IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)
An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Mapping India's Changing Gulf Emigration Patterns

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Abstract: This study examines the changing patterns of Indian migration to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with a focus on Telangana. It highlights the historical context and the socioeconomic drivers, such as agricultural stagnation and high unemployment that propel migration. The study reveals that remittances from Gulf migrants are crucial for their families and contribute to India's economic growth. However, migrants face challenges like exploitation and poor working conditions. The research underscores the need for better migration management, skill development, and legal protections. The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the migration landscape, reducing job opportunities and exposing vulnerabilities. Policy recommendations include utilizing existing skill development programs, creating comprehensive migration databases, and enhancing legal and social protections for migrants.

Keywords: Emigration Check Required(ECR),Gulf Cooperation Council(GCC),Emigration

1.Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states encircling the Persian Gulf are endowed with vast reservoirs of oil and natural gas. In the early seventies, the oil boom led to the formation of OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries), making these member countries attractive destinations for low-skilled workers from neighboring Asian countries, particularly India. Indian migration to GCC nations is not new and dates back to pre-partition days, but it has grown exponentially since the 1970s. The India-Gulf region is the second-largest migration corridor in the world. Of the nearly 31 million non-resident Indians (NRIs), an estimated 8.5 million are working in the Gulf (MEA, 2018). Indians constitute over 30% of the expatriate workforce in the Gulf States, where the proportion of non-nationals in the employed population is among the highest in the world.

In the midst of India's rapid structural changes, the importance of low-skilled international labor migration has grown significantly. Despite strong economic growth in recent decades, there has been a lack of corresponding job creation in India's secondary and service sectors. Compounding this issue is India's rapid demographic shift, which has resulted in one of the world's largest youthful populations. To capitalize on this demographic dividend, India needs to effectively utilize its young workforce. However, the slow growth in manufacturing jobs poses a risk to fully exploiting this historic opportunity. Against this backdrop, low-skilled labor migration from India to Gulf countries becomes even more crucial.

Seventy percent of Indians in the GCC work in the construction sector, as cleaners, domestic servants, and drivers. Migration to these nations is typically temporary and lasts for relatively short periods. Remittances sent by these emigrants to their families help them escape abject poverty and fuel economic growth in their home states in India, as well as the nation at a macro level. At the micro level, remittances provide migrant families with social protection against unemployment and health hazards, and support education and other benefits.

2. Research Objectives:

1. Analyze Migration Trends and Drivers: Investigate the historical and current trends of Indian migration to GCC countries, focusing on Telangana and the socioeconomic factors driving this migration.
2. Assess Impact and Challenges: Evaluate the economic impact of remittances and identify the challenges faced by Indian migrants in the Gulf, including exploitation and legal issues.
3. Develop Policy Recommendations: Propose policy recommendations to improve migration management, enhance skill development, and provide better protections for migrants, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.Methodology

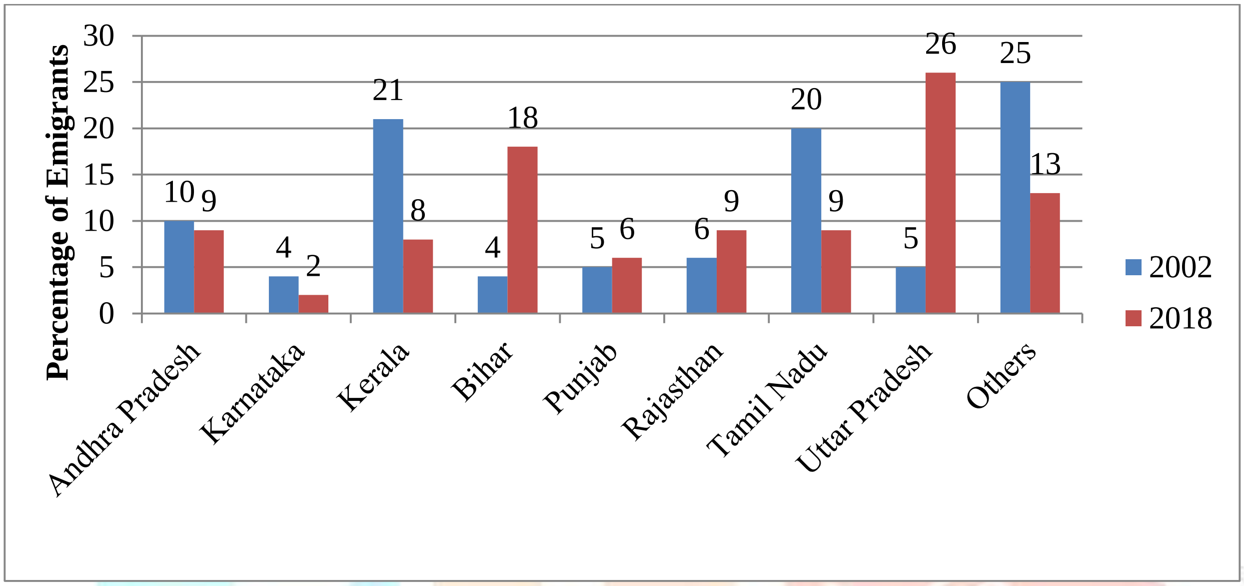
This study's methodology was quantitative and based on secondary data from the Ministry of External Affairs, the World Bank, the RBI, e-Migrate data of the Ministry of External Affairs.

4. State wise Variation in Emigration: Regional Variations and Shifting Patterns

India exhibits diverse characteristics such as religion, caste, ethnicity, and language, contributing to varied regional development levels. Some areas are highly developed, while others lag behind in industry and infrastructure. Urban and rural areas alike experience distinct patterns of growth and migration, influenced by socioeconomic, demographic, political, cultural, and geographic factors like natural disasters.

The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) oversees emigration data collection, focusing particularly on unskilled and semi-skilled workers seeking employment in GCC states and elsewhere. Since 1993, MOIA has tracked state-wise emigration clearance, providing insights into migration trends from 2002 to 2018(MEA,2018).

Figur:1 State wise pattern of Indian Emigrants (ECR) 2002-2018)



Source: Authors Compilation from the annual reports of the Ministry of Overseas Affairs and Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India.

State-wise Variation in Emigration (2002-2018)

1. **Key Observations:**

In 2002, Kerala was the leading state for emigration (21%), followed by Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Karnataka, cumulatively accounting for 85% of total Indian emigrants.

By 2018, Uttar Pradesh became the largest source of emigrants (26%), followed by Bihar (18%), and then Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Kerala, Punjab, and Karnataka.

2. **Trends and Shifts:**

The southern states (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh) saw a decrease in emigration, while the northern states (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab) experienced an increase.

This shift indicates a regional change in the socio-economic factors driving emigration, with northern states facing greater economic pressures or having fewer local opportunities compared to their southern counterparts.

5.Gulf Emigration from Telangana

Indian migration to Gulf countries is unique, characterized by restrictive contracts that prevent migrants from obtaining citizenship or family reunification. Nearly 85% of Gulf emigrants work in construction, transportation, low-end services, and domestic work (ILO Report, 2015). Approximately 500,000 workers from Telangana are employed in Gulf countries, predominantly in blue-collar jobs, unlike migrants from Kerala who often work in white-collar occupations (Rajan, 2014). Many Telangana migrants are lured to the Gulf on visit visas, azad visas, or with bogus trade certifications, frequently facing jail or deportation (Sahoo, 2015).

Background

International labor migration among Telugu-speaking individuals has evolved through four phases:

1. The Kangani and Maistry Migration System: Colonial era migration of Telugu-speaking workers to Sri Lanka, Burma, and Malaya for plantation work.
2. Migration of Professionals: 20th-century migration of scientists, doctors, and engineers to developed Western countries (Baskar & Bhatt, 2003).
3. The 1970s Oil Boom: Large-scale migration of low-skilled workers to Gulf countries for unskilled manual jobs (Bodvarsson & Berg, 2009).
4. The IT Wave: Recent migration of software engineers and IT professionals to the USA.

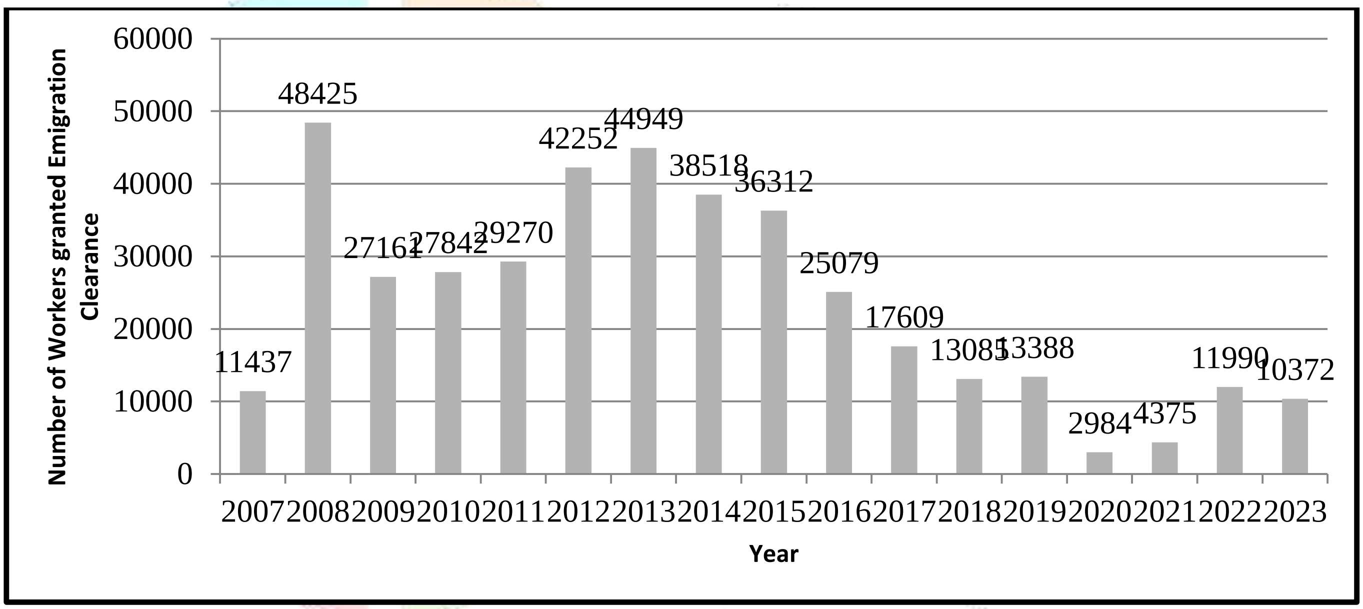
Migration from northern Telangana is driven by violence from extremist groups, leading to the relocation of young people and property owners to urban areas like Bombay, and eventually to Gulf countries. This migration is facilitated by social networks within the migrant community, evolving into chain migration (Balagopal, 2006; Sampath, 2006; Sahoo, 2015; David, 2017).

The handloom industry in northern Telangana has suffered due to globalization and liberalization, leading many weavers to abandon their traditional occupations for jobs in Western Indian towns like Bombay, Bhiwandi, Sholapur, and Surat (Srinivasulu, 1997). Some transitioned to construction work in Bombay, and later to the Gulf (Azeez & Begum, 2009).

Northern districts like Karimnagar, Rajanna Sircilla, Nizamabad, Adilabad, and Warangal became significant emigration centers in the late 1980s, driven by factors such as recurring droughts, agricultural difficulties, armed revolts, high unemployment, agricultural sector stagnation, mounting indebtedness, inadequate access to credit, and limited alternative opportunities. Extreme debt and exploitation have forced landowners to become laborers, leading to dire outcomes like suicides, kidney sales, and hunger deaths, prompting migration as a necessary survival strategy (Jayathi Gosh, 2004; Rajan, 2014; Korra, 2011; Viswajit, 2017).

The migrant population primarily consists of small-scale marginal farmers, tenant farmers, and rural laborers. Recent years have seen increased migration of youth from northern Telangana districts like Hyderabad, Nizamabad, and Karimnagar, and from East Godavari, Kadapa, and West Godavari in Andhra Pradesh, with women from East Godavari also prominently emigrating (MEA, 2023).

Figure 2 : Outflow of number of workers based on Emigration Clearance data from Telangana State , 2007-2023



Source: Authors Compilation from the annual reports of the Ministry of External Affairs and the eMigrate website of the Government of India

During the period from 2007 to 2016, the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh collectively contributed to a total of more than 751,000 emigration clearances. This accounts for an average annual outflow of approximately 75,000 workers who speak the Telugu language(Rajan 2014), Figure 1 illustrates a significant increase in the number of immigrants from Telangana. The data reveals that the flow of emigrants reached its highest point in 2013, with 48,425 employees. This is a substantial rise from the recorded 11,437 emigrants in 2007. Over the past twenty years, a cyclical pattern has been observed in the annual emigration clearances; with a notable increase from 2007to 2013(see Figure 2).

Over the last decade, there has been a noticeable shift in the pattern of Indian migration to the Gulf. Particularly, there has been a significant decrease in the number of blue-collar workers migrating to the Gulf

States. (Ishani Duttagupta, 2019) This contraction is evident in the sharp decline, since its peak in 2014, in the number of Indians granted emigration clearances to work in the Gulf as per Ministry of External Affairs emigrate data illustrated in Figure 1.

The declining number of Indians departing for work in the Gulf is due to various factors at both ends of the migration corridor. One key factor is the narrowing of wage differentials. Wage stagnation, mainly due to sluggish oil prices, has made the Gulf States less attractive destinations than in the past. Additionally, the implementation of programs to increase the employment of nationals in the private sector has played a significant role. Nationalization policies have resulted in shrinking job opportunities for Indian migrants and those from other South Asian countries. Furthermore, increased work permit renewal fees and taxes in the Gulf have driven up the cost of living. The cost of utilities and basic goods has also risen. (Mridula Chari,2018)

Another reason for the decline in migrants heading to the Gulf is the tightening of procedures for sending workers abroad by the Indian government. In May 2015, the Government of India introduced a computerized system called "e-Migrate" to regulate overseas employment. In recent years, the Indian government has also set minimum referral wages (MRWs) to regulate the wages of Indian migrant workers employed in various capacities (e.g., carpenters, masons, drivers, fitters, nurses, and domestic workers) in the six Gulf States and 12 other "emigration check required" (ECR) countries, where labor standards are identified as not migrant-friendly. Although both measures were instituted to safeguard the interests of those seeking contractual employment abroad, anecdotal evidence suggests that they have had the unintended effect of making Indian workers less attractive to recruiters and employers.

Nevertheless, there has been a gradual decrease in the number of migrants due to factors such as emigration and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite efforts to manage the pandemic, the oil-dependent Gulf States were severely affected by economic disruptions due to lockdown measures and a significant drop in global demand and oil prices. The adverse impact of COVID-19 was acutely felt in the Gulf labor markets, stripping thousands of migrant workers from India and other countries of their jobs and livelihoods. Sectors such as travel, tourism, hospitality, restaurants, retail, manufacturing, construction, and business were hit harder compared to healthcare, education, and domestic services. Despite this uneven impact, Indian migrants across all classes in the Gulf have inevitably borne the brunt of the pandemic in various ways. Additionally, the pandemic exposed flaws in migration management, non-compliance with international labor standards, and domestic laws, highlighting the precarious conditions faced by migrants in these countries. (Sasikumar,2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to migrants and exposed systemic inadequacies in addressing their issues in the Gulf. Upon their pandemic-induced return to their home states in India, many migrants struggle to secure productive employment, business opportunities, or other livelihoods. This situation has compelled many returnees to seek opportunities to re-migrate to the Gulf or elsewhere for work. However, re-migrating to the Gulf has become increasingly difficult in the evolving post-pandemic scenario, as prospects for obtaining better-paid job opportunities are severely limited due to the rigorous implementation of labor nationalization policies in the Gulf States. India-Gulf migration is now at a crossroads. The immediate manifestation of the reduction in oil prices is seen in the significant decrease in the issuance of overall emigration clearances between 2014 and 2018(Sasikumar, 2019).In addition to the scenario has changed now with the rural economy in Telangana State booming with opportunities, water aplenty and groundwater levels rising by leaps and bounds across the State, has resulted in shrinking number of migrants.

This is an ideal time to reassess Indian migration to the Arab lands and safeguard the welfare of India's Gulf migrants. To meet labor and technological demands, it is crucial to utilize mechanisms like the Telangana State Skill Development Mission (TSSDM), National Academy of Construction (NAC), and Industrial Training Institutes (ITI). Supporting initiatives such as the Institute of Driving Training and Research Centre (IDTRC) in Sircilla is commendable. The Telangana Overseas Manpower Company Limited (TOMCOM) helps streamline recruitment and combat illegal migration. Unlike Kerala, Andhra Pradesh's migration management is still developing, lacking a coherent policy. Establishing a comprehensive database for tracking migration and returnees is essential for transparency, reintegration, and skill utilization, informing targeted policies for protecting international labor migration.

Key findings highlight the historical and contemporary factors driving migration, the socioeconomic impact on both migrants and their home communities, and policy implications.

- Historical Context: Migration to GCC countries dates back to pre-partition days, with significant growth since the 1970s oil boom. Indian migrants have been crucial in filling low-skilled labor needs in the Gulf.
- Current Trends: Approximately 8.5 million Indians work in the Gulf, primarily in construction and low-skilled sectors. Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh historically led in migration numbers, but recent trends show an increase from northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.
- Telangana's Emigration: Telangana has emerged as a significant source of migrants due to socioeconomic challenges, including agricultural stagnation, high unemployment, and indebtedness. The state has seen a shift from handloom weavers to blue-collar workers migrating to Gulf countries.
- Economic Impact: Remittances from Gulf migrants are vital for their families, providing social protection and contributing to economic growth in India. However, issues such as exploitation, poor working conditions, and legal challenges persist.
- Policy Environment: India's emigration policies, including the e-Migrate system and minimum referral wages, aim to protect workers but also impact the attractiveness of Indian labor in the Gulf. The

COVID-19 pandemic further complicated the migration landscape, exposing vulnerabilities and reducing job opportunities.

Policy Recommendations

- **Skill Development:** Enhance programs like the Telangana State Skill Development Mission (TSSDM) and National Academy of Construction (NAC) to improve the skillset of potential migrants.
- **Migration Management:** Establish comprehensive databases for tracking migration and streamline recruitment processes.
- **Legal Protections:** Implement stricter regulations to safeguard migrants' rights and develop support systems for their families.
- **Local Economic Development:** Invest in rural infrastructure and alternative employment opportunities to reduce migration pressures.
- **Gender-Specific Support:** Address the unique challenges faced by female migrants and ensure safe migration channels.
- **Bilateral Agreements:** Engage with GCC countries for better working conditions and social security benefits for migrants.
- **Returnee Reintegration:** Develop programs for the reintegration of returnees and provide financial and entrepreneurial training.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Educate potential migrants about the risks of illegal migration and promote legal channels.

By implementing these policy recommendations, India can better manage its migration dynamics, protect its migrant workforce, and harness the benefits of international labor migration for national development.

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