



## Foreign Shores and Fading Dreams: The Great Indian Labor Exodus

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### Abstract

A vast majority of Indians earn their income through labor by working in the unorganized sector. About 90% of Indian working population earn their livelihood through informal employment which has no job security, no employment benefits, no social protection and survive with lower earnings. However desperate people are risking their lives to seek employment by migrating to other nations by taking up illegal route and signing up for risky jobs. Unemployment Rate in India increased to 8.30 percent in December from 8 percent in November of 2024. Unemployment Rate in India averaged at 8.18 percent from 2018 until 2024, reaching an all-time high of 23.50 percent in April of 2020 and a record low of 6.40 percent in September of 2022. According to the India Employment Report 2024, created jointly by the Institute for Human Development and the International Labor Organization (ILO), India's working population increased from 61 percent in 2011 to 64 percent in 2021, and it is projected to reach 65 percent in 2036. However, the percent of youth involved in economic activities declined to 37 percent in 2022. According to the latest Periodic Labor Force Survey the urban unemployment data for the age group 15-29 for the five quarters between January 2023 and March 2024, has ranged between 16.5 per cent and 17.6 per cent, with the latest January-March 2024 quarter posting a 17 per cent unemployment rate. Given these conditions, it is natural that Indian youth are lured by promising careers abroad. A new wave of Indian workers is travelling to the West and the Gulf in search of better lives, some of them as illegal migrants. "Unemployment, systemic disorganization, peer pressure and fear of drug traps were compelling rural households to send their young to foreign shores," according to a study. This situation had led to youth being exploited at foreign shores and incidents of unfair wages, exploitations, illegal immigration, etc are now being reported. This paper discusses all these issues and presents suggestions to handle these issues.

**Keywords:** Labor force, Unemployment, migrants, exodus

### 1. Introduction

A C-17 wide bodied aircraft of USA Airforce landed in Guru Ram Dass Jee International Airport, Amritsar on 6-2-2025 carrying 104 Indian nationals who were deported by US authorities, for having entered illegally into US. They include men, women and children handcuffed and treated like slaves under inhuman conditions. This evoked wide spread criticism and was opposed by all sections of the society in India. This deportation was a part of "Operation Clean up" of the US government. In future many countries, especially friendly nations like UK, France, Canada, Australia etc., may follow this kind of deportation within 100 days approximately. Already UK has targeted Indian

Restaurants in Trump style immigration crackdown. India has the world's largest emigrant population, with over 18.5 million people of Indian origin living overseas as of 2024. Indian emigrants account for 6% of all international migrants globally. It is therefore necessary for our authorities to ensure their safety and well-being in their chosen work destinations. The UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants defines a migrant worker as a "person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State forced or compelled to leave their homes. Migrants are people who make choices about when to leave and where to go, even though these choices are sometimes extremely constrained.

Therefore, according to the UNESCO a migrant can be understood as "any person who lives temporarily or permanently in a country where he or she was not born, and has acquired some significant social ties to this country." It is also clear that "migrant" does not refer refugees, displaced or other forced or compelled to leave their homes. This paper purports to present the current status of labour migration from India, their working conditions and analyse the current support system framework in the home country.

## 2. Review of Literature

Nileena Suresh (2025) in her article on International Migration from India states that in West Asia, Indians now make up nearly 40% of all immigrants in the country, and account for a third of the country's population. Indians now make up a quarter of the population of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as well. Indian migrants also form a growing share of the immigrant population in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA. They are the largest migrant group in Canada, and the second-largest immigrant group in the USA after Mexicans. Naresh Kumar and Sudhakar Singh (2016) in their article on Mapping of migration aspects of manpower resources for India and comparative countries state that migration though it affects cultural and social aspects of the host country, it is majorly an economic migration to ensure sustenance of national economies of the host country and to meet the economic goals of the migrants. The paper also discusses theories of international migration like the neoclassical economic theory, dual labour market theory, relative deprivation theory, world systems theory. In their article on Unauthorized Indians in the United States, Abby Budiman and Devesh Kapur (2025) discuss about the asylum requests by Indians in the US followed by an examination of asylum requests by Indian nationals in the U.S., along with a breakdown of languages spoken by Indian immigrants who are involved in asylum claims in U.S.

## 3. Methodology of The Study

The study is exploratory in nature and uses secondary data from various sources, like ministry of external affairs and The UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants defines relies on various research reports on migrant data.

## 4. Objectives of The Study

- To understand the risks that unlawful immigrants take to enter foreign shores.
- To study the proportion of skilled and unskilled workforce abroad and their working conditions. [1-3]
- To study select nations where a large Indian migrant population and diaspora is present.
- To study the current support system that offers succour to the hapless migrants and suggest remedial measures to avoid illegal migration.

## 5. Discussion

The world population review report as presented below states that the United States is home to the highest number of immigrants in the world. An estimated 50.6 million people in the United States—a bit more than 15% of the total population of 331.4 million—were born in a foreign country. Perhaps the most unique entry in the top ten is the United Arab Emirates, whose 8.7 million immigrants make up nearly 89% of the country's total population. This gives the UAE one of the world's highest proportions of immigrant residents in relation to the total national population. Table 1 shows Top 10 Countries with the Highest Number of Foreign-Born Residents (Immigrants) - United Nations 2020

**Table 1 Top 10 Countries with the Highest Number of Foreign-Born Residents (Immigrants) - United Nations 2020**

Country	Immigrants
United States	50.6M
Germany	15.8M
Saudi Arabia	13.5M
Russia	11.6M
United Kingdom	9.4M
United Arab Emirates	8.7M
France	8.5M
Canada	8M
Australia	7.7M
Spain	6.8M

### 5.1 Indian Migrants

With regard to the population of overseas Indian, the countries with the highest Indian population are

presented as follows: Table 2 shows Indian Migrants – Top ten nations

**Table 2 Indian Migrants – Top ten nations**

Rank	Country	Non-Resident Indians (NRIs)	Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs)	Overseas Indian
1	USA	2,077,158	3,331,904	5,409,062 (5.4M)
2	UAE	3,554,274	14,574	3,568,848 (3.6M)
3	Malaysia	163,127	2,751,000	2,914,127 (2.9M)
4	Canada	1,016,274	1,859,680	2,875,954 (2.8M)
5	Saudi Arabia	2,460,603	2,906	2,463,509 (2.5M)
6	Myanmar	2,660	2,000,000	2,002,660 (2.0M)
7	UK	369,000	1,495,318	1,864,318 (1.9M)
8	South Africa	60,000	1,640,000	1,700,000 (1.7M)
9	Sri Lanka	7,500	1,600,000	1,607,500 (1.6M)
10	Kuwait	993,284	2,244	995,528 (996K)

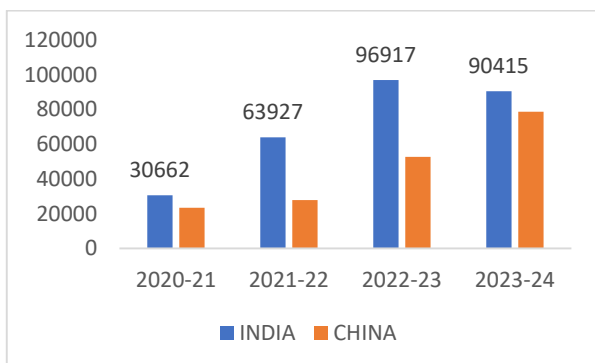
**Source:** Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: Population of Overseas Indians

### 5.2 Illegal Immigrants from India

According to DHS (Department of Homeland Security, US), the number of illegal Indian immigrants in the US increased from 28,000 in 1990 to 120,000 in 2000 to 270,000 in 2010 to 560,000 in 2016, before dropping to 220,000 in 2022. The official DHS (Department of Homeland Security, US) estimate put roughly 7% of all foreign-born Indians in the US as unauthorized in 2022, a decline from approximately 17% in 2015 and around 9% in 2000. Overall, Indians account for a small proportion of the total unauthorized population in the US, comprising just 2% in 2022, down from nearly 4% in 2015. Since the share of Indian population in the

overall US foreign-born population was 7%, this indicates that Indians are substantially underrepresented in the unauthorized immigrant population. What forces may have driven these recent unprecedented changes in Indian migration patterns to the U.S.? One might look to the migrants' country of origin, India, for potential explanations. Were there recent "shocks" that prompted its citizens to seek refuge in the U.S. through informal channels? It's tempting to interpret the rise in asylum claims filed by Indian nationals as a consequence of democratic backsliding and increasing authoritarianism in India. U.S. data suggests that

asylum seekers are primarily Punjabi and Gujarati—ethnic groups from some of India's wealthiest states who are more likely capable of bearing the high costs of migrating to the West through unauthorized channels. This contrasts with individuals from less prosperous regions or marginalized groups most affected by current national policies. Disenfranchised communities notably absent from asylum claims include Indian Muslims, individuals from Scheduled Caste populations, and those residing in conflict-ridden areas such as the Adivasi (tribal) belt and the Kashmir region. Ham-handed policies of the Indian government targeting Khalistani activists in the West gave further credence to those from Punjab alleging persecution by Indian authorities. The drivers of migration are rooted in both the sending and receiving countries, in this case India and in the U.S. Both Gujarat and Punjab have tradition of seeking better lives overseas, with large number of migrants going to the UK and U.S., as well as Canada and Australia. The remittances (India received an estimated \$120 billion in remittances in 2023) from employment overseas, visually apparent in more opulent homes, lead more to try to escape not poverty but "relative deprivation", fearing limited economic prospects in India.<sup>9</sup> At the same time a full industry of agents and brokers facilitating this illegal migration sprang up in India. India's Home Ministry looked the other way since this issue likely because the issue of illegal migration is much more a burden for receiving than sending countries. Figure 1 shows No of Illegal Immigrants Caught at Us Border (October 1 - September 30)



**Figure 1** No of Illegal Immigrants Caught at Us Border (October 1 - September 30)

**Source:** US Customs and Border Protection

### 5.3 Saudi Arabia and GCC

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, one of the world's largest recipients of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in the world and GCC Nations of UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain combinedly employ nearly 5.5 million migrant domestic workers out of which a sizable number is from India. Large numbers are employed as drivers, domestics help, shepherds, camel care workers, house cleaners etc. These are outsourced by the state and live under the mercy of the individual owners and especially female workers face extreme abuse in the hands of the employers and by other officials when they seek remedy. Saudi Arabia's regulations have miserably failed to address these situations. The wages are abysmal and rampant labour exploitation is evident. Consular support is limited and not equipped enough to deal with these issues.

### 5.4 Indians Risking Their Lives in Israel, Russia and Cambodia

Unemployment in India is driving Indians to seek employment in war zones like Russia and Israel. Russia and Israel aren't the first instances of Indian workers being killed in conflict zones abroad. In 2018, a mass grave in Iraq, was discovered where the bodies of 39 Indian construction workers were discovered—four years after they were kidnapped by Islamic State militants in Mosul. Hap less Indians are lured by better wages, passport and Russian citizenship and they fall prey to these promises. They are deployed in war zones as support staff to the Russian army or as active fighters. In Israel thousands of Indians have replaced Palestinian labourer amid its war with Hamas. Despite India's booming economy, economically marginalized Indians still seek opportunities overseas, regardless of how dangerous the region they find themselves working in may be. The disturbing fact is that the Government signed a bilateral agreement to send workers to Israel and conducted recruitment drives in 2024 to select workers from Telangana, UP and Haryana. War is not the only hazard recently 250 Indians were rescued from cyber slavery in Cambodia and thousands of Indian Seafarers in de humanizing conditions are stuck in countries like Iran, Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi

Arabia and UAE, cheated by dishonest agents, caught in a debt trap and legal trouble. [4-7]

### **5.5 Why Indians Are Risking Their Lives Overseas?**

So why are Indians so willing to risk dangers overseas? According to a 2024 report by the International Labour Organization and Institute for Human Development, youth made up 83 percent of India's unemployed workforce in 2022. Many, are educated but unable to find jobs matching their skills back home. Although India is known as the world's fastest-growing economy, with a growth that is likely to outpace China's soon, the boom has failed to generate the jobs needed, especially for university graduates. Joblessness among those in the 20-24 years age group is 44 per cent and has been growing. Unemployment, inflation and low wages at home are driving young Indian men to desperate measures to earn a living. They are willing to work even in war zones to provide for their families. This explains the long lines outside recruitment centers. The Indian government's decision to support exporting workers is considered at dehumanizing and commodifying by various trade unions in India. It has been noticed that there has been a huge rise in the number of overseas job seekers being cheated by unregistered recruitment agents by fake job offers and also overcharging to the tune of Rs. 2-5 lakhs. These unregistered/illegal agents operate without obtaining license from the Ministry of External Affairs, which is mandatory for any recruitment for work abroad. It is reported that many illegal agents operate through Facebook, Whatsapp, text message and other such mediums. These agencies provide little or no details of their whereabouts and contacts. They usually communicate only through Whatsapp, making it difficult to ascertain the location and identity of the caller & genuineness of the job offer. Such agents also lure workers to work in difficult and life threatening conditions. Such cases are being reported for recruitment to work in several East European Countries, some of the Gulf countries, Central Asian countries, Israel, Canada, Myanmar and Lao People's Democratic Republic.

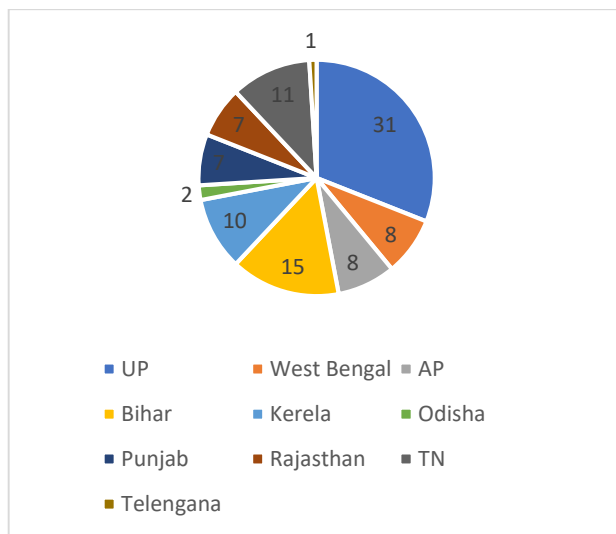
### **6. Suggestions**

The need of the hour is institutional mechanism at

State level to protect migrant worker's welfare and prevent exploitation abroad. This is needed to facilitate safe, and orderly migration and safeguard their rights. In light of the above developments the following suggestions are presented to safeguard the interests of the prospective migrant workers.

1. To ensure legal and valid employment contracts signed by the overseas employer, recruitment agent and the emigrant worker outlines all the terms, conditions, salary and other entitlements. Necessary insurance cover and if required boarding, lodging and airfare costs should be borne by the employers.
2. Pre – Departure orientation training should be arranged for all sections of workers and government should ensure that Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana insurance cover for Rs. 10 Lakhs is taken for 2-3 years by the recruiting agents by paying the relevant premium.
3. Awareness should be created across the country the prospective job seekers approach registered recruiting agents only. The list should be registered in MEA website. All registered RAs license number should be prominently displayed in their office premises and in their advertisements, including newspapers and social media.
4. As per the Emigration Act 1983, no recruiting agent shall collect from the prospective emigrant the service charges more than Rs. 30,000 + GST (18%), in respect of services provided by it to that emigrant and the recruiting agent shall issue a receipt to the emigrant for the amount collected by it in this regard.
5. Strong punishments should be meted out to those who violate the Emigration Act of 1983.
6. While there has been an overall decline in ECR migration from the top sending states, Uttar Pradesh has been in the clear lead with 31% of all ECR workers followed by Bihar (15%) and Tamil Nadu (11%). Kerala which was the highest sending state of ECR emigrant workers till 2011, has been overtaken by Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Kerala

is currently in the fourth position accounting for only 10% of ECR migration for the past 7 years. Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab account for 7 percent each of ECR migration since 2011. This should be coordinated. Figure 2 shows State Wise Emigration Clearance Granted for Top 10 States 2011-2027



**Figure 2 State wise Emigration Clearance Granted for Top 10 States 2011-2027**

7. Interventions at the State Level: At the state level, states like UP, TN, Karnataka, AP, Kerala, Gujarat have NRI Cells that interact with NRI to attract investments towards business and infrastructural projects in the state. Registration of Manpower agencies and their regulation is done by some states like UP, Kerala, AP, Tamilnadu etc. In the case of some labour sending states such as West Bengal and Rajasthan there has been a dearth of policy efforts and welfare measures for international migrant workers. With MEA's encouragement, some measures are planned but at present very little information is available in the public domain regarding any assistance being provided to ECR migrants for their welfare abroad or for safeguarding their interests during the migration process. In the case of states such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the initial steps had

been taken to set up institutional structures under the state Labour department. With the establishing Migrant Resource Centres and initiatives for skill training and awareness generation; there are schemes for the welfare of emigrant workers of different skill levels and works to protect the rights and interests of low-skilled workers particularly those migrating to the Gulf, as they are more vulnerable to unscrupulous practices by recruiters and overseas employers.

8. Grievance Redressal: The grievance redressal system for overseas workers is centralised through the eMigrate and Madad which is managed by the MEA. The Ministry seeks the support of the States to resolve cases, primarily to take action against recruiting agents. An interesting fact that emerged is that many of the complaints and grievances reported during interviews with state officials were regarding land disputes, intimidation and harassment of family, cases of cheating, false police complaints etc. which have led to different steps being taken at the state level. Grievance redressal forms a bulk of the interventions at the state-level.
9. State based Identity Cards: Most states have a registration and membership system which is available to NRIs who belong to the state. While this could serve as an important database to provide evidence for programme design, possibilities of duplication exist, especially since ECR migrants also have to register on the E-migrate website.
10. Outreach: On NRI department websites, information on emergency contact numbers and schemes for emigrant workers should be more prominently displayed. In addition, it is important to create awareness about relevant information like contact details of MRCs and POEs in the local languages through radio, television, SMS and other electronic media.

### Conclusion

While it is natural for exodus to take place in any developing or under developed nation, it is important for us to protect the interests of our migrant workers



with focus on governance of migration, protection of their rights and developing linkages and expanding international cooperation. Problems faced by women migrant workers also should be kept in mind and policies should be there to address these too. The central government and the state governments should work in tandem based on the guidelines of the ILO Multilateral framework to ensure policies and legal provision are developed and implemented to ensure fast and effective remedies and to ensure their welfare.

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