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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# Indian Workers Abroad — Exploitation Without Accountability

 **THE HINDU**

3 April 2026

**SOCIAL ISSUES****IR****GS2****GS3**

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# Indian Workers Abroad — Exploitation Without Accountability

 The Hindu

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GS2

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The Hindu

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## INTERVIEW ANGLE



*"What institutional reforms in India's emigration governance framework are needed to protect millions of low-skilled Indian workers from exploitation abroad?"*

## THE CORE ARGUMENT

A joint report by the International Labour Organization and a Thiruvananthapuram-based research centre — released in March 2026 — documents the systematic exploitation of low-skilled Indian migrant workers in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: **wage theft, passport confiscation, kafala-system bondage, physical abuse, and deaths in custody**. The Hindu argues that India's policy response has been structurally inadequate: the Emigration Act, 1983 — nearly unchanged in four decades — provides a bureaucratic framework for emigration clearance but offers no **substantive** protection for workers once they depart. Despite generating \$55–60 billion in annual remittances, Indian migrant workers receive far less diplomatic and legal protection than their economic contribution warrants.

## THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

INDICATOR	DATA
Indian workers in GCC countries	~9 million
Annual remittances from Gulf	~\$55–60 billion
Workers on Emigration Check Required (ECR) passports	~10 million (low-skilled, from 18 ECR states)
Deaths of Indian workers in Gulf per year	~7,000–10,000 (official consular data; likely undercounted)
Wage theft complaints (MEA data, 2022–23)	~70,000 cases formally registered
Cases resolved	<30%

## THE KAFALA SYSTEM — ROOT OF EXPLOITATION

The **kafala (sponsorship) system** governs migrant labour across most GCC countries:

- Worker’s **legal status is tied to their employer/sponsor** — cannot change jobs or leave country without employer’s permission
- Creates structural **power imbalance**: employer can cancel visa, confiscate passport, or withhold wages with near-impunity
- **Qatar, UAE, Bahrain** have announced partial reforms (following 2022 FIFA World Cup scrutiny) — but implementation is uneven
- **Saudi Arabia**: kafala reforms limited to certain categories; millions of Indian domestic workers remain under unreformed system

## INDIA'S EMIGRATION GOVERNANCE — STRUCTURAL WEAKNESSES

GAP	IMPACT
<b>Emigration Act, 1983 (outdated):</b> Focuses on pre-departure clearance, not post-arrival protection	Bureaucratic exit gate; no in-country protection mechanism
<b>ECR/ECNR passport distinction:</b> Low-skilled workers need Emigration Clearance Required clearance; middle-class exempt	Creates two-tier system but clearance is perfunctory, not protective
<b>Recruitment agent regulation:</b> Registered Recruitment Agents (RAs) required; but illegal sub-agents proliferate	“Loan trap” — workers pay ₹1–5 lakh to agents; arrive in debt bondage
<b>Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs):</b> India has BLAs with UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia — but enforcement mechanisms are weak	Agreements exist on paper; dispute resolution is slow and inaccessible
<b>e-Migrate system:</b> Online portal for ECR workers — captures pre-departure data but not welfare outcomes	Data collection without outcome tracking

## POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS

The editorial argues for:

- ❶ **New Emigration Act:** Replace 1983 Act with comprehensive Emigration and Overseas Workers Protection Act — including in-country welfare provisions, bilateral enforcement mechanisms
- ❷ **Worker welfare fund expansion:** Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBBY) insurance mandatory and adequately funded; eMigrate data connected to welfare tracking
- ❸ **Direct engagement on kafala:** India must use its economic weight (remittance and labour supply) to push GCC countries toward genuine kafala reform, not symbolic changes
- ❹ **Legal aid networks:** Government-funded legal aid centres in GCC countries; existing Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) at embassies needs expanded mandate and resources
- ❺ **Recruitment agent reform:** Mandatory escrow for agent fees; penalties for wage fraud; agent blacklisting publicly accessible

## UPSC RELEVANCE

**GS Paper 2 — Governance and IR:**

- Emigration governance — Ministry of External Affairs vs. Ministry of Labour; institutional gaps

- Pravasi Bharatiya Divas — India’s diaspora engagement policy
- Bilateral Labour Agreements — India-GCC; effectiveness
- MEA’s welfare mandate for overseas Indian workers

### GS Paper 3 — Economy:

- Remittances — economic significance; India as world’s top remittance recipient
- Informal economy and labour — low-skilled migration as livelihood strategy

#### UPSC RELEVANCE

“India’s migrant workers are among its most economically productive citizens — sending home more than the nation receives in FDI in many years. Yet they navigate a governance vacuum once they cross the border. A country that takes remittances seriously must take worker welfare equally seriously.”

#### FACTS CORNER

- **India: world’s top remittance recipient** — received ~\$120 billion in 2023 (World Bank); Gulf contributes ~50% of this
- **ECR states:** 18 states where passport holders are subject to Emigration Check Required; broadly correspond to high-migration, low-literacy states (UP, Bihar, Rajasthan, Odisha, etc.)
- **Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBBY):** Mandatory insurance for ECR workers; covers ₹10 lakh on accidental death, ₹1 lakh medical; premium ~₹275–375/year
- **Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF):** Set up at Indian missions in major labour-receiving countries; funds emergency repatriation, legal aid, shelter — but underfunded relative to need
- **Kafala reform in Qatar:** Following FIFA World Cup 2022 scrutiny, Qatar introduced “job mobility” without requiring NOC for most workers — but domestic workers and those in debt bondage remain vulnerable
- **Pravasi Bharatiya Divas:** Biennial convention connecting diaspora with Indian government; policy platform — but primarily targets skilled, affluent diaspora, not low-wage migrant workers
- **eMigrate:** Online system for Emigration Clearance Required workers to register pre-departure; ~12 lakh clearances/year processed
- **Operation Kaveri, Operation Ajay:** India’s emergency evacuations from Sudan and Israel — demonstrate capability for crisis response but not prevention

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