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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Leverage, Not Sympathy: Protecting Indian Workers in the Gulf

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Leverage, Not Sympathy: Protecting Indian Workers in the Gulf

 The Economic Times

5 August 2026

GS2

GS3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"A migrant worker's recruiting agent is licensed in India, his employer is in another country, and his death certificate says "natural causes". Which of those three facts would you try to change first, and why that one?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A worker who owes eighteen months of wages to the agent who got him the job cannot refuse to work in the afternoon heat. The debt is the safety hazard.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Diaspora questions in GS2 are usually answered with institutional lists: the Ministry of External Affairs, Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, remittance figures. This supplies a policy problem with a clear structure, the asymmetry between where a worker is employed and where their government has jurisdiction, and a set of instruments that follow from it. It also connects to GS1 on migration and GS3 on remittances and the external sector.

GS Paper 2: Indian diaspora; [bilateral](#) agreements involving India; welfare schemes for vulnerable sections; mechanisms for protection of vulnerable sections.

GS Paper 3: External sector and remittances; employment.

INSTRUMENT	CONTENT	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Emigration Act, 1983	The governing statute; Section 3 creates the Protector General of Emigrants, Sections 9 to 14 govern registration of recruiting agents, Section 22 requires emigration clearance	Still the operative law. The replacement, the Overseas Mobility (Facilitation and Welfare) Bill, 2025 , has been in draft since October 2025 and has never been introduced in Parliament
Emigration Check Required (ECR)	Passport category requiring clearance before emigrating for employment to the notified countries	Applies to those without a matriculation certificate, with nurses and certain notified professions requiring clearance regardless of qualification. The Government uses 18 countries in parliamentary replies, while some MEA web pages still list 17, predating the addition of South Sudan
eMigrate	The online platform for registration of workers, employers and recruiting agents; V2.0 launched 14 October 2024 , with DigiLocker integration and a multilingual helpline	The compliance and traceability layer
Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF)	Established 2009 , extended to all Indian Missions and Posts; means-tested assistance covering shelter, air passage home, emergency medical care, legal aid and repatriation of remains; restructured guidelines operational 1 September 2017	The redress mechanism at destination
Labour attaché	Officer at a mission handling worker grievances	The capacity constraint at destination
Kafala	The sponsorship system tying a migrant's legal status to an employer	Reformed to differing degrees across GCC states; not uniform

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The underlying data comes from written replies given by the Minister of State for External Affairs to the **Rajya Sabha in January and March 2026**. Between **2021 and 2025**, **37,740** Indian workers died abroad, of whom **32,608 died in the six Gulf Cooperation Council states**, which is about **86 per cent** of the total, or roughly 20 deaths a day.

DESTINATION	DEATHS, 2021 TO 2025
United Arab Emirates	12,380
Saudi Arabia	11,757
Kuwait	3,890
Oman	2,821
Qatar	1,760
GCC total	32,608
All destinations	37,740

The **GCC** comprises Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman.

These are all deaths, not occupational deaths, and the distinction has to be made before the figure is used at all. That reply carried no cause-wise classification. A separate reply, covering 2023 to 2025, does:

CAUSE, GCC, 2023 TO 2025	DEATHS	SHARE
Natural causes	16,328	about 83 per cent
Suicide	1,340	about 6.8 per cent
Workplace accidents	443	about 2.2 per cent

So **workplace-accident deaths across all six GCC states run at roughly 150 a year**, about three a week. Anyone who reads “33,000 worker deaths” in an argument about workplace safety will hear 33,000 industrial fatalities, and that reading is wrong by a factor of around seventy. An editorial that permits the misreading is not making the case honestly.

Three things nonetheless remain damning, and they are the real case.

The concentration. 86 per cent of all Indian worker deaths abroad occur in six countries, which is far more than the distribution of Indian workers abroad would predict.

The natural-causes share is a finding, not a reassurance. Over 16,000 deaths attributed to natural causes in three years, among a predominantly young, male, working-age population that was **medically screened before departure**, is precisely what heat stress, dehydration, exhaustion and untreated chronic illness look like in a system where post-mortems are not performed. The category is doing concealing work.

The suicides and the grievances. There were **1,901 suicides by Indians abroad between 2023 and 2025, over 70 per cent of them in the GCC**, and Indian missions received **80,985 complaints between 2021 and 2025**, rising to 22,479 in 2025 alone. Neither figure depends on any contested inference

about cause of death.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The jurisdictional asymmetry is the whole problem

An Indian worker in Doha or Riyadh is employed under the labour law of that state, inspected, if at all, by its inspectorate, and adjudicated in its courts. India has **no enforcement jurisdiction whatever** over the site where the harm occurs.

That single fact disposes of most of what is usually proposed. India cannot **mandate** rest breaks on a Gulf construction site, cannot inspect accommodation, cannot prosecute an employer, and cannot set a heat threshold. Any policy that begins by requiring the destination state to do something is a policy that depends on persuasion.

What follows is that the effective instruments are located at the **two ends India does control**: before departure, and at the mission.

Recruitment debt is a safety issue, not a financial one

This is the argument most worth carrying into an answer, because it reframes something usually filed under exploitation into something filed under occupational safety.

A worker who has paid a large recruitment fee, often borrowed at high interest, frequently through an **unregistered sub-agent** operating below the licensed agent, arrives with an obligation that must be discharged before any income accrues to the household. That worker cannot refuse an unsafe task, cannot decline overtime in extreme heat, cannot complain about accommodation and cannot go home early, because each of those actions risks the income stream the debt depends on.

The debt therefore operates as a **removal of the exit option**, and safety regimes everywhere depend on workers being able to refuse. Regulating recruitment fees is thus not consumer protection; it is the **precondition** for every other safety measure to function.

The evidentiary failure

Cause-of-death recording is where the system stops generating the information that would drive reform.

Deaths certified as **cardiac arrest** or **natural causes** without post-mortem examination remove heat stress, dehydration, exhaustion and untreated chronic conditions from the record. A young man who collapses after a long shift in extreme heat and is recorded as having died of cardiac arrest has, in a formal sense, died of cardiac arrest; the heat does not appear anywhere.

The consequence is circular and self-sealing. No recorded occupational-heat deaths means no evidence of an occupational-heat hazard, which means no regulatory case for a heat standard, which means no requirement to record heat as a factor. **Mandatory post-mortem and standardised cause-of-death reporting** are

therefore not administrative housekeeping; they are the intervention that makes every subsequent intervention arguable.

The coverage gap in India's own system

India's protective architecture applies unevenly to its own citizens, and this is a gap India can close without anyone's agreement.

The **Emigration Check Required** category, which triggers clearance requirements and eMigrate registration, applies to passport holders without a matriculation certificate travelling for employment to 18 notified countries. Workers outside that category, and workers who travel on visit visas and convert to employment at destination, fall outside the system entirely, and are frequently the most vulnerable precisely because they are outside it.

A protection system that covers a subset of migrants defined by educational qualification is protecting by proxy rather than by risk.

Why the counter-argument deserves genuine weight

Leverage is bounded. India is one of several major sending countries, and workers from other origins are substitutable. Pressing conditions too hard risks employers shifting recruitment, which harms the workers the policy is meant to protect.

Remittances matter to the households concerned, but the leverage is shrinking. On the RBI's **Sixth Round of India's Remittances Survey (2023-24)**, the **United States has overtaken the UAE** as India's largest single source at **27.7 per cent** against 19.2 per cent, advanced economies together supply **51.2 per cent** of inflows, and the **GCC share has fallen from 46.7 per cent in 2016-17 to 37.9 per cent in 2023-24**. The Gulf still sends more than a third of a total that reached **US\$118.7 billion in 2023-24** and **US\$135.5 billion in 2024-25**, and those flows sustain households across Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan.

But the direction of travel matters for how the argument is made. If protection for Gulf workers is defended on the ground that India cannot afford to disturb the remittance relationship, that ground is eroding year by year. The case is better made where it actually rests, which is on the obligations a state owes its citizens rather than on what their earnings are worth to it.

Conditions have improved, and the improvement is more general than commentary allows. All six GCC states now operate midday summer work bans, with Qatar's running from 10:00 to 15:30 between 1 June and 15 September under Ministerial Decision 17 of 2021. Qatar alone uses a **risk-based** trigger rather than clock and calendar: all work must stop, at any time of year, wherever the **wet-bulb globe temperature exceeds 32.1 degrees**, a measure combining temperature, humidity, solar radiation and wind speed. That is the most defensible heat standard in the region and the model worth citing. Qatar has gone furthest. It abolished the **exit permit** for most workers under Law 13 of 2018, extended that to remaining categories including domestic workers in January 2020, and removed the **no-objection**

certificate under Law 18 of 2020, so a worker may change employer before contract end. Under **Law 17 of 2020, in force 20 March 2021**, it introduced the **only non-discriminatory statutory minimum wage in the Gulf**: QAR 1,000 basic, plus QAR 500 for accommodation and QAR 300 for food where not provided in kind, expressly covering domestic workers. The UAE permits transfer after six months under Federal Decree-Law 33 of 2021, Oman's new Labour Law came through Royal Decree 53/2023 with conditional transfer rules following in December 2024, and Bahrain moved earliest, making the Labour Market Regulatory Authority rather than the employer the visa sponsor in 2009.

But the direction is not uniformly forward, and two recent reversals matter more than any of the above.

Kuwait re-imposed exit permits. From **1 July 2025**, every private-sector migrant worker in Kuwait, over two million people, requires **employer approval to leave the country**, regardless of how long they intend to be away. Previously clearance was needed only for extended absences. An appeal lies to the Public Authority for Manpower, which is of limited use to a worker without legal advice or digital access. This is a straightforward restoration of the control that exit-permit abolition elsewhere was meant to end.

Bahrain withdrew the most radical anti-kafala measure the Gulf has produced. Its **Flexi-Permit**, introduced in 2017, allowed irregular-status migrants to **sponsor themselves**, releasing them from any employer at all. It was cancelled by order in **October 2022** and replaced from December that year by a Labour Registration Programme open only to former holders, run privately, and engaging workers on **service contracts under the civil code rather than the labour code**, which places them outside the Labour Law and outside the Wage Protection System together.

The qualifications on the heat bans run the same way. Human Rights Watch, reporting in June 2026 after a fourth consecutive year of interviews, finds calendar-based bans poorly matched to actual exposure, since extreme heat occurs outside the banned hours and months, and Saudi research places peak heat intensity between 09:00 and noon, **before the ban begins**.

And the exclusions are structural. **Domestic workers sit outside the main labour law in all six states**, governed by separate instruments of varying force; the ILO observes that Oman's 2004 domestic-work regulation **provides for no penalties at all**, so it functions as guidance rather than as enforceable law. **No GCC state has ratified ILO Convention 189 on domestic workers or Convention 190 on violence and harassment.** Enforcement capacity is correspondingly thin: Bahrain's Wage Protection Directorate runs on **13 staff**, Oman's wages section on **nine**.

The honest position is that India's influence is real, **incremental** and best exercised on the instruments it controls outright, rather than dramatic.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

When harm occurs outside your jurisdiction, stop asking what the other jurisdiction should do and enumerate the points in the chain that pass through yours. Every transnational harm has upstream and downstream segments that touch the home state: licensing of intermediaries, the information given before departure, the documentation that records the outcome, the consular presence at destination, and the terms of any bilateral instrument. Policy attention gravitates to the site of the harm, which is where it is least effective, because that is where the story is. The productive question is always: which link in this chain is mine? Apply the same test to overseas fraud against Indian citizens, cross-border trafficking, and the safety of Indian seafarers and students.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture a rope running from a village in Bihar to a construction site in the Gulf. India holds the first several metres of it: the agent who recruits, the fee that is charged, the papers that are filed, the briefing that is given or not given. Somewhere over the water, the rope passes out of India's hands entirely, and what happens at the far end is held by someone else. When a worker is hurt at that far end, almost all the attention goes there, where India cannot pull. But the tension that keeps the worker unable to let go, the debt, the missing registration, the absent briefing, was set in the first few metres, which India was holding the whole time. And when the rope comes back carrying a body, the certificate that says what happened is written at the far end too, which is why nobody upstream ever learns what the rope was doing.

WAY FORWARD

- ① **Tie recruitment-agent licence renewal to outcomes**, specifically to the safety and mortality record of the employers each agent supplies, so that licensing becomes a quality filter rather than a registration formality.
- ② **Enforce against unregistered sub-agents**, who operate below the licensed layer and are the source of most excess fee extraction and of most workers who fall outside the system.
- ③ **Make eMigrate registration and pre-departure orientation universal**, decoupled from the ECR category and from educational qualification, and extended to those who convert from visit visas at destination.
- ④ **Require mandatory post-mortem and standardised cause-of-death reporting** for worker deaths abroad, so that heat and occupational fatalities become statistically visible and therefore regulable.
- ⑤ **Write occupational-safety and heat-stress schedules into bilateral labour agreements**, with defined standards, review mechanisms and reporting obligations rather than statements of intent.

- 6 **Expand labour attaché capacity and the Indian Community Welfare Fund**, since a grievance mechanism that exists only on paper at a mission hundreds of kilometres from a labour camp is not a remedy.
- 7 **Table and enact the Overseas Mobility (Facilitation and Welfare) Bill, 2025**, which has sat in draft since October 2025 and has never been introduced in either House. Earlier Emigration Bills were circulated for comment in 2019 and 2021 and were likewise never tabled, so the **Emigration Act, 1983** remains the operative law forty-three years on. The Standing Committee on External Affairs, reporting on 1 April 2025, recorded that the Bill had not been introduced and recommended that timelines be fixed.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has tested the Indian diaspora, remittances, migration and welfare of overseas Indians across GS1 and GS2. The jurisdictional-**asymmetry** framing and the recruitment-debt-as-safety-hazard argument are the analytical moves that distinguish an answer from a description of schemes.

Practice question: “Where the harm occurs outside India’s jurisdiction, protection of Indian workers abroad depends on the instruments India controls at home.” Examine this proposition with reference to labour migration to the Gulf, and identify the reforms with the highest expected effect. (250 words, 15 marks)

Interview angle: A migrant worker’s recruiting agent is licensed in India, his employer is in another country, and his death certificate says “natural causes”. Which of those three facts would you try to change first, and why that one?

Sources: The Economic Times, Ministry of External Affairs, eMigrate

Source: Leverage, Not Sympathy: Protecting Indian Workers in the Gulf — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

India cannot enforce labour law in the Gulf, so the instruments that matter are the ones it already holds at home: recruitment-agent licensing tied to the record of the employers agents supply, a genuinely universal eMigrate and pre-departure system, standardised cause-of-death reporting, and enforceable occupational-safety schedules in bilateral labour agreements. The case for acting rests less on the raw death count, most of which is attributed to natural causes, than on three things the data does show: a concentration of 86 per cent of all Indian worker deaths abroad in six states, more than 1,300 suicides in the GCC in three years, and over 80,000 grievances filed with Indian missions in five.



SUPPORTING

- Ministry of External Affairs data placed before the Rajya Sabha records 37,740 deaths of Indian workers abroad between 2021 and 2025, of which 32,608, over 86 per cent, occurred in the six Gulf Cooperation Council states. That reply gave no cause-wise classification at all; a separate reply covering 2023 to 2025 does, and it shows roughly 83 per cent attributed to natural causes, 6.8 per cent to suicide and 2.2 per cent to workplace accidents, which means occupational deaths run at about 150 a year across the region rather than the thousands the headline figure suggests.
- The structural vulnerability begins before departure. Recruitment debt, frequently incurred through unregistered sub-agents at rates far above regulated limits, converts a worker into someone who cannot afford to refuse unsafe work or return early, so the debt itself is a safety hazard operating through the worker's inability to exit.
- The natural-causes share is the finding, not the reassurance. More than 16,000 deaths of working-age men attributed to natural causes in three years, in a population medically screened before departure, is what heat stress, dehydration and untreated chronic conditions look like when nobody performs a post-mortem, and a hazard that is never recorded cannot be regulated against in either country.



COUNTER

India's leverage is genuinely bounded and the economic argument for it is weakening rather than strengthening. Destination states legislate and enforce for themselves, other sending countries compete for the same jobs, and the remittance lever is smaller than it was: on the

RBI's Sixth Remittances Survey the United States has overtaken the UAE as India's largest single source at 27.7 per cent, advanced economies now supply over half of all inflows, and the GCC share has fallen from 46.7 per cent in 2016-17 to 37.9 per cent in 2023-24. Conditions have also improved: all six GCC states now operate midday summer work bans, Qatar has abolished the exit permit and the no-objection certificate and introduced a non-discriminatory minimum wage, and Oman, the UAE and Bahrain have each relaxed sponsorship transfer, so a static account of an unreformed kafala system misdescribes the current position. The case for protection is therefore better made on rights grounds than on economic leverage.

**WAY FORWARD**

Concentrate on the instruments India controls rather than on those it does not: tie recruitment-agent licence renewal to the safety and mortality record of the employers they supply, make eMigrate registration and pre-departure orientation genuinely universal including for emigration-check-not-required categories, insist on mandatory post-mortem and standardised cause-of-death reporting so that heat and occupational deaths enter the record, negotiate heat-stress and occupational-safety schedules into bilateral labour agreements with review mechanisms, and expand consular labour attaché capacity and the Indian Community Welfare Fund so that redress exists at the destination.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Examine the limits of India's ability to protect the safety of its workers in Gulf destination countries, and assess which policy instruments within India's own control would be most effective. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Labour migration to the Gulf is among India's largest and most economically consequential external relationships, and it is governed almost entirely by the law of the destination country. That asymmetry frames the policy question: given that India does not write or enforce the labour law under which its citizens work abroad, what can it actually do about their safety?

BODY

The first move is to locate the failure precisely. Ministry of External Affairs replies to the Rajya Sabha in early 2026 record 37,740 deaths of Indian workers abroad between 2021 and 2025, of which 32,608, about 86 per cent, occurred in the six GCC states.

A concentration on that scale is not explained by the distribution of the migrant population alone. It points to the conditions of construction, infrastructure and outdoor work in extreme heat, to long shifts, to accommodation quality and to the absence of effective occupational-safety enforcement at site level.

The second is to recognise that the vulnerability is created before departure. Recruitment debt, incurred through unregistered sub-agents at rates well above regulated ceilings, is not merely a financial burden; it removes the worker's ability to refuse unsafe work, complain or return, which converts a debt into a safety hazard.

The third is the evidentiary failure. The Ministry's own replies do not disaggregate cause of death at all, and where individual deaths are recorded as cardiac arrest or natural causes without post-mortem, heat stress, dehydration and exhaustion never enter the statistics.

A hazard that is not recorded generates no regulatory response in either country. Against this, India's leverage is real but bounded: destination states legislate for themselves, other sending countries compete for the same jobs, and remittance flows make disruption costly for migrant households.

Several Gulf states have also reformed, introducing midday work bans in summer, wage-protection systems and changes to sponsorship and exit-permit rules, so the position is not uniform. The instruments that remain fully within India's control are therefore the pre-departure and diplomatic ones.

CONCLUSION

India should tie recruitment-agent licensing to the safety record of the employers those agents supply, make eMigrate registration and pre-departure orientation genuinely universal rather than confined to emigration-check-required categories, insist on mandatory post-mortem and standardised cause-of-death reporting so that heat and occupational fatalities become visible, write occupational-safety and heat-stress schedules into bilateral labour agreements with periodic review, and expand labour attaché capacity and

welfare-fund coverage at destination. None of this requires another state's consent to begin, which is precisely the argument for starting there.

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