

## Protection of Migrant Workers

### What is the issue?

The stories of exploitation and labour violations faced by Indian workers in the Gulf countries should be looked at by remembering the five-decade history of migration to the region.

### How about the picture of migration in India?

- Globally, **India ranks first** in terms of international migrants and remittances.
- 6 countries in the Gulf alone account for close to 50% of Indian migrants.
- As per the latest Kerala Migration Survey (2018), close to 2 million Keralites reside in the Gulf.
- The **Kafala or sponsorship system** in the Gulf enables employers to wield significant power over the lives of migrant workers.
- Under the Kafala system a migrant worker's immigration status is legally bound to an individual employer or sponsor (kafeel) for their contract period.
- The migrant worker cannot enter the country, transfer employment nor leave the country for any reason without first obtaining explicit written permission from the kafeel.
- Often the kafeel exerts further control over the migrant worker by confiscating their passport and travel documents, despite legislation in some destination countries that declares this practice illegal.
- The exploitation of migrants led Parliament to enact the **Emigration Act of 1983**.

### What is the accusation on GCC countries?

*The GCC is a political and economic union of Arab states bordering the Gulf. It was established in 1981 and its 6 members are the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain.*

- Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been accused of not providing healthcare services, employment and social protection for workers during Covid-19.
- This led to large-scale repatriation during the pandemic.
- The Return Migration Survey conducted among 2,000 Vande Bharat returnees to Kerala revealed that among 47% who lost their jobs, 39% have reported non-payment of wages and reduction in wages.
- During the Dubai Expo 2020, there were several reports of non-payment of wages, contract violations and intimidation of workers.
- There are concerns over the rights violations and deaths of migrant workers during the construction of stadiums for the football World Cup to be held in Qatar.

- The countries are also implementing nationalisation policies, which could lead to forceful job termination.

### What efforts were taken in this regard?

- Due to the massive reporting of labour rights violations and criticism of the Kafala system, GCC countries are trying to reform labour laws.
- **The Abu Dhabi Dialogue**, a regional forum, is keen on developing information orientation programmes for workers, promoting technology platforms, and reforms in domestic workers' laws.
- The Government of India's portal "**Madad**" has enabled migrant workers from the country to file their grievances.

### What is the need of the hour?

- As much as the country of destination, the country of origin must also be responsible for the current situation.
- The draft Emigration Bill of 2021 (originally drafted in 2019) should be tabled fast.
- The bottlenecks in the countries of destination and origin imply a need for a joint effort to address the issues of migrants.
- India should play a leading role in building regional alliances in the South Asia-GCC corridor.
- A joint effort of all stakeholders including government, trade unions, recruitment agents and civil society can bring notable changes.

### References

1. [The Indian Express | How we can protect migrant workers](#)
2. [ILO | The Kafala System](#)

