India's International Migrant Workers: Geopolitics and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

The challenges faced by immigrant workers are pivotal in today's global discourse. The recent 2024 United States election and the upcoming 45th Canadian elections reflect these sentiments, while developing countries express concerns regarding restricting foreign workers and increasing uncertainty in the immigration process. This paper explores the various issues of wage disparities, legal barriers, exploitation, and social discrimination, as well as conflicts and wars faced by Indian international migrants. Through thematic context analysis, this paper aims to analyse these challenges. Key findings include the legal hurdles Indian workers/ professionals face, such as decades-long waits for green cards in the US, and new immigration reforms in Canada, affecting Indian students. Additionally, the paper highlights the intensifying xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments during the COVID-19 pandemic, worsening social discrimination against Indian migrants. The research concludes that addressing these challenges necessitates comprehensive reforms, and international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), together with other UN bodies and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), must play active roles in bringing these concerns to light in the case of India. Furthermore, India's forthcoming bilateral agreements should include a chapter on the movement of natural persons. Policy suggestions include implementing fair wage practices to close the pay gap between migrants and nationals, dismantling the kafala system in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to protect the rights of migrant workers, streamlining immigration pathways for skilled professionals and combating xenophobia through public awareness campaigns.

Keywords: Indian migrants, Kafala system, Xenophobia, Green card, Movement of Natural Persons

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, a significant increase in global migration has been observed, with millions of people relocating for economic, educational, and personal reasons. According to International Migrant Stock (2020), as of July 1, 2020, the United Nations estimates that there are 281 million international migrants, representing about 3.6 per cent of the global population, up from 2.3 per cent in 1980.

Table 1: International migrant stock as a percentage of the total World population

Year	Percentage of International Migrant Stock of the Total World Population
1990	2.9
1995	2.8
2000	2.8
2005	2.9
2010	3.2
2015	3.4
2020	3.6

Source: Authors' construct based on the data from the International Migrant Stock, Population Division, United Nations, 2020

Figure 1: Number of Indians Residing Abroad in 2022 (Including Workers) by Country
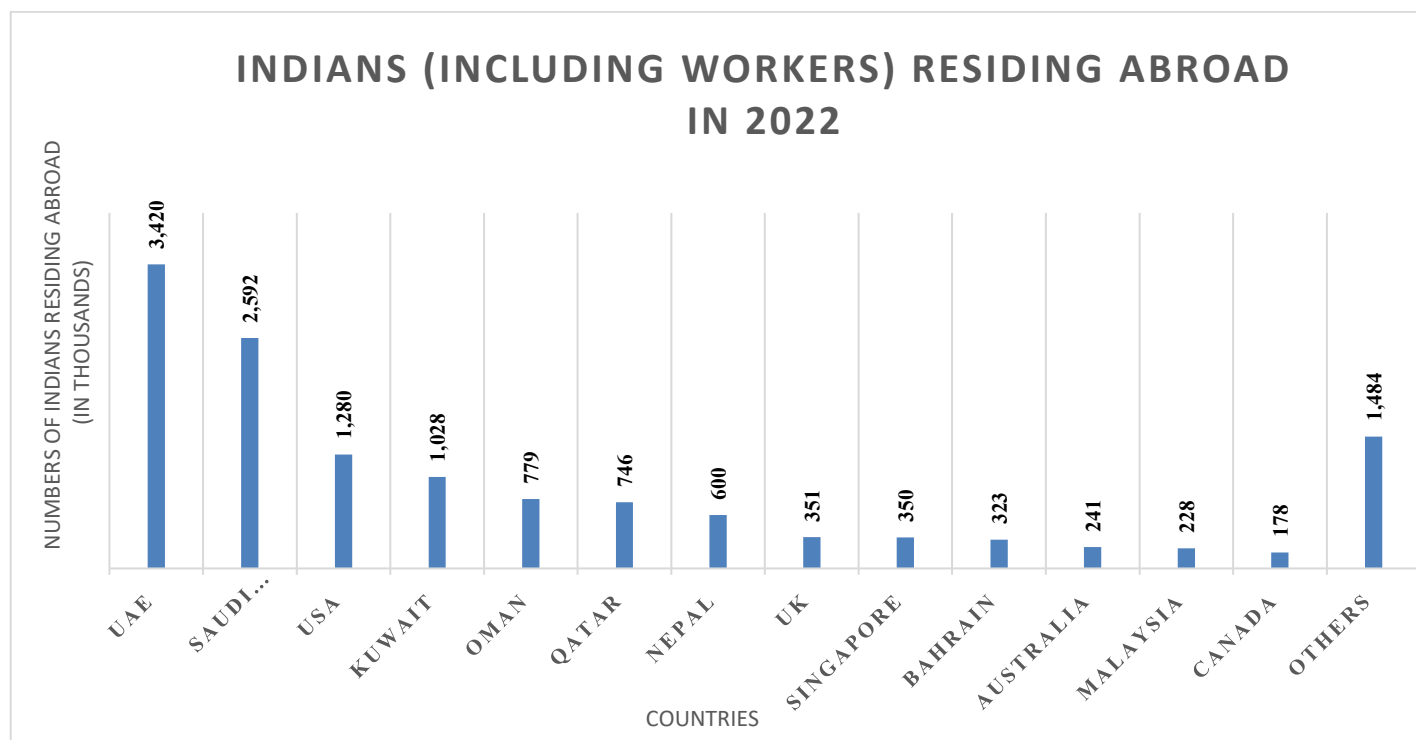
Source: Authors' construct based on the data from the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

Shri V. Muraleedharan, Minister of State for the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, shared that there are approximately 13 million Indian nationals living abroad, including professionals, labourers, and experts (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). India has one of the largest diaspora populations in the world. According to the Bureau of Immigration, Government of India, the number of Indians who moved abroad for employment were 7,026,960 in 2020 and 8,248,870 in 2021 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022).
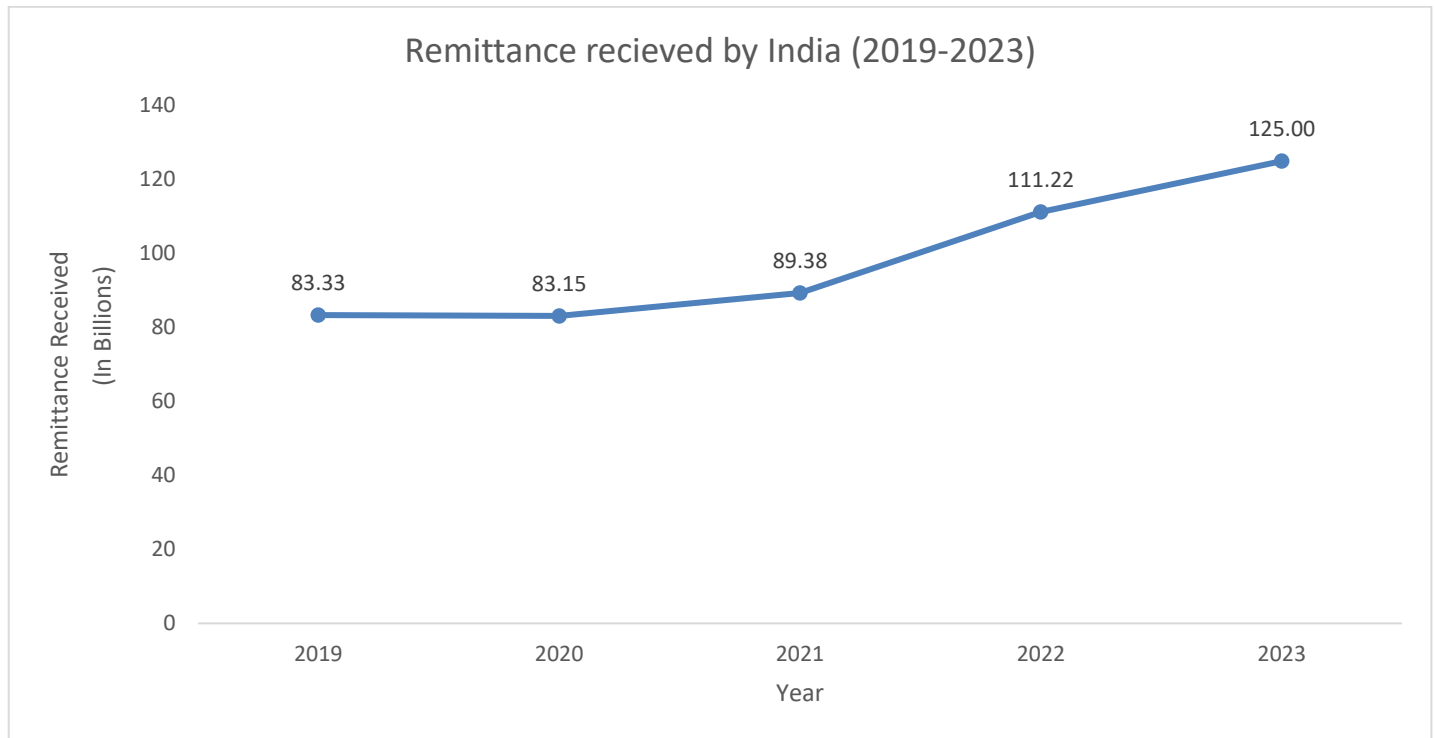
Figure 2: Amount of Remittance received by India in 2023 (current U.S. dollars)
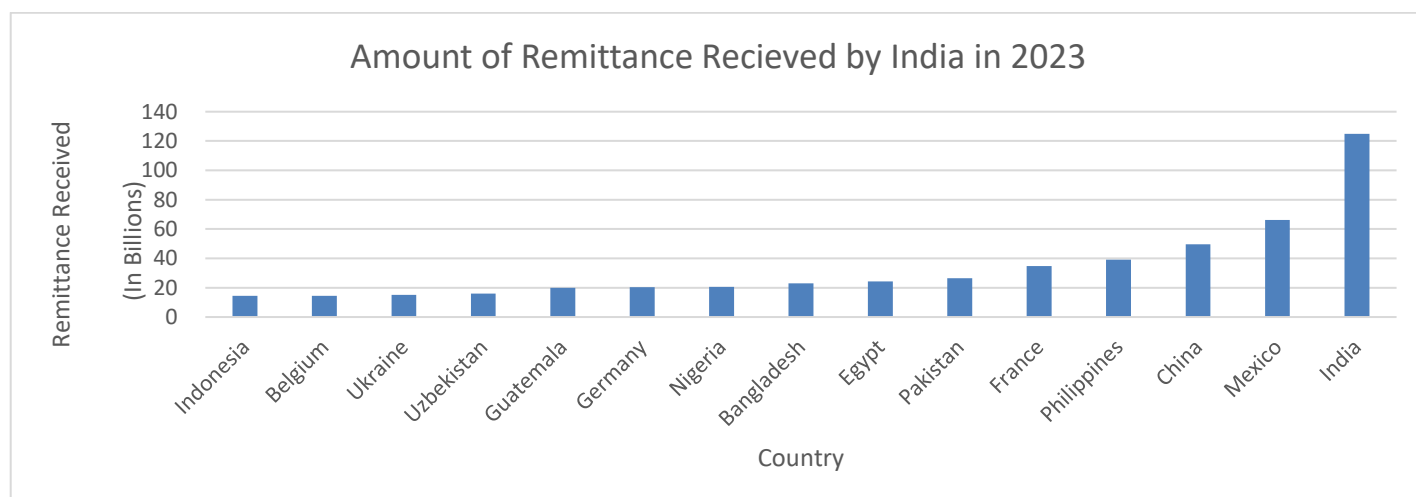
Source: Authors' construct based on the data from the World Development Indicators, World Bank

As illustrated in Figure 2, India was the highest remittance recipient nation with an enormous amount of $125 billion in the financial year 2023, followed by Mexico and China (World Bank, 2024). Several studies suggest that remittances can help relieve budget constraints and increase the income of families left behind, as well as influence their spending patterns (Acosta et al., 2008; Ajefu, 2018; Jena, 2017). Other evidence indicates that households receiving international remittances may prioritise spending on food over investing in physical or productive assets (Ahlburg, 1991; Brown et al, 1999; Chami et al, 2005).

Figure 3: Trend of remittances received in India during 2019-2023 (current U.S. dollars)

Remittance recieved by India (2019-2023)

Source: Authors' construct based on the data from the World Development Indicators, World Bank

As shown in Figure 3, India ranked first in the list of countries receiving remittances in 2010 with $53.48 billion, $68.91 billion in 2015, $83.15 billion in 2020, and $111.22 billion in 2022 (International Organisation for Migration, 2024). Indian diaspora is playing a key role in economic activities at the international level. Dr. Lalita Malhotra, originally from India, has delivered over 10,000 babies in Canada and has formed strong connections with the local community, earning her the title "Angel of the North." (Government of Canada, 2019). These migrants make a significant contribution to the destination nation through their specialised skills and knowledge. Moreover, their sizeable income expenditure within the host country supports the local economy and facilitates the exchange of diverse cultural perspectives. As Banerjee and Duflo (2019) wrote, "The influx of a new group of workers will typically shift the demand curve to the right, which will help undo the effect of the downward slope. The newcomers spend money: they go to restaurants, they get haircuts, they go shopping. This creates jobs, and mostly jobs for other low-skilled people."

Indian immigrants are noteworthy as they are more likely to be well-educated, work in management positions, and have higher incomes. Indian migrants are rather proficient in English than the general foreign-born population (Hanna & Batalova, 2020). Many old-age nations need young people for their care and other facilities. India being a demographically young nation, Indian migrants fulfil these roles aptly, but the question here arises, whether these migrants are living in good conditions or not. If not, what challenges are they facing? It is essential to identify and comprehend the issues they are confronting, as it allows us to further identify ways to protect their rights and improve their lives. By researching these issues, better policies can be developed that ensure equal wages, safer workplaces, and access to basic services. Furthermore, understanding these issues promotes better relationships and cooperation internationally. It ensures that Indian migrants are treated fairly, which benefits both the workers and the countries where they live.

The existing research sheds light on challenges, such as economic discrimination and increased vulnerabilities of migrants during crises like COVID-19. However, there is a significant gap in research on the specific issues faced by Indian migrants abroad. Challenges such as strict visa restrictions, xenophobia, safety concerns, social exclusion, and discrimination in student admissions were not sufficiently addressed. These factors critically impact the integration and well-being of Indian migrants, yet they have not received the attention they deserve in migration studies. Bridging this gap is essential for creating effective policies that genuinely support Indian migrants in different global contexts.

Section 2 provides a literature review that examines existing studies on migration issues, identifying gaps specifically on challenges faced by Indian migrants. Section 3 provides the methodology for this research. Section 4 presents the findings, offering insights into various challenges, including pay gaps, green card and H1B visa complexities, the impact of COVID-19, xenophobia, student restrictions, the Kafala system, discrimination, and safety concerns experienced by Indian migrants. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper by summarising all important findings and limitations of this research, additionally giving recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The challenges faced by migrants in host countries are multifaceted, including socio-economic, cultural, and psychological issues. Cultural and language barriers are major issues that hamper effective communication and access to essential services, often leading to social isolation and discrimination. Afolayan (2001) highlights that these barriers significantly hinder migrants' integration and overall well-being, contributing to difficulties in getting employment and social services. Segal and Mayadas (2005) further emphasise that traditional familial roles and responsibilities are often disrupted due to migration, aggravated by sociocultural differences and a lack of understanding between migrants and host communities. This disruption often results in psychological stress from separation from families and the pressure to adapt and succeed in unfamiliar environments (Faret et al., 2021).

Economic issues create another critical challenge for Indian migrants, especially concerning employment and social protection. Many migrants faced discrimination and exploitation in the labour market, leading to risky employment conditions and limited job security (Yen et al., 2021). Sabates-Wheeler and Koettl (2010) underscore the lack of social security benefits across borders, disproportionately affecting migrants from low-income countries like India. The insufficient administrative capacity to manage social security programs correctly in both home and host countries further worsens these vulnerabilities. Bach's (2003) work on the international migration of health workers highlights labour and social issues specific to migrant professionals, indicating that despite their skills, they often face underemployment and lack adequate social support systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified existing challenges for migrants, creating additional layers of complication to their experiences. Migrants have faced limited access to healthcare, heightened discrimination, and increased economic instability during this period (Bhandari et al., 2021). Bhandari et al. further examined psychosomatic symptoms, financial hardship, and discrimination as common issues among migrants during the pandemic, emphasising the need for timely and comprehensive support systems. Chamie (2020) notes that the pandemic has not only stopped human mobility but also worsened the living conditions of migrants by worsening global issues such as poverty and health disparities. Effective coordination between the governments of home and host countries is crucial to address these pandemic-induced hardships and to ensure the well-being of migrant populations.

The infringement of rights, among migrants, is an issue in today's global migration landscape, according to Taran (2001). Indian migrants encounter not only socio-economic and health difficulties but also substantial human rights concerns concern as highlighted by Taran (2001). Legal safeguards for migrants are often insufficient, which results in mistreatment and exploitation in low-level occupations that lack standard labour safeguards. Migration is often associated with lawlessness and the prioritisation of crime efforts over human rights issues, which adds complexity to the existing challenges and underscores the importance of cohesive and thorough migration strategies that work towards protecting the dignity and rights of migrants as they integrate into new communities. The available literature highlights the pressing need for actions and policies that provide support for migrants around the world in navigating the varied and intricate obstacles they encounter.

Recent scholarship by Natter and Welfens (2024) highlights a disconnect between migration research and its impact on policy and public discourse. Despite the considerable growth of migration studies, scientific knowledge in this area is marginalised in policymaking. While both policymakers and academics participate in the production of migration knowledge, its impact on actual policy and public debate remains minimal. They examine the dynamics of knowledge production and distribution in both sectors, looking to uncover the reasons for the limited applicability of migration research and encouraging a more integrated approach in policymaking.

The institutional theory of migration explains that as international migration begins, private institutions and voluntary organisations arise to address the demand resulting from the imbalance between the large number of people seeking entry into capital-rich countries and the limited availability of immigrant visas. This imbalance creates a profitable niche for entrepreneurs and institutions that engage in activities such as smuggling, labour contracting, and providing counterfeit documents, while humanitarian organisations offer counselling, social services, and legal advice. Over time, these institutions became well-established, further institutionalising migration and disconnecting it from its original cause (Massey et al., 1993).

While existing research has examined the various challenges migrants face in host countries, including socio-economic, cultural, and psychological barriers, a notable gap exists in addressing the issues faced specifically by Indian migrants abroad. Although studies have explored general migrant challenges, such as cultural isolation, language barriers (Afolayan, 2001), disrupted familial roles (Segal and Mayadas, 2005), economic discrimination (Yen et al., 2021), and heightened vulnerabilities during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Chamie, 2020), these studies often overlook the specific challenges affecting Indian migrants.

Indian migrants face a range of unique challenges, including visa restrictions, social discrimination, and difficulties in getting suitable employment. These issues are often multiplied by crises such as wars and global health emergencies. Important concerns like xenophobia, safety issues, discrimination in student admissions, and limited protections in host countries remain largely unexamined in existing literature, despite their considerable impact on the well-being of Indian migrants. Addressing these specific challenges is crucial for developing comprehensive support systems and policies that cater to the diverse needs of Indian migrants, as current frameworks frequently overlook the unique socio-political and economic challenges they encounter in the host nation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, relying on secondary sources to explore the challenges faced by Indian migrants through the lens of thematic contextual analysis. For this purpose, eight different themes: economic issues, legal issues, restrictions on students, COVID-19 and Xenophobia, Kafala system, social issues, safety issues & war and conflicts' impact on migrants are chosen. Moreover, the stance of international organisations on labour migration is studied.

Sources addressing the experiences and challenges of Indian migrants were included, with precise attention to the eight thematic areas mentioned above. The study relies on data sources such as academic research papers, official reports, newspaper articles, and X (formerly known as Twitter) posts. Reports from UN organisations, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), other UN organisations, World Trade Organisation and Government data from the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India were sourced to capture policy-driven outlooks on migration patterns and issues. Reports from institutions like the Pew Research Centre are also used to add migrant opinions directly into the research. Exclusively publicly available and accessible sources were selected to ensure transparency and reproducibility of this research.

Thematic content analysis was used to organise and interpret the collected information systematically. Each theme was coded to get repeated patterns and unique insights, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the underlying issues. This method enabled the synthesis of information across diverse sources while ensuring an in-depth exploration of each theme. The study emphasises a rigorous approach to source selection, prioritising authenticity and relevance, to provide nuanced and evidence-based insights into the challenges faced by Indian migrants.

DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Indian Migrants

Economic Issues

Indian migrants face pay gaps and exploitation. An analysis of the average hourly wages shows that the pay gap

is in favour of nationals, with the gap being about 12.6 per cent in high-income countries and 8.6 per cent across the European Union member states (Amo-Agyei et al., 2020). Despite their high level of education and skills, They are disproportionately represented in lower-skilled and lower-wage jobs that do not suit their levels of education and expertise, indicating potential discrimination in the hiring process. This issue is particularly noticeable in regions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and some parts of Europe. Indian migrants often face underpayment as compared to local workers, and the kafala system in some countries leads to delays in receiving payment. Under the kafala system, foreign workers are required to have a sponsor, known as a Kafeel, who is accountable for their financial support and residence. This can lead to a power imbalance, as workers are unable to change jobs or leave the country without their sponsor's permission, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation (Fernandez, 2021).

Michelle Leighton, Chief of the ILO Labour Migration Branch, stated, *"Migrant workers often face inequality of treatment in the labour market, including with respect to wages, access to employment and training, conditions of work, social security, and trade union rights. They play a fundamental role in many economies."* Migrants experience a wage disparity of around 13% compared to national workers, as established by a study by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). In certain countries, this disparity can go as high as 42%. Migrant workers tend to earn less than their equally qualified national counterparts within the same occupational categories, and even highly educated migrant workers in high-income countries often face significant barriers to securing employment within higher occupational categories. This situation reflects the challenges they face in transferring their skills and professional experience across national borders, primarily due to the absence of systems designed to acknowledge the qualifications and competencies of migrant workers (International Labour Organisation, 2020).

Additionally, as given in Beyond Beds and Boundaries: Indian Student Mobility Report, Indian students are increasingly spending on education abroad. In 2019, Indian students allocated approximately $37 billion for overseas education, with this investment in education rising by 9% to an impressive $47 billion in 2022. If this trend continues at the current rate of 14%, spending by Indian students could reach around $70 billion by 2025 (University Living, 2023). This growing trend underscores the economic challenges faced by Indian migrants, which are often compounded by the legal obstacles they face in various host countries.

The difficulties Indian migrants encounter are again supported by information from the Ministry of External Affairs. In response to a question about Indian workers abroad who did not receive their wages or salaries between March 2020 and December 2021, Shri V. Muralidharan shared that Indian Missions and Posts received a total of 17,848 labour complaints regarding non-payment during that period (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). Furthermore, one complaint submitted to consular services reflects the frustrations of many migrants: "My employer is forcing me to do physical labour even though I was hired as a skilled worker. What should I do?" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). This sentiment reflects the broader systemic issues that Indian migrants contend with, emphasising the need for reforms and protections to address their precarious status in host countries.

Legal Issues

The legal challenges exacerbate the already precarious economic situations of Indian migrants. In 2020, former President Donald Trump suspended H-1 B visas, one of the largest categories of employment-based visas, for which Indians are significant beneficiaries (Economic Times, 2020). The U.S. immigration system's numerical limitations and the statutory 7% per-country ceiling on employment-based green cards have disproportionately impacted nationals from large migrant-sending countries, particularly India (Kandel, 2020). Restrictive immigration policies affect their legal status, resulting in prolonged waits for permanent residency or citizenship. These constraints have resulted in long wait times for Indian nationals, and many face decades-long delays in receiving green cards. The backlog, which affects nearly one million lawfully present foreign workers and their families, imposes significant hardships on those already residing in the United States. For many, the wait for a green card may exceed their lifetimes, creating a state of legal limbo that exacerbates their vulnerability to exploitation by employers.

The backlog in the immigration system has caused significant legal challenges for Indian migrants. They are

unable to switch jobs without risking their position in the immigration queue, making them vulnerable to exploitative working conditions. Additionally, their legal status makes it challenging for them to travel overseas, and their spouses often struggle to get permission to work legally. Noncitizen children who turn twenty-one before their parents secure green cards may lose their legal status, leading to family separation or forced return to their country. If a prospective immigrant dies while waiting, their family members not only lose their place in the queue but may also lose their legal status in the United States. This sheds light on the precarious situation of these migrants and stresses the urgent need for systemic immigration reform (Kandel, 2020).

Ms. Suella Braverman, the United Kingdom's Home Secretary under Prime Minister Liz Truss, has voiced her concerns about implementing an open borders migration policy with India. She stated, "I have reservations about having an open borders migration policy with India because I don't believe that's what people voted for with Brexit. Look at migration in this country – the largest group of people who overstay are Indian migrants.". Such political statements can also push xenophobia among people (Nelson, 2022).

The United Kingdom has recently implemented strict measures to control net migration, focusing on reducing the hiring of foreign workers and tightening visa sponsorship regulations. UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) is enhancing oversight on employer-sponsored visas to ensure compliance with employment laws while raising the minimum salary threshold for the Skilled Worker visa from £26,200 to £38,700 this year (HT News Desk, 2024). Subsequently, there has been a significant drop in Health and Care Worker visas, with the UK granting 89,095 of these visas in the year ending June 2024—a 26% drop compared to the previous year. The impact was more pronounced in quarterly data, showing an 81% reduction in granted visas from April to June compared to the same period in the previous year (HT News Desk, 2024).

Home Office data also shows a 76% decline in overseas applicants for roles in the UK's care sector and a 58% drop in family dependents within the Health and Care visa category in the first month since these new restrictions took effect, compared to April 2023. Indian nationals remained the top recipients of Health and Care visas in the previous year (PTI & PTI, 2024). The strict policies have similarly affected student visas, where the number of dependents, such as spouses and children, has declined by 79% since the new rules came into force earlier this year. UK Home Secretary James Cleverly noted that this monthly data offers an updated view of legal migration trends, indicating a steady reduction across important visa routes (Deccan Herald, 2024).

Restricting students

Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, shared on the social media platform X on October 24, 2024, "We're going to significantly reduce the number of immigrants coming to Canada for the next two years. This temporarily pauses our population growth and lets our economy catch up. We have to get the system working right for all Canadians" (Trudeau, 2024). According to the Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC), the revised immigration plan lowers the target for permanent residents from 500,000 to 395,000 in 2025 and to 380,000 in 2026, with a decrease to 365,000 set for 2027 (Economic Times, 2024). This reduction in immigration could significantly impact Indian migrants, who make up a large segment of applicants to Canada. With fewer spots available, processing times may increase, and competition for residency will become more intense, limiting opportunities for Indian nationals seeking permanent residency.

Canada recently introduced a cap on international student admissions, part of broader immigration reforms intended to manage the growing number of temporary residents. The cap, implemented in January 2024, limits the intake of study permits and introduces new measures that affect Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) eligibility and spousal work permits. These changes are particularly significant for Indian students, who represent a major portion of the international student population in Canada. The cap and accompanying restrictions could exacerbate existing challenges faced by Indian migrants.

Indian students are a crucial demographic in Canada's international education sector, often viewing it as a pathway to work and permanent residency. However, the recent 10% reduction in study permits, which set lesser intake targets of 437,000 permits by 2025, will likely discourage many from choosing Canada as a destination (Livemint, 2024). Additionally, new PGWP rules, which only grant work permits for jobs in high-demand sectors, could also limit opportunities for Indian students. This could particularly affect those in fields not prioritised by provinces, reducing their chances of securing post-graduate work and residency.

Language requirements for PGWP eligibility have also become stricter, with university graduates now required to get a Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) level 7 and college graduates a CLB 5. For many Indian students, especially those from non-English speaking regions, these language requirements may create significant barriers to obtaining post-graduation work permits (Sharma, 2024).

The elimination of open work permits for the spouses of international students, except those pursuing master's or doctoral degrees, adds another layer of hardship for Indian students (ICEF Monitor, 2024). Many depend on their spouse's ability to work to help cover living expenses while studying in Canada. Without this support, many prospective students may reconsider their decision to study in Canada. For students already in Canada, this could lead to financial stress or prolonged family separations, complicating their overall experience and integration. The new immigration policies, with tighter PGWP restrictions and language requirements, could make it more challenging for Indian graduates to secure employment, hindering their long-term settlement in Canada.

On January 1, 2024, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced a major policy change via an X post, stating that "from today, the majority of foreign university students cannot bring family members to the UK" (Sunak, 2024). The UK Home Office reaffirmed this policy in the post, stating that "we are fully committed to seeing a decisive cut in migration. From today, new overseas students will no longer be able to bring family members to the UK. Postgraduate research or government-funded scholarships students will be exempt." (UK Home Office, 2024). This shift, aimed at reducing migration, is expected to impact Indian students significantly. As one of the largest groups of international students in the UK, many Indian students may find the new regulations restrictive, particularly those who need family support during their studies. Consequently, this policy could lead Indian students to consider alternative study destinations, affecting the UK's higher education sector and its share in the global student market.

Covid-19 and Xenophobia

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased xenophobia and anti-immigrant feelings across the world. Early on, the virus was wrongly linked to foreign nationals, causing many people to blame migrants for its spread. This led to an increase in discrimination against migrant communities. For example, in some countries, migrants were singled out and blamed for bringing the virus, which fuelled public fear and mistrust (Devakumar et al., 2020). As countries-imposed travel restrictions and lockdowns, migrants became even more isolated and vulnerable to mistreatment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the new challenges faced by Indian migrant workers, both domestically and internationally. Many Indian migrant workers find themselves helpless in foreign countries after losing their jobs, grappling with an uncertain future and the looming risk of starvation. This situation is increasing rapidly into a major humanitarian crisis for which the current government was unprepared (Bhattacharjee, 2021). The living conditions of Indian migrant workers in the Gulf region are one of the major concerns. Many live in shared accommodations, which makes social distancing difficult for them. This puts them at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19, and they need significant support from the host country. Additionally, they face challenges such as limited social support, language barriers, and discrimination based on their status as foreigners, which hamper their access to healthcare services in host countries (Jain, 2020).

The economic aftermath of COVID-19 made things worse. Job losses and financial hardships made people view migrants as competitors in the job market, further increasing anti-immigrant feelings. This led to a rise in negative views toward migrant workers, with some politicians using these sentiments to gain political support. The fear of job scarcity and existing biases allowed politicians to turn anti-immigrant feelings into a political tool, worsening the situation (Kustov, 2020). Overall, the pandemic highlighted how crises can deepen social divisions and how vulnerable groups like migrants are often unfairly treated and targeted.

Kafala System

Saudi Arabia's *Kafala system,* one of the most restrictive and abusive in the region, presents significant legal challenges for Indian migrants, who constitute a substantial portion of the workforce in the Gulf. While recent labour reforms in March 2021, introduced by the Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, aim to enhance the contractual relationship between workers and employers, these changes are insufficient in

addressing the core problems of the kafala system. The reforms only partially address the need for employer consent to change or leave jobs and the country, leaving many workers, particularly those in low-paid and domestic roles, at the mercy of their employers. This current dependency perpetuates the vulnerability of Indian migrants to abuses such as passport confiscation, delayed wages, and forced labour, which is in direct violation of international human rights laws. Furthermore, the dependency on employers for the issuance and renewal of residency and work permits exacerbates these legal challenges, trapping workers in a cycle of exploitation with limited recourse. Despite the appearance of progress, these reforms fail to dismantle the structural inequities of the kafala system, highlighting the urgent need for more comprehensive legal protections for migrant workers in Saudi Arabia and across the Gulf region (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Social Issues

Many Indian immigrants encounter social challenges like discrimination based on race or ethnicity. Even the political agenda of some nations reflects anti-immigrant sentiments, which further accelerates such issues. Migrants in such situations are often more vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation, and marginalisation. They frequently live and work in the shadows, are afraid to speak out and are denied their human rights and freedoms (United Nations, 2024).

A report by the Pew Research Centre (2023) found that 58% of Asian adults experienced discrimination in America based on their race. 50% of Indian adults in America experienced racial discrimination. 37% of Asian adults have been called with some offensive names. 26% of Indian adults faced this. 33% of Indian migrants said they have been held back at security checkpoints for secondary screening because of their race and ethnicity.

The intersecting challenges of economic, legal, and social factors inevitably impact the mental health of Indian migrants, highlighting the urgent need for support and attention. In a report by the Pew Research Centre (2023), a US-born woman of Indian origin in her late thirties shared her experience in the 2021 focus groups of Asian Americans:

> "*As an Indian female, we tend to be very hairy... starting very young, so in sixth and seventh grade I was super hairy and so all the other girls would be like, 'Oh my god, are you like shaving already? Or what's going on with that?' And then people would call me, 'Sand N-word.' A lot of just like, 'Saddam's daughter,' just like those types of words.*"

Another Indian born in the US shared his experience with the Pew Research Centre, saying,

> "*We just have to deal with it more than the average person. I've been called DJ Isis, I've been called a terrorist... on a day-to-day basis, I feel welcome in America. This is my country. I'm here to live; I'm here to stay. But there are just those one or two instances that make you feel like maybe it would have been better if I were somewhere else, or maybe it would have been different if I were white or whatever. I feel like the only person that's going to be 100% fully welcome is a white male, and that's the only person that's going to be 100% welcome 100% of the time.*"

Such incidents profoundly impact the individual's mental well-being and overall life (Pew Research Centre, 2023).

Safety Issues

On the 13th of June 2024, a devastating tragedy happened at a labour housing facility in the Mangaf area of Kuwait. Reports indicated that 50 migrant workers lost their lives in a fire, with most of them, approximately 40 individuals, being of Indian origin. Furthermore, about 50 Indian migrant workers sustained injuries because of the fire. This incident has sparked increased concerns regarding enforcing fire safety standards (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). This incident underscores the difficult and often unsafe living conditions that many Indian migrant workers face while seeking employment abroad. Migrants from India, who form a significant part of the workforce in countries like Kuwait, face issues such as overcrowded housing, inadequate access to healthcare, low wages, and unsafe working and living environments.

The fire safety failures at the Mangaf facility denote the larger problem of substandard living conditions in labour accommodations. These issues often stem from insufficient regulation and enforcement of labour rights and safety standards, leaving migrant workers vulnerable to preventable tragedies. Despite being a crucial part of the Gulf economy, Indian migrants, especially low-wage workers, continue to be overlooked in terms of welfare and safety. This tragedy has intensified calls for better enforcement of fire safety standards and general living conditions, not only in Kuwait but across the Gulf region. Moreover, incidents like this reflect deeper issues related to the exploitation and marginalisation of migrant labour. Indian workers, who migrate in large numbers to escape poverty and unemployment back home, often find themselves in exploitative conditions, with limited legal protection and support. This fire acts as a painful reminder of the need for stronger regulations and protections for migrant workers, both from the Indian government and the host countries where these migrants contribute so significantly to the economy.

The impact of war and conflicts on migrants

The conflict in Ukraine placed the Indian community, particularly Indian students, in danger. Around 22,500 Indian nationals, most of them students pursuing higher education, were forced to flee Ukraine as the war escalated (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). Vast numbers of these students were enrolled in medical programs, as Ukraine had become a popular destination for Indian students seeking affordable medical education. When the war broke out, these students had to abruptly abandon their studies and leave the host country, facing uncertainty about their future education and career prospects.

This situation highlights the vulnerability of Indian migrants abroad, especially in crises. Indian students in Ukraine faced significant challenges during the evacuation, including navigating through war zones, a lack of resources, and coordination issues with local authorities. Many students faced financial difficulties as well, having invested substantial amounts in their education, which was suddenly interrupted. The disruption in their education has left many students uncertain about how or where to complete their degrees, with some struggling to transfer to other universities.

The Ministry of External Affairs of India, through the Minister of State, Shri Kirti Vardhan Singh, has reported that almost 19,000 Indian nationals reside in Bangladesh, including over 9,000 students. To support the voluntary repatriation of these migrants, particularly students, the High Commission of India in Dhaka and the Assistant High Commissions in Chittagong, Rajshahi, Sylhet, and Khulna have been actively involved. They coordinate closely with Bangladeshi authorities to ensure the safety and security of Indian nationals, facilitating their transportation to airports and land borders for smooth repatriation. By August 1, 2024, more than 7,200 Indian students had returned to India, with repatriation efforts beginning on July 18, 2024. The Ministry has also collaborated with Indian authorities to facilitate the efficient processing of arrivals at Indian ports of entry (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

Conflicts and wartime tensions deeply affect migrant populations around the world. Many migrants are forced to return to their home countries because of safety concerns, causing disruptions to their education and economic challenges. Such situations show how vulnerable migrants can be, facing sudden changes in their living conditions and support systems as they try to get home. Countries must work together during these difficult times to ensure that people affected by conflicts or crises can travel safely and receive the help they need.

International Organisations' Stand on Labour Migrations

International organisations have taken considerable steps on the complexities of international migration, aiming to protect the rights and dignity of migrant workers. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has been at the forefront, setting migrant workers' rights into its foundational principles since 1919. ILO supported equality between national and migrant workers and cooperation among states on migration policies. Over time, the ILO has also adopted several conventions and recommendations, such as the Migration for Employment Convention (No. 97) and the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention (No. 143), aimed at ensuring fair treatment, social security, and protection from exploitation. Additionally, the ILO's guidelines from the 1997 Tripartite Meeting of Experts highlight protective measures for vulnerable migrant workers, particularly regarding recruitment practices and employment conditions. This reflects the organisation's commitment to

tackling challenges faced by migrants through a healthy framework of international labour standards (International Labour Organisation, 2000).

After the establishment of the WTO under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) subject to the four "modes of supply". Mode 4 of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) facilitates the temporary movement of individuals supplying services internationally. It covers employees of service firms and self-employed professionals but excludes permanent employment or citizenship-related measures. Access to mode 4 market opportunities is quite limited. Commitments mainly allow entry for specific categories of individuals, such as employees transferred within a company and highly skilled professionals like managers and specialists. There are also various restrictions, including quotas, "economic needs tests," and conditions such as residency and training requirements (WTO, 2024).

UNESCO underlines cultural integration and identity through research networks and regional projects, at the same time WHO focuses on health issues affecting migrants in unsafe living and working conditions. The FAO connects migration to food security and rural development, and the United Nations International Drug Control Programme targets risks among migrants related to drug abuse and trafficking. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has also played an important role through initiatives such as the Administrative Committee on Coordination Task Force on Basic Social Services for All. These collective efforts underline a global commitment to addressing migration challenges, enhancing migrants' welfare, and fostering international cooperation (International Labour Organisation, 2000).

Despite efforts by international organisations to safeguard migrant workers, significant challenges remain unattained. Many migrants face exploitation, discrimination, and unsafe working conditions, particularly in low-skilled labour areas. They are frequently exposed to human trafficking, wage theft, and difficult recruitment practices, combined with weak enforcement of international standards. Political instability, restrictive migration policies, and rising xenophobia worsen these issues, stressing the urgent need for better global cooperation and a more inclusive approach to migration.

International Migrants under India's various economic agreements

India has signed various economic cooperation agreements with both developed and developing countries in recent years. Notably, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with Japan includes the movement of natural persons in Chapter 7. As shown in Table 2, Agreements with countries like Japan, Australia, and South Korea facilitate smoother migration for skilled workers, professionals, and students. Canada is beginning discussions with India on the movement of natural persons in preparation for a future agreement, as shown in Table 3. However, the UK and GCC countries have not yet started negotiations on this matter. Given the challenges migrants face in these regions, addressing the movement of natural persons should be a priority in future agreements. While India's trade/economic cooperation/partnership agreements mainly focus on trade in services, they should also emphasise the movement of natural persons, which is part of trade in services (Mode 4). Despite international efforts, migrants still encounter significant challenges, making bilateral agreements a potential solution to these issues.

Table 2: Movement of Natural Persons in India's Comprehensive economic cooperation/partnership agreements

Countries	Name of Agreement	Chapter/Article
Japan-India	Comprehensive economic partnership agreements between Japan and the Republic of India	Chapter 7: Movement of Natural Persons
India- Australia	India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (INDAUS ECTA) between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of Australia	Chapter 9: Temporary Movement of Natural Persons
India-UAE	Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the	Article 8.19: Movement of Natural Persons Supplying

	Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE)	
India- Malaysia	Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of Malaysia	Chapter 9: Movement of Natural Persons
India- Korea	India-South Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement	Chapter 8: Movement of Natural Persons

Source: Author's construct based on the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India

Table 3: Negotiations under Upcoming Agreements

Country	Upcoming Negotiation	Looking Forward
India-Canada	India – Canada to re-launch the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) negotiations to unlock the full potential of bilateral trade	They also acknowledged the importance of strong people-to-people connections between the two countries, including the movement of professionals, skilled workers, students, and business travellers, in enhancing the bilateral economic partnership.
India-UK	Resumption of India-UK Free Trade Agreement Negotiations	India acknowledges the need for a balanced and mutually beneficial Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and looks forward to working with the UK's negotiating team to resolve outstanding issues. But they haven't considered the Movement of a Natural Person.
India-GCC	India-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations	A Framework Agreement was signed on August 25, 2004. Negotiations began with two rounds in 2006 and 2008, but the third round has been postponed while the GCC reviews its strategies. Discussions are ongoing through various forums to resume negotiations. There is also a need for negotiation on the Movement of Natural Persons.

Source: Author's construct based on the Press Information Bureau, Government of India.

CONCLUSION

Key findings of this paper shed light on the challenges that Indian migrants face, including economic, legal, social, and safety-related issues that impact their quality of life, integration, and security abroad. Wage disparities are one of the most challenging issues faced by Indian migrants, particularly in high-income countries, where the wage gap favours national workers despite similar qualifications as well as experience. Numerous highly skilled Indian migrants are often forced into lower-wage, less skilled jobs. The kafala system in the GCC worsens this situation and traps workers with wage exploitation and limited job mobility.

Legal challenges are an additional significant issue; restrictive immigration policies hinder Indian migrants' ability to attain stable legal status. Delays in green card processing led to long waits for approximately one million Indian immigrants in the USA, leading to uncertainty about their status. Moreover, countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada have imposed visa regulations, including curbs on family sponsorship and heightened qualifications for skilled visas, which further reduce the options available to Indian immigrants, especially students and professionals looking to settle down permanently.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased xenophobic sentiments, with migrants in countries that had increased instances of racial discrimination. These hostile attitudes often manifest in discriminatory practices within

workplaces and public spaces, negatively impacting Indian migrant's mental health and sense of belonging. Political statements that oppose open migration policies further worsen anti-immigrant sentiment, making it challenging for Indian migrants to feel accepted and integrated into these societies.

Safety concerns are one more vital issue for Indian migrants, especially in the Gulf region, where living conditions for low-wage migrant workers are often unsafe and substandard. Lacking fire safety measures, crowded housing, and limited healthcare access leave many Indian migrants vulnerable to preventable health risks and accidents. Despite playing a significant role in the economies of GCC countries, Indian migrant workers very often face neglected living conditions that lead them to serious safety hazards, reflecting a lack of regulatory enforcement in labour housing standards.

Indian migrants also encounter increased risks during political conflicts and wars, which lead them to unsafe positions abroad. The Russia-Ukraine conflict, for instance, forced thousands of Indian students to flee, suddenly disrupting their education and future career paths. Similarly, in regions like Bangladesh, geopolitical tensions have led to the temporary repatriation of immigrants, leaving Indian migrants uncertain about their stability and safety in host countries.

Comprehensive policy reforms are necessary to tackle issues faced by Indian migrants. Host countries should set up fair wage policies to lower pay disparities, regulate labour conditions, and simplify visa processes to improve employment opportunities. Anti-discrimination measures, public education, and better labour accommodations are critical to ensure safety and inclusivity. International cooperation is essential for migrant protection during crises. Indian migrants face many challenges, including economic, legal, and social issues that hinder their success in host countries. Despite their contributions to the worldwide economy, they often face wage exploitation, legal uncertainty, and social discrimination. Addressing these issues needs comprehensive policy reforms at the international level, especially through organisations like the ILO and the WTO, to promote fair labour practices and legal protections. Additionally, including a chapter on international migration in India's forthcoming bilateral and trade agreements can help ensure that Indian migrants receive the dignity, rights, and opportunities they deserve to contribute to their host countries' economies.

This paper has several limitations, including its reliance on secondary resources, lack of gender-specific insights, and absence of direct interviews with migrants. Depending on secondary sources may lead to gaps in information, as they might not reflect the nuanced perspectives or most recent developments. The lack of gender-specific analysis may neglect important differences in how migration affects individuals based on gender. In addition, not including direct interviews prevents a deeper understanding of migrant's lived experiences. Biases may occur from the secondary sources. Moreover, secondary interpretations can reflect the biases of the original authors, complicating the validity of the findings. Future research can emphasise collecting primary data and gender perspectives while exploring the effects of wage gaps, underemployment, and mental health issues of Indian migrants.

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