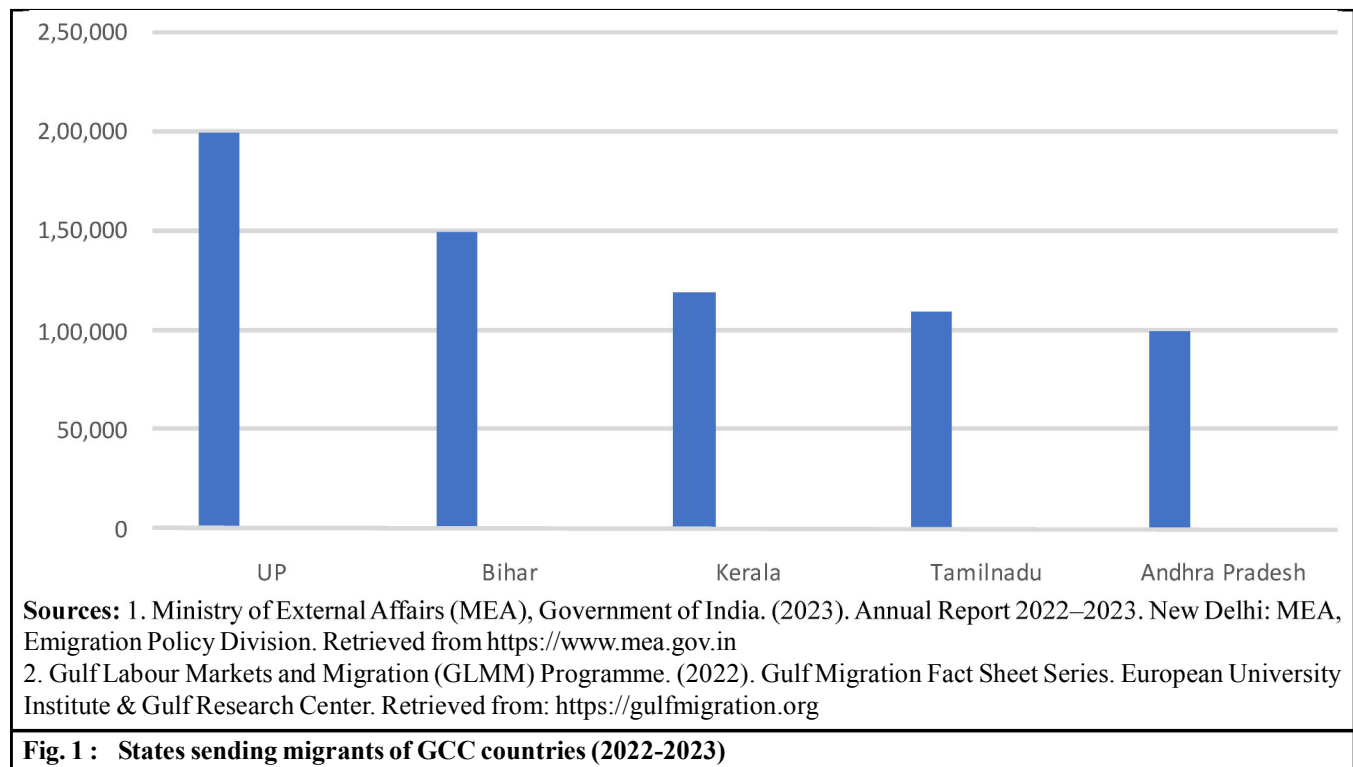
increasingly heading to Oman, Bahrain, and the UAE.

Gender Dynamics:

Historically, labor migration from India to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has been deeply gendered, characterized by a predominance of male migrants engaged in construction and low-skilled sectors. However, in recent decades, the dynamics of gender in migration to the Gulf have been slowly transforming. This change is fueled by multiple factors: shifting labor market demands in the Gulf, rising educational attainment among Indian women, the global care economy, and changing aspirations and agency among female migrants. Despite this evolution, migration remains deeply stratified along gender lines, with women often occupying lower-paying, precarious, and less-protected roles.

Feminization of Migration: Trends and Data

Recent data from the *Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)* and the *Emigration Clearance Required (ECR)* regime indicate a gradual increase in the number of Indian women migrating to the GCC, though the numbers still lag far behind male migration. As per the *MEA's 2023 Annual Report*, out of approximately 410,000 Indian



workers who migrated to ECR countries in 2022, only around 8.5% were women. However, this marks a noticeable increase from less than 5% a decade ago, reflecting the steady feminization of this migration corridor.

The *GCC states*, especially Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar, have seen increasing demand for female domestic workers, nurses, and caregivers. In particular, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha have become major sending states for female migrants, especially in health care and domestic service sectors (Rajan *et al.*, 2020).

Sectors of Female Employment:

The occupational placement of Indian women in the GCC is highly gendered and segmented.

a) Domestic Work and Care Economy:

The majority of Indian women migrate to the GCC as domestic workers—housemaids, nannies, and elderly caregivers. According to the *International Labour Organization* (ILO, 2021), Indian women constitute one of the largest national groups of domestic workers in countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. These jobs are largely informal, unregulated, and often not protected under national labor laws in host countries, particularly under the Kafala system.

b) Nursing and Healthcare:

India has also emerged as a leading source of female nurses, especially to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. Kerala, with its robust nursing education system, has been central to this trend. According to a 2023 study by *Rajan and Zachariah*, over 20,000 Indian nurses, most of them women, work in GCC hospitals and clinics. This migration is relatively more formalized and offers better labor rights and salaries than domestic work.

c) Education, Retail, and Other Sectors:

A growing number of Indian women are also entering the education sector (teachers in Indian and international schools), hospitality, and retail sectors in the UAE and Qatar. These jobs tend to be available through non-ECR channels and require higher qualifications, English language skills, and digital literacy.

Gendered Vulnerabilities and Exploitation:

The feminization of migration, particularly in domestic work, has exposed Indian women to a host of vulnerabilities, including physical abuse, mental trauma, sexual harassment, delayed wages, and absence of legal recourse. Many of these issues are exacerbated by the Kafala sponsorship system, prevalent in most GCC countries, which binds migrant workers to their employers and severely limits job mobility and legal protections (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Reports by *Amnesty International* and *Human Rights Watch* (2022) document numerous cases where Indian female domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were confined to homes, worked 16–18 hours per day, and were subjected to physical abuse. Many had their passports confiscated, limiting their freedom to return.

Furthermore, irregular and illegal recruitment channels—despite being banned by the Indian government—continue to operate, particularly in the recruitment of domestic workers. Agents often misrepresent job roles, pay scales, and working conditions. Women are disproportionately affected due to lack of awareness, literacy, and social support systems.

State Regulation and Policy Responses:

Recognizing these gendered vulnerabilities, the Government of India has enacted a range of policy measures aimed at regulating female migration to the GCC. These include:

- ECR requirements for women below 30 years of age.
- Mandatory registration on the *e-Migrate* portal for recruitment through licensed agencies.
- Bilateral labor agreements with countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE specifically addressing protections for domestic workers.

While these efforts are commendable, scholars argue that they also contribute to gender paternalism, where the state assumes a protective rather than empowering role (Kaur, 2021). For instance, age restrictions and mandatory approvals often drive women to migrate through informal and riskier channels, thereby increasing their vulnerability.

Impact on Families and Sending Communities in India:

The migration of Indian workers, particularly to the

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, has generated significant social, economic, and cultural transformations in the households and communities they leave behind. While the economic benefits of remittances are well-documented, the broader sociological impact—on family structure, gender roles, community expectations, and emotional well-being—has received comparatively less attention. These dynamics become especially pronounced when examining the experiences of families of low-skilled laborers and female migrants, whose migration is often marked by extended absences, emotional costs, and reconfigured household responsibilities.

Economic Remittances and Household Prosperity:

Remittances sent by Indian migrants in the Gulf have historically served as a financial lifeline for their families. According to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI, 2023), India received approximately \$125 billion in remittances in 2022, the highest in the world, with nearly 55% of these originating from GCC countries. These funds contribute to:

- Household consumption, including food, housing, and daily needs.
- Education and health expenditure, particularly for children of migrants.
- Investment in land, housing construction, and small enterprises.

In regions like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, entire local economies are often supported by Gulf remittances, creating what researchers call “remittance economies” (Zachariah and Rajan, 2012). These inflows not only elevate individual family income but also stimulate growth in local markets and service sectors.

However, the benefits are unevenly distributed. Families of female domestic workers and low-skilled male laborers often receive modest remittances that are barely sufficient for survival, especially when migration costs are incurred through debts to unlicensed agents (Rajan and Narayana, 2010). Furthermore, remittance reliance makes families economically vulnerable during crises such as job loss, illness, or geopolitical tensions.

Changing Gender Roles and Domestic Responsibilities:

Migration reshapes gender norms and domestic structures, particularly when the migrant is a woman or when male migration leaves women as de facto heads

of households.

Female-Headed Households:

In many cases, the out-migration of men leads to female-headed households, where women assume decision-making roles related to family finance, education, and agriculture. This can lead to increased female empowerment, especially when women gain access to remittance funds or community support networks (Osella and Osella, 2000). However, this transition is not always smooth. In patriarchal societies, female authority may be contested by extended family members, particularly in joint households.

Role Reversals in Female Migration:

When women migrate for domestic or nursing work in the Gulf, their husbands or elderly in-laws often take on caregiving responsibilities—a notable reversal of traditional gender roles. While this can contribute to changing perceptions of masculinity and domestic labor, it can also lead to psychosocial strain for both spouses, especially in socially conservative regions where female mobility is stigmatized (Kaur, 2021).

Emotional and Psychological Effects on Families:

Migration, especially for extended durations, induces significant emotional strain on both migrants and their families. This separation can cause:

- Parental absence and its effects on children’s development and academic performance.
- Emotional loneliness for spouses left behind.
- Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and insecurity among both migrants and their families.

A study conducted by the Centre for Development Studies (CDS, 2022) on returnee migrants in Kerala reported that over 30% of migrant families experienced emotional or psychological distress due to prolonged separation. Children, particularly in nuclear households, showed higher levels of school absenteeism, aggression, or attachment issues when one or both parents were abroad for extended periods.

Among families of female domestic workers, the burden is even more acute. These women often go years without visiting home, primarily due to contractual obligations, passport confiscation, or the high costs of travel. Their absence can create an emotional vacuum in caregiving roles traditionally occupied by mothers and

daughters-in-law, leading to fractured intergenerational relationships and care deficits for both children and elderly family members.

Social Status, Stigma, and Migration Aspirations:

In sending communities, migration to the Gulf is often seen as a symbol of upward mobility, particularly when it leads to improved material status—houses with tiled roofs, children attending private schools, or weddings with higher dowries. Consequently, many rural and semi-urban families view Gulf migration as a rite of passage for young men and increasingly, for women (Varghese, 2016).

However, class and gender intersections complicate these narratives. While male migrants often return to communal applause, female migrants—particularly domestic workers—face social stigma, with assumptions of moral laxity, abandonment of familial roles, or sexual exploitation abroad. This stigma has real consequences, including social exclusion, delayed marriages, and reduced community participation upon return (Gamburd, 2000).

Additionally, migration shapes the aspirations of youth in sending areas. In regions like Malappuram (Kerala) or Villupuram (Tamil Nadu), school dropouts among boys have been linked to the allure of quick employment in the Gulf, undermining educational attainment. For girls, witnessing the economic contribution of migrant women can inspire both ambition and anxiety, particularly around the balance of financial independence and societal expectations.

Community-Level Transformations:

Migration does not only impact households; it reshapes entire communities, socially and spatially.

Infrastructure and Consumption:

Gulf remittances have transformed village landscapes: modern homes, mosques, schools, and shopping complexes funded by migrants are now visible across migrant-intensive districts. These investments improve local amenities but can also deepen inequality between migrant and non-migrant households.

Migration Networks and Brokerage:

In many sending areas, informal networks of returnees, brokers, and recruitment agents operate as community-level infrastructures that facilitate new migration. While these networks provide job access, they also entrench exploitative practices such as fee-charging,

debt-bondage, and unverified placements, particularly for women and unskilled workers (Naujoks, 2015).

Conclusion:

The trajectory of Indian migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has undergone significant transformations over the past century. What began as a largely male-dominated, temporary, and economically driven movement has evolved into a complex and multidimensional phenomenon shaped by socio-economic, political, and cultural factors on both ends of the migration corridor.

Historically rooted in trade and early labor flows, Indian migration to the Gulf surged post-1970s due to oil-induced development and labor shortages in the region. Kerala's early prominence has gradually given way to increased participation from other Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, reflecting changing push factors like rural poverty, unemployment, and aspirations for upward mobility.

These changing patterns have not only altered the demographic makeup of Indian migrants but also diversified the sectors in which they are employed—from construction and domestic work to healthcare and education. Increasing female migration, particularly in domestic and caregiving roles, has highlighted deeply gendered labor hierarchies, marked by vulnerabilities and exploitative conditions under systems such as *kafala*. At the same time, the emergence of professional female migrants signifies a slow but growing shift toward gender diversification in Gulf-bound employment.

The sociological impact of migration is profound, affecting family structures, community networks, and gender norms. While remittances have undeniably contributed to economic upliftment and local development, the emotional, psychological, and social costs—particularly in the context of prolonged separation and stigmatization—remain underexplored and insufficiently addressed.

Furthermore, labor reforms in the GCC, restrictive immigration policies, and efforts toward labor nationalization suggest that the future of Indian migration to the region may face new constraints. These evolving challenges necessitate robust policy responses, greater intergovernmental cooperation, and more inclusive frameworks for migrant welfare and rights protection.

Recommendations:

Based on the above findings and analysis, the

following recommendations are proposed to address the emerging challenges and optimize the benefits of migration for individuals, families, and both sending and receiving countries:

Strengthening Pre-Departure and Reintegration Support

- Mandatory orientation programs focusing on legal rights, cultural sensitivity, financial literacy, and mental health should be made universally accessible, especially for low-skilled and female migrants.
- Reintegration policies must be institutionalized to help returnees transition smoothly into local labor markets. These should include skills recognition, psychosocial support, and entrepreneurial training.

Gender-Sensitive Migration Policies

- The Indian government should re-evaluate restrictive norms such as the minimum age requirement for female migrants, which often push women into irregular and risk-prone migration routes.
- Dedicated support cells for women migrants, including helplines, legal assistance, and shelters at Indian embassies and consulates in the GCC, must be enhanced and adequately funded.

Regulation of Recruitment Practices:

- Crack down on unlicensed and exploitative recruitment agents through stricter enforcement of the Emigration Act, digitized monitoring via the *e-Migrate* portal, and swift legal recourse for victims.
- Promote ethical recruitment practices by incentivizing licensed agencies, offering public ratings, and establishing bilateral oversight committees.

Bilateral Labor Agreements and Worker Protections:

- India must push for stronger, enforceable bilateral labor agreements with all GCC nations, including provisions that protect the rights of domestic and low-skilled workers.
- Regular labor inspections and independent grievance redressal mechanisms should be

established in collaboration with GCC governments to monitor workplace conditions.

Addressing Social and Psychological Impacts

- Encourage the creation of community-based support groups and counseling services for migrants' families to address emotional, mental health, and educational challenges arising from long-term separation.
- Schools and local NGOs in high out-migration areas should implement programs for children of migrants, focusing on psychosocial development, resilience, and academic retention.

Inclusive Development Planning in Sending States:

- Use remittances as a tool for sustainable local development by promoting savings, investment in local enterprises, and infrastructural development, especially in rural and underdeveloped regions.
- State governments should create migration resource centers to provide information, legal support, training, and reintegration assistance.

Enhancing Data Collection and Migration Research:

- Institutionalize state-wise migration surveys, particularly in emerging migrant-sending states like Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal, to inform targeted policy responses.
- Promote collaborative research between Indian and Gulf institutions to better understand migration patterns, labor markets, and gendered experiences in real-time.

Encouraging Diaspora Engagement:

- Engage the Indian diaspora in the Gulf through structured platforms for community development, knowledge transfer, and philanthropic investment in home regions.
- Empower Gulf-based Indian community organizations to act as intermediaries between migrants and official Indian missions.

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