

# India's Labour Migration to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia : Issues and Challenges

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## Abstract

The Indian economy has been benefitted by migration of Indian skilled and unskilled labour to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and partly filled its trade account deficit and facilitated in the management of balance of payments even in the period of global crisis. In many states of India such as Kerala, Punjab, etc. where remittances acted as the backbone of the state economy, there has been substantial improvement in the standards of life for migrant labour. Though, remittances play a crucial role in a developing economy like India, but on the other side, it is also true that Indian immigrants face a lot of challenges and exploitation in gulf countries. To keep all these things in mind, the present paper highlighted the issues and problems faced by Indian semi-skilled labour in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The results of the field survey showed that the frequent delay in wage payments was a major problem. The results also showed that the presence of middle men and lack of awareness in semi-skilled labours about their rights were the main causes of issues/problems related to immigrant labour. In the end, the paper suggested that the Government of India must play a pro-active role in solving all these issues.

**Keywords :** *international migration, India, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, semi-skilled labour, wage payment*

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Modern day labour integration across the world is an outcome of cross-border and intercontinental movements of labour. Historically, these movements took place in the colonial period in the form of slave trade and also in the form of international migration as people moved across borders in search of better lives and economic opportunities (Puri, 2008). However, in the 21st century, migration is not only associated with better livelihood, but it has become an integral part of globalization of the world associated with increasing integration of national economies, internationalization of production process and ownership in goods and services, demographic changes, and emerging employment opportunities across the world. Modern information & communication technology and advancements in transportation facilities have made migration more accessible to the poor and developing countries. Over the years, economic migration has largely deepened owing to the labor surplus and deficits in different parts of the world. Labour deficits are increasing in the North with demographic outcomes like ageing of the population and declining birth rates ; and labour surplus is created in the South due to rapid growth of population, which outpaces the available opportunities of employment (UNCTAD, 2010). As a result, to overcome the demand - supply gap in labor markets across the nations, economic migration takes place.

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In his theory of migration, Lee (1966) classified the factors leading to migration into two parts, that is, push factors and pull factors. A push factor is forceful, while a pull factor is attractive. For example, lack of jobs, not enough opportunities for growth, natural calamities like famines, poor medical care, etc. are classified as push factors, which force the labour into migration. On the other hand, better job opportunities, higher standard of living, social security benefits, etc. are considered as pull factors, which attract the labour for migration even if one is employed in the home country.

According to *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016* (prepared by World Bank), more than 247 million people, or 3.4% of the world population, live outside their countries of birth. Although the number of international migrants rose from 175 million in 2000 to more than 247 million in 2013 and surpassed 251 million in 2015, the share of migrants has remained just above 3% (of the world population) for the last 15 years. This shows that, although the absolute number of migrants across the world is rising, but this is in tandem with the rise in population of the world, as the percentage of migrants (of total world population) has remained more or less constant over the last 15 years.

Migration of workers to other countries is not new in India. The patterns and implications vary from time to time. Over the past 100 years or a little more, there have been a few major waves of migration. Migration from India on a significant scale began within the colonial era and continued after independence (Naidu, 1991). After independence, international migration got a boost, mainly because of oil discovery in gulf countries. At present, the Table 1 depicts that all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries come under India's top 10 migrant countries, which clearly shows that the GCC countries are a hot favourite for Indian emigrants. In fact, around two - third (65.8%) of India's total emigrants population is living in GCC countries and around one - fourth of Indian emigrants population is living in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia alone, followed by United Arab Emirates (UAE), United States of America (USA), Kuwait, and other countries. According to *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016* (prepared by World Bank), India has the largest expatriate population in the world as well.

Oil discovery paved the way for international migration to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the late 1930s. The pull factors attracted the immigrants to Saudi Arabia. Initially, labour was coming from neighboring countries of Saudi Arabia as well as from European countries to exploit huge oil reserves. According to the World Bank Group (2016), in 2013, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had the second highest stock of immigrants (after USA) in the world, that is, 14.6 million. Among them, a majority of the immigrants belonged to India.

Opportunities for better employment, higher wages, facilities, better working conditions, and attractive amenities also attracted migrants from Southeast and South Asian countries, including India in 1970s and after

**Table 1. Indian Expatriate Population in the World (December, 2017)**

Country	Indian Expatriate (NRIs)	Share (%)
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	32,55,864	24.43
United Arab Emirates	28,00,000	21.01
United States of America	12,80,000	9.60
Kuwait	9,17,970	6.89
Oman	7,83,040	5.88
Qatar	6,97,000	5.23
Nepal	6,00,000	4.50
Singapore	3,50,000	2.62
United Kingdom	3,25,000	2.44
Bahrain	3,12,918	2.35
Total	133,27,438	100

Source : Compiled from Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2017)

that, the migration has been increasing continuously despite several obstacles. According to the *Report of the High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora* (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2011), in 1975, the total number of Indian migrants to Saudi Arabia was 34,500. In December 2017, according to the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India's figures, 3.26 million Indians were living there.

After the discovery of oil, the oil industry grew in Saudi Arabia and consequently, there was a huge demand of skilled and unskilled labour. At present, the Saudi economy is largely dependent on foreign labour force; for skilled labour, it is mainly dependent on European nations ; and for semi-skilled and unskilled labour, it is dependent on Asian countries, including India. In 2015, the share of world expatriate population was approximately one-third (32.3%) in Saudi Arabia's total population, and Indian expatriates were 5.9% of the total expatriate population in Saudi Arabia, which is the highest among all expatriate nations in Saudi Arabia.

With the phenomenon of migration, several labour issues have also arisen in Saudi Arabia. Although, Saudi Arabia abolished the slavery system in 1962, according to international organization - Human Rights Watch (2014), conditions of foreign labour is like near-slavery in the Kingdom. Recently, in July 2016, approximately 10,000 Indian workers became unemployed because of shutting down of a construction company- Saudi Oger Limited. Due to this, workers' condition was worse ; many of them were surviving on just water and salt. Also, they couldn't go back to India because their passports were held by the company. A similar situation happened when another construction company named Saudi Binladin Group was closed down in 2015. In this scenario, it is pertinent to look at the labour issues holistically.

## Literature Review

Human migration or labour movement can be divided into two sections. When labour is migrating to another place within the country for work purposes, it is known as “internal migration,” while labour movement from one country to another country is called “international migration.” Cross border movement of labour is not a new phenomenon; it has its own history. It first happened at the time of the slave trade system (Puri, 2008). There are numerous causes behind migration and that is explained in different theories of migration.

According to the neoclassical theory, the main reason behind migration is wage differences in different places, and this is associated with demand and supply of labour. As per the dual market labour theory, pull factors are responsible for migration. New economic theory of migration states that migration is not only an individual decision; rather, it is influenced by family or society. This theory is based on LDCs. The main aim of migration is to take less risk and get maximum returns (remittances).

Besides the above theoretical underpinnings, there are numerous empirical studies, which talk about reasons of migration. Kaplan and Schulhofer - Wohl (2015) depicted that there was a 50% decline in inter-state migration in United States (U.S.) during 1991 - 2011. They concluded that the main reason behind this was decline in return because of geographical differences, and this happened because now, workers' learning abilities have increased due to a number of reasons. Hence, they concluded that over a period of time, geographical differences will be less responsible for migration. According to Birks and Sinclair (1980), labour movement from one country to another country is also affected by disequilibrium between demand and supply of labour in the domestic market. Because of this, there lies a difference in wage level between countries. The studies of Mehra and Singh (2013) and Malhotra and Devi (2018) suggested that economic factors like lack of job opportunities, failure of agriculture crop, and land ownership were prominent factors for internal migration in Ludhiana city (India).

International migration is also linked with the domestic country's economy in the form of trade. Empirical studies of Karayil (2007) and Tai (2009) suggested that there was a direct relationship between a country's immigrants in destination countries and their exports to those countries. The studies of Alam and Ahmed (2015, 2017) also suggested that trade was a very important link between India and GCC (including Saudi Arabia) countries for labour migration.

Another aspect of migration is remittances received by households. Zachariah, Prakash, and Rajan (2000) conducted a study based on field surveys conducted in the state of Kerala to analyze the impact of remittances upon the socioeconomic conditions of households. The results showed that the households receiving remittances from abroad enjoyed a fairly high level of consumption. There was a substantial investment in land and houses leading to a rise in land prices. There was practically no investment in productive activities. The entire sum of remittances sent from abroad was either used for consumption or investment in land and houses.

In the process of migration, a number of labour issues have also arisen. The studies by Zachariah, Prakash, and Rajan (2004) and Azhar (2016) suggested that delay in wage payment and other social security benefits are the main issues with the Indian labour working in gulf countries. Apart from this, they are also suffering because of domestic recruitment agencies.

The above discussed literature talks about the importance of international migration, its causes, issues of migrant labour, and their impact on an economy in the form of remittances and trade. The available literature also suggested that there is a positive relation between labour migration and trade between two sides. In the Indian scenario, in the form of remittances ; labour migration plays a crucial role in the Indian economy, but there is some recent news which indicates that the working conditions of Indian labour (especially semi-skilled or unskilled) are not good in gulf countries, especially in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, there is no research study which talks about the condition of migrant labour in Saudi Arabia from Uttar Pradesh (India). So, keeping all these things in mind, the present paper explores the problems and issues related to Indian immigrant labour in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

## **Data Sources and Methodology**

The data for the study were collected from primary sources. In order to know the problems faced by Indian migrant labour in the whole migration process either in India or in Saudi Arabia, a field survey was conducted in the Eastern part of Uttar Pradesh (Purvanchal Region) which includes six districts namely Varanasi, Mau, Azamgarh, Allahabad, Bhadohi, and Jaunpur during July - August 2016. Unfortunately, data of total Indian migrant labour from Eastern part of Uttar Pradesh (Purvanchal Region) to Saudi Arabia is not available. That is why the sample size was chosen on the basis of convenient sampling. Labour migration to Saudi Arabia from Northern India is comparatively a new trend, that is why these districts have been chosen. The data were collected from 114 workers consisting of those who visited Saudi Arabia for the purpose of employment. To see the latest issues and trends, only those respondents were taken who went to Saudi Arabia after 2000. After collecting the data, statistical tools like average method, tabulation method, and percentage method have been used for the analysis of results.

A field survey was done in six districts of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Among them, Varanasi and Mau districts are known for silk/cotton industry and Bhadohi district is known for its carpet industry. These three districts are the main source of employment generation for semi-skilled and unskilled workers among the whole of Eastern UP (Purvanchal). However, in the recent years, because of decline/fluctuation in the silk and carpet industry, employment generation is badly affected. Due to this, international migration to West Asian countries has increased from this region.

## **Empirical Analysis and Results**

Out of 114 sample respondents, all workers were male, 97% belonged to the Muslim community, and the remaining to the Hindu community ; 40% of the sample workers were married and the remaining were unmarried at the time of migration. Of the sample workers, 55% belonged to the age group of 18 - 25 years, 30% belonged to the age group of 26 - 35 years, and 15% were more than 35 years of age. Distribution of the sample workers on the

**Table 2. Financial Status of the Respondents**

Monthly Income (only Employed)	% of Sample Workers
Less than ₹ 5000	60
Between ₹ 5,000 to ₹ 15,000	38
More than ₹ 15,000	2

basis of their educational levels revealed that 24% of the respondents had education only up to the primary level, 56% had education up to the high school level, 11% were educated upto the intermediate level, and 9% had completed graduation and above. Some other characteristics of the respondents are discussed below :

**(1) Financial Status Before Migration :** The Table 2 depicts that before leaving India, approximately 89% of the sample workers were employed, among them, 60% sample workers' monthly income was up to ₹ 5000, 38% sample workers' monthly income was between ₹ 5000 to ₹ 15000, and the remaining 2% sample workers' income was more than ₹ 25000.

**(2) Migration Source :** Seventy two percent of the sample workers went to Saudi Arabia through agent and the remaining 28% went through either friends or family relatives. In the agent category, most of the workers directly approached unauthorized agents, whom we can call as a sub-agent<sup>1</sup> or a middle man. This man is working as a chain between migrants and authorized agent/person. Because of the unawareness of the rules and lack of knowledge of the process of migration, most of the persons have contacts through sub-agents.

**(3) Knowledge of Immigration Policy :** Among the sample of 114 respondents, only one worker was aware about the immigration policy of the Saudi Arabian government and other than that, only 19% of the respondents had a little bit idea through their relatives, friends, and the Internet. So, we can say that their information was vague.

**(4) Migration Expenditure :** The total average of migration expenditure including visa fee, medical fee, and ticket came out to be ₹ 82,939. The Table 3 depicts that 10% migrants did an expenditure of less than ₹ 50,000 ; 25% spent ₹ 50,000 to ₹ 75,000 ; 57% expended ₹ 75,000 to ₹ 1 lakh, and 8% spent more than ₹ 1 lakh rupees. To arrange money for this expenditure, 32% of the sample workers did not take any help from outside of their own family members, while only 0.88% sample workers took loan from bank and some from money lenders. The remaining sample workers took assistance from friends and relatives.

**(5) Working Conditions :** Out of the sample of 114 respondents, 11% sample workers worked in offices (clerical job), 30% worked in shops/hotels, 3% worked in houses, 38% worked in factories/at construction sites,

**Table 3. Expenditure on the Migration Process**

Total Expenditure (in ₹)	% Sample Workers
Less than ₹ 50,000	10
₹ 50,000 to ₹ 75,000	25
₹ 75,000 to ₹ 1 Lakh	57
More than ₹ 1 lakh	8

<sup>1</sup> This term was given by the respondents during field survey.



**Table 4. Wage Payments**

Wage Payment Status	%
Wage according to contract/promise.	43
Delay in wage payment (more than a month).	48
Full payment of over time.	64
Return back with all wages/allowances.	66

and 19% worked in open fields ; 28% of the sample workers' duty was up to 8 hours per day, 41% had working hours for 8 - 12 hours, 9% respondents worked for more than 12 hours, and 22% sample workers' duty hours were not fixed.

**(6) Wage Payment :** The Table 4 depicts that 43% of the sample workers reported that they did not get wages according to friends'/agents' contract or promise made in India. Further, 48% claimed that there was delay in payment of wages of about more than a month, 36% sample workers reported that they worked over time without any payment or half payment, and 34% workers also reported that they returned back to India without full payment of wage or bonus.

**(7) Non - Wage Benefits :** Ninety six percent of the respondents reported that their employers had provided accommodation without charging any extra cost. Among them, 48% of the sample workers said they shared one room with three other people, that is, four people in one room; 25% of the respondents lived in a room with five other people, that is, six people in one room; 15% lived in a room with seven other people, that is, eight people in one room ; and 12% shared a room with more than seven people. Further, 54% of the sample workers reported that their employer was providing food without any extra charge ; 89% of the sample workers reported that their employer had provided medical benefits in the form of medical insurance card. With the use of this card, they paid only 20% of the total medical expenditure.

**(8) Employer - Worker Relation :** The Table 5 depicts that 29% of the sample workers rated their employer/supervisor/*mudeer*<sup>2</sup> under 'good' category in terms of behavior, 8% said their behaviour was 'bad,' 50% said 'ok,' while 13% of the respondents said it was worse or unbearable<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, 6% of the respondents said that there was at least a single incidence of physical violence that happened with their employers, while 46% reported abusive/mental harassment incidents from employers' side.

**Table 5. Behavior of Employer**

% Sample Workers	Employer/Supervisor/ <i>Mudeer</i> Behavior
29	Good
50	Ok
8	Bad
13	Worse/unbearable

<sup>2</sup> It is Arabic word which means manager or supervisor.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, one respondent from Mau district told us that he was there for approximately 6 months and was working in the house of a Saudi national. During the whole period, he worked for around 18 hours a day and did not get payment even for a single month. He was continuously physically assaulted (got beatings) by his employer. At the end, once his owner was beating him, then he answered back and told the employer not to beat him ; consequently, the owner threw him in an isolated place for six days. He was not given any food to eat for 6 days for raising his voice.

However, only 11% of the respondents complained about this abusive behaviour in the Indian embassy. Those sample workers who complained to the Indian embassy, none of them were satisfied with the embassy's response; rather, they were very angry with the behavior and response of the embassy's staff members.

**(9) Kafala (Sponsorship) System :** *Kafala* system is used for monitoring of migrant labour in several gulf countries including Saudi Arabia. According to this system, a worker can enter only with legal *Kafala* (sponsor), which gives the employer immense control over all unskilled migrant workers. Generally, employers misuse this system and cause mental harassment to workers by delaying payments and not returning their passports and paying for return tickets. Nearly 18% of the sample workers returned to India with *khurooj*. *Khurooj* means they were blacklisted to return to Saudi Arabia for years. The reason of this *khurooj* was that being unhappy with their employers, some workers left their jobs and were living there illegally and this is the violation of the *kafala* system. During their return, they paid fine, some of them went to jail, and bore the cost of their returning air ticket themselves. Despite knowing the consequences of violating the *kafala* system, many workers returned back because they were fed up with their employers and this was their last option.

From the results of the field survey, it is very much clear that the sample workers were facing a number of problems in Saudi Arabia as well as in their home country. Their main motive of migration was to earn money and for that, they were ready to bear many difficulties. The results show that 43% of the sample workers did not get as much money as they were promised before migrating. Further, approximately half of the workers reported delays in payment. This was very painful for them because in India, their family members were directly dependent on this money, and they suffered a great deal due to this.

When asked about the reason behind these problems, then almost every sample worker directly blamed the supervisor/*mudeer*. *Mudeer* is a term used for the middle man between workers and the main owner of the company. The respondents claimed that the *mudeers* received timely wages, allowances, bonus, and overtime wages on paper from the employers on behalf of the workers, but delayed the payment of wages in their own interests, and a number of times, they did not pay the allowances and overtime wages at all without giving any genuine reason for that. In short, according to the respondents, the corrupt *mudeers* were one of the significant causes responsible for their problems.

The respondents were then asked that while they were facing all these problems, did they approach the Indian embassy to seek help. Out of all the respondents, only 11% reported that they approached the embassy to seek help, but none of them were satisfied with the action taken by the officials. In fact, they pointed out that the embassy officials were least sympathetic towards their condition, and they usually misbehaved with them instead of solving their problems. The remaining respondents did not approach the embassy; but most of them were suffering similar kinds of problems. There were a number of reasons for them not to seek help from the embassy. Some of the reasons are lack of awareness, fear of employers, distance of the embassy from their place of work, and general conception based on the past experiences of fellow workers that Indian embassy isn't helpful. The respondents also claimed that the embassy officials were giving better responses to the migrant workers from Kerala and took their issues seriously because they were better represented by their unions and associations due to which they were able to influence the embassy officials and also because they were better aware of the rights of migrant workers in their respective destination countries. On the other side, most North Indian workers were unheard by the embassy officials as they were unorganized and unrepresented. Unanimously, all sample workers suggested that the Indian embassy should follow the work culture of Philippines embassy that was doing much better for the rights of their expatriates.

The respondents were also asked that why they did not think of returning back to their home country if their condition was so miserable in the destination countries. They cited the main reason behind this was the rules of contract (*kafala* system). Approximately, two - third of the sample workers migrated to Saudi Arabia by borrowing money from their relatives and friends, etc. and returning back to the home country meant violation of

the rules of contract (*kafala* system) due to which they were supposed to pay fines and penalties if they left their jobs and also had to bear the cost of return ticket, which they couldn't afford ; 18% of the sample workers (those who could afford) returned back to India with *khurooj*<sup>4</sup>.

During the entire process of migration and during the stay of workers in their destination countries, the main source of their problems was always the middle man, that is, the sub-agent. Usually, sub-agents misguide migrant workers with false promises. Most of the respondents reported that they were cheated by the sub-agents with fake contracts being signed in India before migrating which promised them higher than actual wages. Furthermore, some respondents conveyed that they were charged more than their other counterparts by the sub-agents for the process of migration depending upon one's ability to pay and bargain and also the level of awareness. Some respondents reported that they realized that they were being cheated by the sub-agents even before migrating from India, yet they migrated because they had already paid the travel expenses to the sub-agent, which were non-refundable.

## Conclusion

Given the human resource profile of India, in the coming years, India will be a major source of human resources in the world. Remittances from gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia are one of the main reasons for the favorable balance of current account during the recent economic crisis. So, in the backdrop of all these points, problems faced by migrant labour become very crucial for the Indian economy. Hence, the Indian government should pursue these matters with the Saudi Arabian government in a proactive manner. There is a need to address the non-tariff barrier (man-made barrier) in context of migration of Indian labor to Saudi Arabia.

One of the main problems with unskilled or semi-skilled Indian migrants is lack of awareness or lack of knowledge of rules. Rajan, Varghese, and Jayakumar (2010) also obtained a similar finding. So, the Indian government (Ministry of External Affairs) should organize “awareness camps” for these aspiring migrant workers before leaving India so that they can make a wise decision as to migrate or not, and even if they decide to migrate, they should be well aware of the circumstances in their destination countries and the rules and policies for immigrants. This will make them well-equipped with knowledge of their own rights and in times of crisis, they would know whom to approach and the concerned office that can help them during their stay in foreign countries.

## Policy Implications

The migrant workers' lot is unlikely to improve until the reform of the *kafala* system, whereby workers are beholden to the employers who sponsored their visas (“The Middle East's migrant workers - Forget about rights,” 2013). So, the Indian embassy must play a proactive role to reform/abolish the *kafala* system in KSA similar to the governments of Bahrain and Qatar. Further, the embassy should also play the role of a supporter as the embassies of other developed and developing countries are doing for their expatriates. Philippines portrays itself as a role model in this regard. Also, the Indian government should make firm laws and take strict action against sub-agents in India who try to lure poor people to migrate with false promises and lead to their misery in foreign countries.

## Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

In the present study, field survey covers only semi-skilled labour. So, in the future, studies can be done on skilled labour also and can compare the conditions of both kinds of labour.

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<sup>4</sup> In this study, the respondents were interviewed at place of origin and not in destination place due to several reasons. Due to this, the percentage of blacklisted workers (*khurooj*) may be higher.



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