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Dr. Deepak Kumar Dinkar
Assistant Professor (Senior Scale), Department of Political Science Sunderwati Mahila College, Bhagalpur, Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Deepak Kumar Dinkar
Assistant Professor (Senior Scale), Department of Political Science Sunderwati Mahila College, Bhagalpur, Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

Indian diaspora in the Gulf Countries: A pivot to multidimensional relations between India and the Gulf Countries

Deepak Kumar Dinkar

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Abstract
The world's largest transnational population is found in India. From the Gulf to Northern America to Europe, the Indian diaspora is found on every continent and in every region. The diaspora is incredibly energetic and lively worldwide. 34 million Indians were living outside of their country of birth, according to the UN DESA population division's "International Migration 2025 Highlights" report. According to this report, India's sizable diaspora is dispersed over several important countries of destination, with the UAE housing the greatest number of Indian migrants at 3.5 million, the US at 2.7 million, and Saudi Arabia at 2.5 million. Australia, Canada, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Kingdom were among the other nations that hosted a significant number of Indian migrants. The largest Indian diaspora in the globe is considered to be among the most "vibrant and dynamic". From Mauritius to the US, Indian expats are present in many nations and make substantial contributions to the social, cultural, and economic spheres. The greatest Indian diasporas are found in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. The nature and destination of the Indian diaspora are examined in this research. India places great importance on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a group of Gulf nations. Only the Arabian Sea separates India's "immediate" vicinity from the Gulf. The GCC is made up of the following six nations: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. The Ministry of External Affairs estimates that 8.9 million Indian migrants were living in the Gulf nations as of 2024. The United Nations reports that the six Gulf nations of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain are home to 56 per cent of non-resident Indians and 25 per cent of overseas Indians. With millions of Indians currently residing in the UAE, the number of Indian expatriates has increased dramatically. Indians are essential to the UAE's economic growth, working in industries like business, healthcare, and construction. India has a sizable workforce in Saudi Arabia, especially in fields like information technology, healthcare, and construction. The infrastructure and economic development of Saudi Arabia have benefited greatly from the efforts of the Indian minority. There are 3.2 million Indians living in Bahrain, 10.3 million in Qatar, 7.8 million in Oman, and 7.3 million in Kuwait. The diaspora, which serves as a conduit between India and its host nations, has been a source of strength and influence that has an impact on the economy, trade, investment, and foreign exchange reserves. Gulf nations have been important places for Indians to work and conduct business. In actuality, Gulf employers have favoured Indian community members above others for employment due in large part to their professionalism, discipline, and dedication. They now contribute to the growth and development of the Gulf nations. Indians who work in the United Arab Emirates transfer a portion of their salary to their family back home. With increased capital flows, investments, and consumption, foreign remittances help India's economy thrive and provide many people with a substantial source of steady financial assistance. The UAE is the second-largest source of remittances to India because so many Indians work in a variety of industries, including retail, hospitality, and construction. India will be the largest recipient of remittances, with inflows likely to increase 12.4 per cent to $125 billion in 2023 or 3.4 per cent of the country's gross domestic product, according to World Bank's latest report. The importance of the Indian diaspora on India-GCC relations is assessed in this essay. The literature on the nature and destinations of the Indian diaspora in the Gulf, the role of the diaspora in strengthening ties between India and the GCC nations, economic cooperation between the two countries, and strategic partnerships between India and the GCC nations forms the basis of this paper.

Keywords: Indian Diaspora, Vibrant Diaspora, The Gulf Region, Migration, Gulf Workers, Gulf Nations, Remittances, Indian Economy, Bilateral Relations, Multidimensional Cooperation

Introduction

The phenomena of migration is worldwide. Migration has its roots in the beginning of humans. The civilizational Indian presence in the Gulf has grown into a solid partnership, aptitude of the two countries. Economic patterns are strengthening mutual dependency as a result of India's recent rise to prominence as a major economic force and the Gulf region's remarkable economic expansion. Emigration from India to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states-Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates-is not a recent occurrence, although it has significantly expanded since the 1970s as a result of the region's oil boom. Indian labourers migrated to the Gulf in quest of work and higher earnings due to the country's population pressure and dire economic prospects (Biswas 2021, p. 21) [2]. Since 1935, when BAPCO (Persian Oil Company) began importing labour from India, Indian labourers have been there. The 1973 spike in oil prices led to a huge investment program in the Gulf's oil-producing nations, which in turn increased demand for workers in the area.

Due to a shortage of domestic labour, several oil-producing nations allowed the immigration of workers from other nations. The Gulf region's development efforts required a wide range of labour. Doctors, engineers, architects, craftspeople, drivers, technical personnel, and those capable of managing shops, homes, and animals are all included. Workers from Pakistan and India migrated in large numbers to the Gulf as a result of this process. Winckler claims that the Gulf governments utilised oil revenue for a variety of objectives, such as strengthening the administrative and agricultural sectors, building energy stations and other infrastructure, and enhancing social services like healthcare and education (Observer Research Foundation 2024, p. 1). The desert economy became one of the fastest-growing regions of the world due to the massive influx of oil profits during the oil boom decade. In 1949, approximately 94 per cent of the Bahrain Petroleum Company's clerical and technical staff were Indian, and nearly 91 per cent of the company's artisans were Indian. Additionally, 86 per cent of the ministerial and technical staff at the Kuwait Oil Company were Indian expatriates. Indians worked in businesses in numerous states in a variety of capacities. All Arab governments in the Persian Gulf, with the exception of Iraq, are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, an intergovernmental political and economic union. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are among its members. On May 25, 1981, in Abu Dhabi, the UAE's capital, Union was established (Embassy of India, Riyad 2024, p. 1).

Over 8 million members of the Indian diaspora reside in the Gulf, one of the strategically significant areas. In contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, the Indian diaspora is now playing a significant role in our foreign policy. It's interesting to observe that, starting in the 1970s, India's foreign policy saw a noticeable change with each succeeding administration. The global financial crisis of the 1970s and the balance of payments issue forced India to change its policy. India's diaspora policy has clearly changed throughout time, moving from disengagement to active participation (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis 2024, p. 1). India and its Diaspora have already benefited from a number of initiatives. The Parliament just enacted a historic bill that gives Indians living abroad the ability to vote. They can now take an active part in the elections in India.

The foreign policy strategy that emerges from India's political and moral philosophy, which was influenced by Indian intellectuals such as Tagore, Gandhi, and Nehru, views the diaspora as a soft power. In India and the host nations, it is also regarded as a stimulant for economic growth. Over 134 nations throughout the world are home to more than 31 million members of the Indian diaspora. Over 8 million members of the Indian diaspora reside in the Gulf, one of the strategically significant areas (Ministry of External Affairs 2024, p. 1). It is evident that this area is home to over one-fourth of the whole Indian diaspora. Therefore, building a closer and friendlier contact with this area is crucial. Therefore, building a closer and friendlier contact with this area is crucial. In light of this, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made numerous trips to the Gulf nations in an effort to improve bilateral ties.

India's foreign policy is mostly determined by its historical ties, cultural heritage, and geopolitical and economic factors. Given that its origins date back many centuries, it has a deeper, civilizational link with the Arab nations. Many Arab tourists were drawn to the coastal region of India because of the world's familiarity with Indian astronomy, numerical science, and Ayurveda. This area attracted a large number of Indian traders and investors. As a result, interpersonal relationships have long been shown to be robust. Particularly with the Gulf nations-Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates-our ties have become even closer (Italian Institute for International Political Studies 2024, p. 1). These ties continue to strengthen and become closer in light of their shared interests in energy, trade, and the Indian diaspora.

Our focus on the Gulf is mostly a result of the significant workforce migration from India to the GGC nations. The Gulf region is home to more than 8 million Indians. Both trained and semi-skilled labourers migrated from India to the Gulf countries as a result of the 1973 oil boom. In addition to bringing about the region's unparalleled economic progress, the boom also drew a sizable foreign labour force to help fulfil its expanding labour needs. As a result, it is crucial that policymakers use the Indian Diaspora as a point of reference while developing India's foreign policy. Conversely, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are looking for investment partners, thus keeping good relations with the area becomes essential (Observer Research Foundation 2023, p. 2). Contrary to the goals and aspirations of the Gulf countries, the percentage of non-citizens in the region has been continuously rising. In the GCC countries, the proportion of foreign-born workers increased from 22.9 per cent in 1975 to 38.5 per cent in 2002 (Biswas 2021, p. 40) [2]. In the GCC countries, foreign nationals make up 51 per cent of the total population in 2024. More over thirty percent of the region's total number of expatriate workers are Indian.

In India and many other developing nations, remittances are regarded as one of the major sources of revenue. This is due to the fact that remittances have a substantial impact on foreign exchange revenues, national GDP growth, and the betterment of migrant families' living situations. In 2023, India received $125 billion in remittances, making it the highest receiving nation in the world. In the Gulf, Saudi Arabia contributed $11.2 billion in remittances in 2023, followed by Kuwait ($4.6 billion), Qatar ($4.1 billion), Oman ($3.3 billion), and the United Arab Emirates ($13.8 billion) (Observer Research Foundation 2023, p. 11). Furthermore, social remittances play an important role as Gulf migrants send money home. New concepts, expertise, work culture, discipline, knowledge, scientific perspective, new abilities, etc. are all considered social remittances (Manjhi 2018, p. 7) [8]. As a result, it is evident that migrant families' attitudes about Indian society have changed for the better.

However, a number of memorandums of understanding (MoUs) have been struck between India and the Gulf nations to safeguard the rights of Indian workers in the region. One cannot ignore the migrant workers' human rights violations despite these signed Memorandums of Understanding. To mention a few, the workers in the destination nations endure long, boring workdays, mistreatment, and payment delays. Under the Kafala system, which is referred to as the “employment framework in the Gulf,” wherein a national employer sponsors a migrant, public sector jobs are designated for nationals and private sector positions for migrants (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis 2024, p. 1). Human rights activists have questioned this structure because it allows migrant workers to be exploited in their host countries. India’s ties with West Asia, particularly the Gulf nations, need to be further strengthened. India’s diplomatic and economic potential has been completely realised by the West Asian nations.

Since Modi assumed office in 2014, India has transformed its relationship with the Gulf states from one focused on energy, trade and Indian expatriates into a new framework encompassing political relations, investment, and defence and security cooperation. India’s priorities include attracting investments to increase economic growth, addressing regional security concerns (including in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf), and enhancing its regional presence and influence. In one of his last foreign visits before India’s general election in April-May 2024, on 13-15 February India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, a move which signalled the growing importance of the Gulf region for India (Ministry of External Affairs 2024, p. 1). Under Modi, the Gulf has become a foreign- and security-policy priority and an integral part of India’s ‘extended neighbourhood’ in which India has increasing interests and influence. The timing of Modi’s visit highlights the importance of the UAE as New Delhi’s key regional partner. Indeed, the UAE is the only regional country that India engages with bilaterally, trilaterally (along with France) and, since 2021, in the I2U2 quadrilateral grouping with the United States and Israel (Middle East Institute 2023, p. 2).

In crucial areas, they are open to deepening their relationship with India. They might meet the problems of the modern world if they collaborated. India can play a key role in fostering regional stability, which will benefit its own energy and security needs as well as job opportunities. We would benefit from strengthening our diplomatic, cultural, and economic ties with these nations. Human resources should be prioritised, and relationships should be diversified beyond trade and energy. For our mutual interest, we must create a strong bilateral labour policy that tackles the problems pertaining to Indian labourers employed in the area. The two primary goals of this study are: Initially, to observe the current pattern and trend of Indian emigration (out migration) to the GCC nations. Secondly, the role of the Indian diaspora in the backdrop of the shift to multifaceted relations between the Gulf countries and India.

Pattern of Indian Emigration to Gulf Countries

The majority of foreign migrants-roughly 18 million-come from India, with sizable diasporas residing in the US, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. It maintained its position as the biggest recipient of remittances, but 2022 was exceptional as the amount surpassed $100. The top three nations that received remittances in 2022 were China, Mexico, and India, followed by the Philippines, France, and Pakistan, according to the United Nations’ International Organisation for Migration's (IOM) 2024 World Migration Report (Press Information Bureau 2024, p. 1). The first nation to achieve and even surpass the $100 billion threshold was India, which received $111 billion in 2022.

Table 1: Estimated number of Indians in the Gulf Countries (Till 2024)

GCC Countries	Estimated Numbers of Indians (including workers)
United Arab Emirates	3554274
Saudi Arabia	2463509
Kuwait	924687
Qatar	844499
Oman	653500
Bahrain	327807

Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India

For India, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole is extremely important. The Arabian Sea is the only thing separating India’s “immediate” vicinity from the Gulf. As seen by the numerous announcements of investments made by GCC nations in India, especially the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, the GCC has become a significant trading partner for India and has enormous potential as an important investment partner. India’s energy security greatly depends on the GCC’s large oil and gas reserves. A sizable Indian expat population resides in the GCC nations as a whole. When it comes to politics, security, defence, energy, social and cultural contacts, and interpersonal relationships, the GCC actually has a lot of room for cooperation (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis 2024, p. 1). From a geopolitical standpoint, India and the GCC share a desire for regional political stability and security. India and the GCC share political and security concerns, which directly lead to efforts to advance peace, security, and stability in the Gulf and South Asia. The development of common security viewpoints further improves the chances for future India-GCC cooperation (Ministry of External Affairs 2023, p. 1). There are more chances for cooperation in these new fields because the GCC states are going through significant transformations.

Though it has a long history, emigration from India to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries-Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates-has increased dramatically since the 1970s due to the “oil boom”. According to a recent estimate by the Government of India’s Ministry of External Affairs there are currently roughly 8 million migrant communities dispersed among these six GCC nations (Ministry of External Affairs 2024, p. 1). The development of both their home countries (the GCC) and their countries of origin is greatly aided by these massive numbers of migrants. The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which surround the Persian Gulf, are among the new economic powers of the modern era due to their abundance of natural gas and oil. The oil boom of the 1970s has attracted semi-skilled and unskilled labourers from several Indian states, especially those in the south. Emigration is primarily driven by economic improvement, and most people leave these countries for short periods of time. Due to the migrants' economic success, which encourages other Indian youngsters to travel as well, emigration from India to the Gulf countries has increased over time (Observer Research Foundation 2024, p. 1).

The GCC countries-Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates-are some of the most well-known migration routes in the world. These six countries are attracting migrant workers from other South and Southeast Asian countries in addition to those from India. All of these immigrant groups living in the Gulf countries have a substantial Indian diaspora. Following China, the Indian population essentially scattered over the globe, resulting in a substantial diaspora. According to the most recent Ministry of External Affairs, estimate, there are over 30 million Indian emigrants (including PIOs and NRIs) spread throughout 130 countries. Of the 30 million Indian migrants, about 6 million are employed in a range of jobs in these six GCC countries (Press Information Bureau 2024, p.1)

Their main occupations are three different kinds of jobs:1) White-collar jobs (such as accountants, engineers, architects, doctors, nurses, and managers): 2) unskilled labourers in domestic labour, construction sites, farms, cattle ranches, shops, and stores; 3) housemaids; and 4) blue-collar jobs or semi-skilled labourers (craftsmen, drivers, artisans, and other technical workers) (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2024, p. 3). Approximately 30 per cent of all Indian immigrants in the Gulf countries are classified as skilled labourers, or the first group of workers (Observer Research Foundation 2023, p. 3). The second and third groups comprise over 70 per cent of all Indian immigrants. In the GCC, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) are the most popular destinations for Indian immigrants, making for more than 60 per cent of all deployments of Indian migrant workers (Middle East Institute 2023, p. 1).

There was a significant exodus from India to the Gulf countries after the 1973 oil boom, which boosted oil revenue and encouraged extensive commercial development in the GCC nations. They built infrastructure like energy stations, developed administrative and governance machinery, and improved social services like health care and education using the money from oil earnings, according to Winckler (1997) (Middle East Institute 2023, p. 1). The enormous inflow of oil revenue during the oil boom decade (1973-82) made the desert economies one of the fastest-growing areas in the globe. With the end of the oil boom decade (1973-1982), a country scenario emerged; oil plummeted to one of the lowest levels ever, causing in a large shortfall in oil earnings; consequently, the overall economy’s performance declined from the high level of the previous decade. Emigration Check Requirement (ECR) statistics data from 1990 to 2011 are the basis for any citizen who obtained an ECR for leaving their employment in any country in the world. Between the 1990s and 2011, there were five different phases of Indian emigration to GCC countries. The first phase, which lasted from 1990 to 1993, saw an increase in the number of Indian emigrant workers in GCC countries (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2018, p. 1).

Most Indian emigrants returned home during the Gulf War in late 1990 due to political upheaval, lax immigration control rules, and the need for foreign labour for several infrastructural projects. Partial continuous trend or second phase (1993-1997): Throughout this period, there were almost constant trends in Indian emigration to the Gulf nations (Observer Research Foundation 2022, p. 1). The fact that the Gulf countries had an oil boom during this period is noteworthy. Oil profits have been used to fund the construction of social services like schools, hospitals, banks, and service sectors. During this period, work permits under contract were issued to an average of 384000 workers annually, especially in Gulf countries. The period from 1997 to 1999 was known as the third phase, or falling trend. In order to control the non-Arab or non-national population through localisation (Kuwaitization, Saudization, Emertization, Qatarization), certain host countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, enacted stringent immigration rules at this time (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2018, p. 1). On average, 323000 people annually obtained work permit contracts during this time, especially in Gulf nations. In addition, the job market is oversaturated or several important projects have been finished. To control the outflow of remittances from their countries, they employed local labourers.

Between 2000 and 2008, Middle Eastern countries like the United Arab Emirates have been able to meet their demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labourers for their projects, while rising oil prices have generated revenue for more infrastructure projects. This is known as the Fourth Phase or another inclination trend (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2024, p. 2). To promote migration abroad, the Indian government has set up several migration posts for various Indian states. During this period, work permits under contract were issued to 471,000 people annually on average, mostly in Gulf countries (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2024, p. 1). Fifth Phase or declining trend (2009 to 2011): The number of Indians emigrating to GCC countries has been declining since 2008, however the absolute number is still significant when compared to the previous ten years (Middle East Institute 2022, p. 1). During this time, 626,000 workers on average per year acquired contracts for work permits in primarily Gulf countries. The number of workers receiving emigrant clearance to countries in South-East Asia, such as Malaysia, has somewhat increased. The demand for specific worker types from the Asian labour market in GCC nations determines the flow of all these phases (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2024, p. 2).

Remittances inflow to India from the Gulf Countries

India is one of the most popular destinations for Indian workers, with a significant number of unskilled and semi-skilled workers migrating there each year. The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs reports that, on average, 6-7 lakh people move annually under the Emigration Clearance Required (ECR) category; in 2023, that number might reach 7.47 lakh (Ministry of External Affairs 2024, p. 6). The GCC's economic expansion has drawn a large number of expatriates, particularly from South Asian nations, who have contributed to the region's economic expansion. Another important aspect that facilitates migration to this region is its geographic proximity to South Asia. For India, remittances are essential since they support a large number of households and provide as a substantial source of foreign money. Each year, millions of migrants around the world remit billions of cash to their family or communities back home. Remittances are the main source of foreign funding and a significant source of income for families and the country in many underdeveloped nations. Remittances from the Middle East totalled about USD 125 billion for India in the fiscal year 2023-2024 (Press Information Bureau 2024, p. 10).

After the US, UK, and Singapore, the Gulf nations were the second-largest source of these inflows. Remittances from the Middle East totalled about USD 125 billion for India in the fiscal year 2023-2024 (Middle East Institute 2023, p. 4). After the US, UK, and Singapore, the Gulf nations were the second-largest source of these inflows. In particular, the

UAE was the second-largest source of remittances from India after the US, contributing 18 per cent of all remittances. Forbes reports that the increase in remittance inflows to India has been driven by robust job markets and declining inflation in high-income Western and Middle Eastern nations. According to the prediction, these inflows are expected to climb by 8 per cent in 2024, possibly reaching USD 135 billion by the end of the year.

Table 2: Remittances inflow to India

Year	Inward Remittances (in billon USD)
2021	89
2022	111
2023	125
2024	124
2025	129

Source: Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting

These inflows have a significant size and potential impact. In terms of remittance inflows, India continues to lead the world in 2023. Due to the existence of a sizable diaspora of foreign residents dispersed throughout the world, remittance inflows into India have steadily increased over the past ten years. The United States and the Gulf Cooperation Countries continue to be the largest remittance providers to India, with the United Kingdom coming in second. Additionally, remittance outflows under the RBI's liberalised remittance system (LRS) have increased significantly. The upkeep of close family continues to be important, but the main driver of the growth is the increased remittance outflow for travel.

Remittances are a more efficient means of meeting the needs of the poor than foreign aid or foreign direct investment (FDI), as recipients often depend on them to cover everyday living expenses, to serve as a safety net in times of emergency, or to make small investments in business or education (Bank of Baroda Research Report 2024, p. 1). Thus, remittance services ought to be trustworthy, efficient, and secure. This can be achieved through raising transparency, increasing competition, ensuring a stable and predictable legal and regulatory framework, and increasing access to payment system infrastructure. India is the most popular remittance destination in the world; in 2024, it is expected to receive US$124 billion in remittances.

Table 3: Net remittances as % of India’s GDP

Financial Year	Net Remittances (% of GDP)
FY14	3.5
FY15	3.3
FY16	3.0
FY17	2.5
FY18	2.4
FY19	2.6
FY20	2.7
FY21	2.8
FY22	2.6
FY23	3.0
FY24	3.0

Source: CEIC, Bank of Baroda Research

Remittances from the Middle East totalled about USD 125 billion for India in the fiscal year 2023–2024. After the US, UK, and Singapore, the Gulf nations were the second-largest source of these inflows. In particular, the UAE was the second-largest source of remittances from India after the US, contributing 18 per cent of all remittances. Forbes reports that the increase in remittance inflows to India has been driven by robust job markets and declining inflation in high-income Western and Middle Eastern nations. According to the prediction, these inflows are expected to climb by 8 per cent in 2024, possibly reaching USD 135 billion by the end of the year (Ministry of Commerce and Industry 2024, p 2). Over the past ten years, there has been a significant increase in the commercial and investment ties between India and the GCC nations. The substantial remittance contributions made by the Indian diaspora highlight India's leading position in the world’s remittance scene. Despite this, the business climate issues of cronyism and ambiguous land rights hamper Gulf investments in India. Conversely, Indian investments have played a significant role in propelling the UAE’s growth.

Investors in the Middle East are turning their attention from conventional industries like gas and oil to knowledge-driven, high-growth sectors. The extensive use of digital payment solutions, which are transforming the MENA remittance sector by utilising internet and mobile technology to offer quick, safe, and affordable services, supports this shift. Bilateral commerce is expected to be greatly increased by the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which was signed on February 18, 2022, and will go into effect on May 1, 2022, between India and the United Arab Emirates. A Deloitte analysis states that CEPA, which covers a wide variety of tariff lines and various service sectors and sub-sectors, intends to increase trade in commodities to over USD 100 billion and in services to over USD 15 billion within five years (Ministry of External Affairs 2024, p. 3).

Remittances are payments made by Indians who work in the United Arab Emirates to their family back home. Many people rely heavily on foreign remittances for steady financial support, and they also help India's economy thrive by boosting capital flows, investments, and consumption. Due to the vast number of Indian labourers employed in a variety of industries, including retail, hospitality, and construction, the UAE is the second-largest source of remittances to India. The amount of foreign exchange remittances to India will be greatly impacted by the availability of UPI to NRIs based in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf nations via international mobile phones. Remittances are P2P transfers since they include the transfer of money from one party to another, typically abroad. P2P money transfers between bank accounts are made possible by UPI through specific mobile applications or web platforms (Observer Research Foundation 2023, p. 4). Time zone variations, delays, and transfer uncertainty are some of the basic issues with overseas remittances that are addressed by these UPI-enabled P2P payments, which are quick, easy, and safe.

The largest source of remittances to any country at the time is India’s international community. Remittances to India have grown over time, even during times of global recession, and continue to impact the quality of life for the families that receive them. Despite the fact that most remittances are used for immediate family consumption, there is increasing focus on figuring out how to turn them into assets through productive investments (Observer Research Foundation 2023, p. 2). In light of the current debate over migration and development, policymakers and academics are growing increasingly interested in understanding the nature and impacts of remittances. Thanks to robust labour markets in the US and Europe, India collected $120 billion in remittances in 2023. According to the World Bank, the slowdown was caused in part by reduced outflows from GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries amid declining oil prices and production cuts. It is anticipated that remittances will increase slightly to $124 billion in 2024 and $129 billion in 2025. India continued to be the largest beneficiary of remittances, with Mexico ($66 billion), China ($50 billion), the Philippines ($39 billion), and Pakistan ($27 billion) following closely behind. India continued to be the country of origin for the greatest number of emigrants (18.7 million), followed by Venezuela (8.9 million), Mexico (11 million), China (11.1 million), and Ukraine (11.9 million) (International Monetary Fund 2024, p. 2).

According to projections published by the World Bank, inward remittances to India increased 12.3 per cent to $125 billion in 2023, or 3.4 per cent of its GDP. India sent $111.22 billion in remittances abroad in 2022 (World Bank Report 2024, p. 9). India's inward remittances are predicted to surpass earlier projections by $14 billion in 2023. The World Bank stated in its "Migration and Development Brief" published on Monday that China ($50 billion) and Mexico ($67 billion) are the next two countries that get the most remittances worldwide, after India. Remittances to South Asia were also encouraged by India's large earnings (World Bank 2024, p. 4). Remittance increase was highest in Latin America and the Caribbean (8 per cent), followed by South Asia (7.2 per cent) and East Asia and the Pacific (3 per cent), according to the report.

Currently, India is responsible for 66 per cent of all remittances to South Asia, up from 63 per cent in 2022. According to the World Bank's most recent Migration and Development Brief, which was published on December 18, 2023, India remains the world leader in remittance inflows (World Bank Report 2024, p. 2). According to the research, India received an astounding $125 billion in remittances in 2023, making it the world leader in this regard. India's inward remittances have surpassed $100 billion for the second year in a row. India is the biggest beneficiary of remittances from the United States, followed by Mexico, China, the Philippines, and Egypt, according to a World Bank research (International Migration Organization Report 2024, p. 2). This outstanding accomplishment not only demonstrates the important role played by the Indian diaspora, but it also shows how resilient India's labour market is and how it has managed to withstand global economic difficulties for two decades in a row. Remittances to low and middle-income countries (LMICs) grew by an estimated 3.8 per cent in 2023, with India leading the way, according to a World Bank analysis. Remittances account for around 3.4 per cent of India's GDP. According to World Bank data, India has led the world in remittances received since 2000, with the exception of 2004 and 2005 and 2007 (World Bank Report 2024, p. 2).

Declining inflation and robust labour markets in high-income source nations were the primary drivers of the increase in remittances to India, which in turn increased remittances from skilled Indians living in the US, UK, and Singapore. According to World Bank Report, 36 per cent of all remittance flows to India come from these three nations. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), particularly the United Arab Emirates, which contributes 18 per cent of India's total remittances and is the second-largest source after the United States, was another influence. According to the research, India's February 2023 agreement with the United Arab Emirates to create a framework to encourage the use of local currencies for cross-border transactions and collaboration to link payment and messaging systems was especially beneficial for remittance flows to India (Observer Research Foundation 2023, p. 4).

More remittances would be routed through official channels if dirhams and rupees were used in cross-border transactions. The low cost of remittances in South Asia was another significant reason. In the second quarter of 2023, the cost of sending $200 to South Asia was 4.3 per cent, which was 30 per cent less than the global average of 6.2 per cent (Ministry of Commerce and Industry 2023, p. 2). At 1.9 per cent, the cost of remittances from Malaysia to India is actually the lowest in the world. The World Bank stated that India's remittance outlook for 2024 is favourable. Nonetheless, it is anticipated that remittance growth will slow to 8 per cent, reaching $135 billion. It noted that inflation and labour market conditions in the major host economies for its highly and lowly skilled migrants will influence this trend.

Expanding India-GCC Relations

Due to their unique relationships, close proximity, similar political systems based on Islamic principles, shared destiny, and shared goals, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates signed an agreement in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on May 25, 1981, creating the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Its current total area is 2,672,700 square kilometres. Arabic is the official language. The GCC has some of the world's fastest-growing economies, primarily as a result of rising oil and natural gas profits as well as a surge in construction and investment supported by reserves, etc (Observer Research Foundation 2023, p. 4). The majority of these economies that were impacted by the most recent economic downturn are now recovering and expanding quickly once more. India and the GCC have historically enjoyed friendly ties and collaboration. India is very interested in its long-standing, historical links with the GCC states, as well as the region's roughly 6 million Indian workers, rising oil and gas imports, and expanding trade and investment opportunities. India's economic ties to the GCC have been growing gradually, particularly as a result of rising oil imports. To date, these have made steady progress.

For India, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole is extremely important. The Arabian Sea is the only thing separating India's "immediate" vicinity from the Gulf. As seen by the numerous announcements of investments made by GCC nations in India, especially the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, the GCC has become a significant trading partner for India and has enormous potential as an important investment partner. India's energy security greatly depends on the GCC's large oil and gas reserves. A sizable Indian expat population resides in the GCC nations as a whole. In actuality, the GCC has a great deal of opportunity for collaboration, encompassing the areas of politics, security, defence, energy, social and cultural interactions, and interpersonal relationships (Middle East Institute 2023, p. 1).

A new framework for India-Gulf relations centred on investment, political linkages, and defence and security cooperation has emerged as a result of India's expanding strategic and commercial interests in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have set ambitious investment targets of US$100 billion and US$75 billion, respectively, in response to India's growing economic appeal. With US$15.3 billion, the UAE is currently India's seventh-largest source of foreign direct investment. As of March 2022, Saudi Arabia had invested US$ 3.2 billion, and Qatar had invested more than US$1.5 billion in the previous year. One of the major projects is the US$ 44 billion Ratnagiri Refinery and Petrochemicals project in Maharashtra, which is being jointly developed by Indian, Saudi, and Emirati oil corporations (Ministry of External Affairs 2023, p. 1). Furthermore, India joined the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and collaborated with the I2U2 grouping due to its regional geo-economics focus. An intergovernmental framework agreement on IMEC was inked by the two countries during Modi's visit to the United Arab Emirates. However, the conflict between Israel and Hamas could cause both endeavours to be delayed (Middle East Institute 2024, p. 12).

Maintaining open and continuous marine routes of communication is India's primary goal for regional defence and security. The Indian Navy maintains a year-round presence in the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman, and a few Indian ships are frequently stationed in the Indian Ocean region as part of its "mission-based deployments." Even though it did not join the US-led task force, the Indian Navy boosted its deployment to 12 ships in response to shipping strikes in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to show itself as a trustworthy regional ally. In an effort to become the Gulf governments' "preferred security partner," India has also set up new military drills with a number of Gulf nations to improve collaboration and interoperability (Italian Institute for International Political Studies 2024, p. 1). The Indian Navy began conducting bilateral drills with the United Arab Emirates in 2018, Qatar in 2019, Bahrain in 2021, and Saudi Arabia in 2019. In January and February of 2024, the Indian Army conducted its first drills with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The UAE is becoming as India's most important regional defence partner; the only other regional nations with which India conducts army, air force, and navy drills are the UAE and Oman. India and the UAE have begun trilateral military cooperation with France, hosting an air force exercise in 2024 and a marine exercise in 2023 as a demonstration of their growing strategic trust (Observer Research Foundation 2024, p. 8).

From a strategic perspective, the GCC and India both want political stability and security in the area. Efforts to promote peace, security, and stability in the Gulf and South Asia are a direct result of India and the GCC's shared political and security concerns. Future prospects for India-GCC collaboration are further enhanced by the emergence of shared security perspectives. Since the GCC states are undergoing major changes, there are more opportunities for collaboration in these new areas. On September 26, 2003, the first-ever India-GCC Political Dialogue took place outside the UN General Assembly. The importance of this conversation, which signalled the beginning of a new chapter in India-GCC relations, was acknowledged by both parties. On September 10, 2022, during EAM's visit to Riyadh (September 10-12, 2022), India and the GCC signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Mechanisms of Consultations (Ministry of External Affairs 2024, p. 5). The MoU establishes a framework for yearly communication between EAM and the GCC-Troika, which consists of the GCC-SG, the foreign ministers of the current and incoming GCC presidents, as well as any other foreign ministers or senior officials from the GCC nations. Following the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding, Dr. Ausaf Sayeed, Secretary (CPV & OIA), MEA, visited Riyadh on March 20, 2023, for the inaugural India-GCC Senior Officials Meeting. During his May 6-7, 2024, visit to Riyadh, Shri Muktesh K. Pardeshi, Secretary (CPV & OIA), MEA, met Dr. Abdulaziz Aluwaisheg, Assistant Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council for Political Affairs and Negotiations (Ministry of External Affairs 2024, p. 1).

In order to attend the first-ever India-GCC Joint Ministerial Meeting for Strategic Dialogue, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar travelled to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, from September 8-9, 2024 (Press Information Bureau 2024, p. 1). The foreign ministers of every GCC nation, along with His Excellency Jasem Mohamed Albudaiwi, the GCC Secretary General, attended the first-ever meeting between India and the GCC at the level of foreign ministers. Furthermore, on September 9-10, 2024, His Highness Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, made his first official visit to India at Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's request. The involvement of Indian External Foreign Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar in this momentous strategic discussion highlighted a major improvement in the bilateral and multilateral ties between India and the Arab Gulf nations (Observer Research Foundation 2024, p. 1). His participation in this event underscored the significance of strengthening India-GCC ties, as did comparable platforms established between the GCC, Russia, and Brazil. With an emphasis on cooperation in commerce, investment, infrastructure development, and people-to-people relations, the India-GCC Joint Ministerial Meeting highlighted the expanding strategic alliance between India and the GCC. In addition to supporting economic growth in the region and India, this collaboration has the potential to make the global economy more stable and affluent.

Along with rising oil and gas imports, expanding trade and investment opportunities, and the presence of almost 8.9 million Indian workers in the area, India's long-standing, historical relationships with the GCC members are of critical importance. India has progressively strengthened its commercial ties with the GCC, particularly as a result of rising oil imports. Due to the return of demand after the COVID-19 disruption and the rise in oil prices following the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, these have increased dramatically in FY22. Bilateral trade between India and the GCC totalled USD 161.59 billion in FY 2023–2024. In FY 2023–24, India's imports totalled USD 105.3 billion, while its exports totalled USD 56.3 billion (Ministry of Commerce and Industry 2024, p. 1).

The main pillars of the India-Gulf relationship have historically been energy, trade, and protecting the safety of Indian expatriates. With almost 8.8 million Indian citizens living in the Gulf, India has a significant stake in its stability. The largest regional bloc commercial partner of India is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In FY2022-2023, trade with the GCC accounted for 15.8 per cent of India's overall trade, while trade with the EU made up 11.6 per cent (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis 2024, p. 2). With Saudi Arabia in fourth place, the UAE is India's third-largest trading partner worldwide and has long been its main trading partner in the Gulf. However, a deal has not yet been reached, even though India and the GCC declared in November 2022 that they intended to resume free-trade agreement (FTA) negotiations.

Table 4: Trade between India and the GCC Countries in the Fiscal Year 2023-2024

GCC Countries	2023-24		
	Import	Export	Total
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	31.4	11.56	42.9
United Arab Emirates	48.0	35.6	83.6
Qatar	12.3	1.7	14.0
Kuwait	8.3	3.1	10.4
Oman	4.5	4.4	8.9
Bahrain	0.83	0.9	1.7
Total	105.3	56.3	161.59

Source: Embassy of India, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Challenges and Future of India-GCC Relations

Though it confronts difficulties in forging political and commercial relationships in the wake of a worsening security situation, India stands to gain a great deal from expanding its relations with the Gulf. India's economic growth and energy security are directly impacted by the start of the Hamas-Israel war and shipping strikes in the Red Sea. However, India is still hesitant to actively participate in the complicated Middle Eastern affairs and has returned to its long-standing balancing act between Israel, Iran, and the Gulf (Chaurasia 2024, p. 4). If the conflict intensifies further, this can become more challenging. The ongoing postponing of a senior-officials conference since October 2023 is another example of how the war has affected the I2U2 minilateral group. India has demanded that despite the hostilities, economic projects like I2U2 and IMEC continue to advance. Finalising the India-GCC free trade agreement, which was first postponed because the GCC's chief trade negotiator changed, is another difficulty. Achieving an agreement that pleases every GCC state will be the main concern. Following Islamophobic remarks made by Indian authorities in May 2022, India too needs to exercise caution in managing diplomatic ties. The increasing demonstration of religious tolerance between India and the Gulf states contrasts with any Islamophobic statements made by Indian citizens. During his February visit, Modi opened a significant Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi as part of his "temple diplomacy" campaign to interact with India's expatriate population (Observer Research Foundation 2024, p. 1).

The improvement in relations between the Gulf and India occurs amid difficulties, such as the continuous wars in West Asia, like the Israeli attack on Gaza, which has claimed the lives of nearly 40,000 Palestinians. Dr. Jaishankar, India's External Minister, reaffirmed in his speech that India has traditionally supported a two-state solution to the Palestinian problem. He also emphasised how India has helped to strengthen Palestinian institutions and capabilities. Given their common interests, the almost 9 million Indian workers in the Gulf, and the sizeable volume of trade between them, India's relations with the Arab Gulf nations constitute an essential component of its foreign strategy (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis 2024, p. 1). Energy supply, security, and strategic partnerships continue to be vital areas of cooperation. Tensions in the Red Sea region have also increased military and naval cooperation.

Furthermore, India contributes significantly to the Gulf region's food supply by supplying manpower and necessities like fruits and vegetables. In order to promote sustainable development, regional stability, and global security, there is increasing expectation that India and the Gulf states would further strengthen their connections as they move to the future. India has made it clear that it wants the marine routes of communication in the Gulf to stay open and functional, but it has no plans to take on the role of a US-style guardian of Gulf security (Chaurasia 2024, p. 4). This would go against its long-standing policy of staying away from military organisations or alliances and avoiding overseas military deployments that aren't required by the UN. In general, India is reluctant to take the chance of jeopardising its fundamental regional interests by pursuing an overtly ambitious or assertive role. Maintaining ties with Iran in the face of potential sanctions from the US Trump administration will be a major obstacle for India in the Gulf. Given its sizeable Shia Muslim minority, India has historically sought to keep cordial ties with Iran. At Washington's insistence, New Delhi recently voted against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency and cut back on oil imports from Iran, which was once its second-largest supplier behind Saudi Arabia (Observer Research Foundation 2024, p. 1).

Conclusion

Diasporas have become influential groups because, in addition to their active participation in host countries, they are acknowledged as "soft power" in the context of foreign policy strategy and as a catalyst or agent of economic development in their home countries. In the realm of economics, for example, the Indian Diaspora has been viewed as a driving force behind its rise to prominence. Because they are transnational communities, diasporas have grown to be significant non-state actors and determining factors in global politics and economics. Gained skills and inspiration from their civilizational values have helped the more than 8.9 million diverse Indian diaspora in the Gulf region elevate their profile. Despite their diversity, originating from various historical and cultural migration contexts, they are united by their "Indianess" and strong cultural and emotional ties to Mother India; in fact, they are a microcosm of India and serve as a tool for "soft power diplomacy" to preserve India's cultural heritage. They have served as lobbying groups, bridges, mediators, and advocacy groups for prioritising India's economic and national security interests.

For India, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole is extremely important. The Arabian Sea is the only thing separating India's "immediate" vicinity from the Gulf. Therefore, India has a significant interest in the stability, security, and prosperity of the Gulf. The GCC as a whole has been influencing its member states' political, economic, and security strategies more and more. The GCC nations' efforts to integrate economically are progressing quickly. The GCC has become one of India's most important trading partners and holds great promise as an investment partner in the future. India's energy needs depend heavily on the GCC's large oil and gas deposits. There is a sizable Indian expat population spread across the GCC nations. To put it briefly, the GCC has enormous opportunities for collaboration in areas such as commerce, investment, energy, and labour. There is a sizable Indian expat population spread across the GCC nations. Due to a variety of economic, political, geopolitical, and security considerations, the Gulf countries are very important to India. The Gulf area is seen by India as its "extended neighbourhood." India's GCC policy has drawn more attention after Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014, signalling a significant shift in the country's foreign policy strategy towards the region's nations. Engagement between India and the Gulf nations has expanded in recent years beyond the historically dominated domains of energy, trade, and diaspora relations. In addition to forging strategic alliances and focussing on defence and security cooperation, India is also looking at new avenues of collaboration in subjects like renewable energy, health, climate change, food security, connectivity, and so on.

Engagement with West Asian nations has been further highlighted by Prime Minister Modi's "Think West" initiative. From a strategic perspective, the GCC and India both want political stability and security in the area. Efforts to promote peace, security, and stability in the Gulf and South Asia are a direct result of India and the GCC's shared political and security concerns. Future prospects for GCC-India collaboration are further enhanced by the emergence of shared security views. Together, the GCC has grown to be one of India's most significant commercial partners; in the fiscal year 2023-2024, bilateral trade reached an astounding $161.59 billion. Since the Gulf provides 35 per cent of India's oil and 70 per cent of its natural gas needs, that amounts to more than $105 billion in imports, the most of which are gas and oil. The two regions' growing economic relations are reflected in this interdependence.

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