

Indian Diaspora in the Middle East: Economic Roles and Cultural Contributions

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ABSTRACT

The Indian diaspora in the Middle East has grown significantly over the years, with millions of Indians living and working in the region. Despite their substantial presence, the economic and cultural contributions of the Indian diaspora in the Middle East remain understudied. This research aims to fill this knowledge gap by examining the economic and cultural contributions of the Indian diaspora in the Middle East. This study will examine the economic contribution of the Indian diaspora in the Middle East, including their role in trade, investment, remittances, and entrepreneurship. This paper examines the economic and cultural influence of the Indian diaspora in the Middle East, focusing on their position as “bridge builders” between India and the region. It will also analyze the cultural contributions of the Indian diaspora in the Middle East, including their impact on the region’s cultural landscape, social norms and values. Further it seeks to explore the key challenges faced by the Indian diaspora in the Middle East and to identify, how they navigate issues of identity, belonging, and integration in the Middle East. This research will use qualitative method. Data will be collected from research papers, journals, policy reports, and media articles.

Keywords: *Indian Diaspora, Soft Power, Middle East, Cultural Diplomacy, Economic*

India possesses a long and rich history of soft power. Numerous religions, communities, dialects, cultures, and customs have rooted in India from thousands of years. Elements such as yoga, Ayurveda, and Bollywood have significantly contributed to the contemporary global projection of India's soft power in international relations. Following its independence in 1947, India started forging connections with nations in the region and beyond. It is part of India's cultural diplomacy, also known as smart diplomacy, in addition to its soft power. India's modern engagement of soft power diplomacy traced to the late 19th century, when Swami Vivekananda discussed Hinduism and India during his visit to the Parliament of World’s Religion in Chicago in 1893. It marked an early and impactful example of projecting India’s cultural and spiritual heritage on global platform. Many Indians and foreigners had the chance to learn about Indian culture and the Sanskrit language as a result. His book on Raj Yoga inspired people in Western nations to travel to India and visit Ashramas in order to practice yoga. India's main soft powers are spiritualism, yoga, and Ayurveda, and the world is moving toward organic treatment methods, which have their roots in India. Dance, music, and the arts are exchanged culturally. Young people and the Indian

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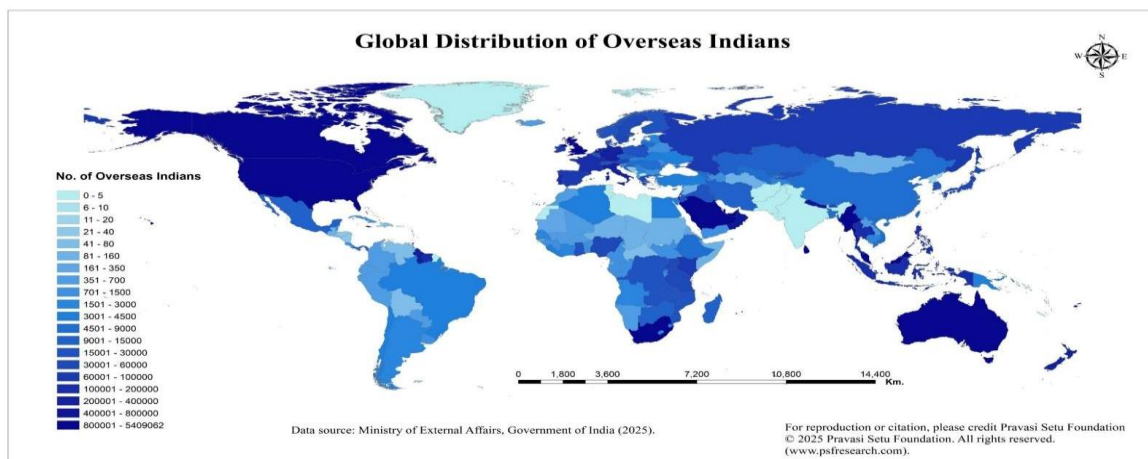
diaspora are the main tools used to promote Indian culture around the world. (Bhattacharya et al., 2021).

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in its World Migration Report 2024, India is the country of origin for the greatest number of migrants worldwide, with over 18 million individuals residing abroad. (IOM, 2024)

In the field of international studies, "diaspora" refers to the population of a particular nation or ethnic group living outside their native homeland, who retain connections with their home country (Brubaker, 2005). The Greek word diaspeirein, which meaning "to scatter," is the root of the English word diaspora. This term was first used to refer to the dispersion of particular people, most notably the diasporas of Jews, Armenians, and Africans. (Cohen, 2008). Over time, although, its application has expanded and changed over time. Now this term is used broadly to describe any individual or individuals who are citizens or residents of a certain nation and have a same ancestry or culture yet live abroad for a variety of reasons. Diasporas can form because of voluntary migration, economic opportunities, forced displacement, or political reasons. Such diasporic communities leading to transnational communities that uphold unique identities shaped by both their homeland and host country cultures (Safran, 1991).

Indian Diaspora: However, there is no exact definition of the expatriate community provided by the Indian government. Nonetheless, it usually includes Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), Overseas Citizens of India (OCI), and Non-Residential Indians (NRIs). OCI and PIO cardholders were merged into a single OCI category in 2015.

According to India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as of May 2024, there were approximately 35.42 million Indians living abroad, including 15.85 million non-resident Indians (NRIs) and nearly 19.57 million people of Indian origin (PIO). The largest Indian community in the world resides in the United States, where there are 5.4 million people, or 1.6% of the 345 million total population (GOI, MEA, Overseas Indian Population). There are 5.4 million Indians living in the United States, both PIOs and NRIs are included in this number. Due to economic and educational opportunities, Indian immigrants also live in significant numbers in the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Canada, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, the United Kingdom, and South Africa, respectively. However, the Middle East has become a popular destination for Indian migrants in recent decades.



Data Sources: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2025) www.psresearch.com

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India considers the Middle East to be a strategically significant area with significant geopolitical and geo economic implications. There are strong historical ties, cultural exchanges, and civilizational links between India and the area. Both have fought for independence and shared a colonial past in recent times. The Indian diaspora in the Middle East has grown significantly over the years, with millions of Indians living and working in the region. India's non-alignment strategy has gained a lot of regional support and strength since gaining independence. This migration, fueled by economic opportunity and historical links, has resulted in a thriving and powerful Indian community. The Indian community's contributions go beyond labor provision; they include considerable economic investments, entrepreneurial enterprises, and a rich cultural interaction that enhances the social fabric of the host countries. According to Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2024), Middle Eastern nations like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait draw a sizable influx of Indian migrants because of their welcoming investment climates and government initiatives to hire highly qualified personnel. The Indian diaspora in the Middle East, particularly in the UAE and Gulf countries, plays a crucial role in shaping economic, cultural, and diplomatic ties between India and the region (Ansari & Fatima, 2024; Dar & Janbaz, 2024).

Over a quarter of the global Indian diaspora, officially estimated to number around 9.09 million, is located in the Middle East. Its main concentrations are in the United Arab Emirates (3.43 mn), Saudi Arabia (2.6 mn), Kuwait (1.03 mn), Oman (781,000), Qatar (747,000), Bahrain (327,000), Israel (97,000), Jordan (21,000), Iraq (18,000), Yemen (10,000), Lebanon (9,000), Algeria (6,000), Iran (4,000), Egypt (4,000), Turkey (1,700), Sudan (1,600), Libya (1,500), Morocco (350); Mauritania (150), Tunisia (137), Syria (94) and Palestine (20). As can be seen, over 98 per cent of Indians present in the Middle East are in six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Moreover, Nearly two-thirds of Indian presence in the Middle East is concentrated in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. (Sachdev, Mahesh. May 14, 2025).



Source: IndianDiaspora.org <https://www.indiandiaspora.org/news/global-footprint-indian-diaspora-worlds-largest-diaspora>

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on the Indian diaspora in the Middle East has increasingly focused on its dual socio-cultural and economic contributions. On the economic front, researchers have documented the massive volume of remittances, growing foreign direct investment, and the diaspora's role in strengthening bilateral trade and economic relations (Anam et al., 2022; Ansari et al., 2024). While other studies have explored the cultural and soft power dimension, demonstrating how Indian traditions, festivals, languages, and community networks enrich host societies while simultaneously enhancing India's image and diplomatic goodwill in the region (Puri et al., 2023; Puri Anima et al., 2023). Overall, Scholarly work highlights the Indian diaspora as a strategic transnational actor whose contributions extend considerably beyond narrow economic transactions. Contemporary scholars presents the diaspora's role as multifaceted—extending beyond economic flows to include social remittances, network-building, and long-term contributions to interstate relations—positioning it as a cornerstone of India's outreach and shared prosperity in the region.

Research Objectives

This research examines the dual contributions—economic and cultural—of the Indian diaspora in the Middle East. This study economically analyzes the involvement of Indian diaspora in trade, investment, and remittances, and culturally, it evaluates their influence on the social mores and cultural landscape of the area. this study emphasizing their role as link builders between India and the Middle East and also looks into how this diaspora handles problems of identity, integration, and belonging in the Middle East in order to identify the main obstacles they face. Data collected from published research papers, articles, policy reports, and media articles to do qualitative investigation.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies a qualitative research approach to explore the multifaceted role of the Indian diaspora in Middle Eastern countries as cultural and economic bridge. Qualitative methods are employed to interpret complex social, economic, and cultural phenomena through non-numerical data. The research design is both analytical and descriptive. Data collection relies on secondary sources which include peer-reviewed academic articles, books, reports from international organizations such as World Bank, ILO, and Ministry of External Affairs, India.

Historical Context:

India and the Middle East have a long history together that predates contemporary migration trends. Nearly four millennia ago, India's ancient commercial contacts were intimately linked to the origins of the Indian diaspora. Trade with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia was thriving even during the Indus Valley Civilization, establishing the groundwork for the tiny commercial communities and which eventually gave rise to the contemporary Indian diaspora. (Brahamchari, 2011)

India has historically been linked to many regions of the world, particularly the Middle East, through its marine trade. To engage in lucrative business dealings with Arab traders, Indian traders, especially those from coastal regions, journeyed to the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East. This trade made it easier for India and the Arab world to exchange goods, concepts, and cultures. Indian traders, sailors, and merchants arrived in the Middle East through the Indian Ocean trade routes, which resulted in the development of coastal settlements. However, Arab traders also visited India and made important cultural contributions, particularly in coastal regions like Gujarat and Kerala in western India. (MEA, 2016). In search of better economic opportunities, traders and laborers from India started

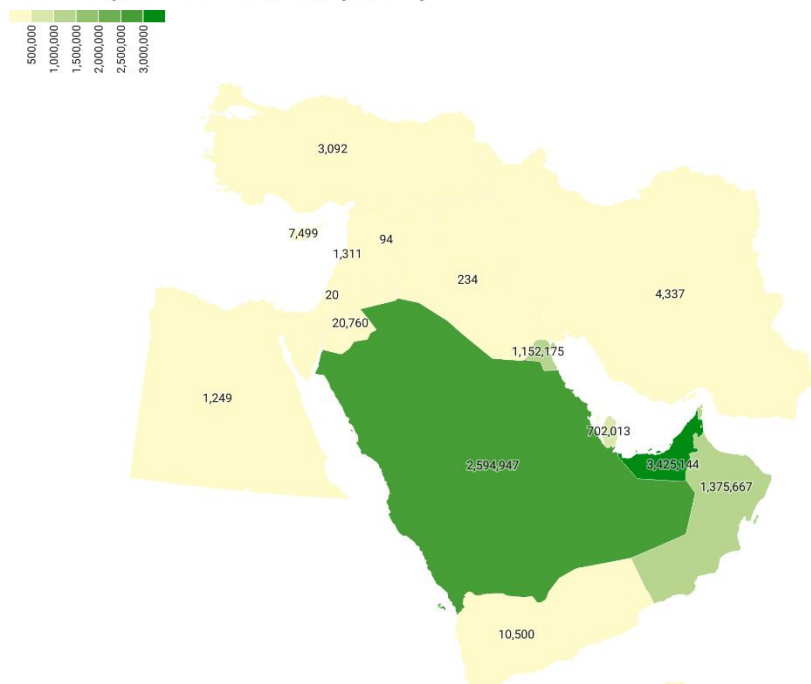
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moving in great numbers to the Middle Eastern countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The development of the Middle Eastern building, trading, and pearl-diving industries depended heavily on Indians. Many Indians, particularly those from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, went to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain to work in a range of industries. The Indian population in the Middle East has expanded dramatically over time. While assimilating into the local culture, some communities have managed to preserve their cultural identity. (Naha Alik, 2024)

Mainly it can be seen that Indian migrants or their ancestors, left the subcontinent as part of various migration patterns. In general, since earliest period traders were migrated to develop profitable ties. Than in 19th and 20th century indentured laborers were migrated to Malaya, Mauritius etc. After the Second world war, and partition of India refugees and conflict driven migrated, in neighboring countries. But when the oil industry boom in the Gulf countries during 1970s resulted in formation of “Gulf Diaspora” in West Asian countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain etc.

For millennia, trade routes over the Arabian Sea made it easier to interchange products and ideas. However, the oil boom and the ensuing need for workers in infrastructure, services, and construction drove the current wave of Indian migration in the 1970s. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, particularly the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, became primary destinations for Indian migrants. (El-Arifi, 1986) Varied demographic, including entrepreneurs, semi-skilled laborers, and skilled professionals, characterizes the migration pattern. This community contributes significantly to both host and home countries through remittances, trade relations, and cultural exchange (Parija, 2021; Pattnaik et al., 2024).

Indian Diaspora in the Middle East By Country



Map: Brilliant Maps - Source: <https://brilliantmaps.com/indian-diaspora-middle-east/> - Created with Datawrapper

Significance of Diaspora, both for India and for destination countries

The Indian diaspora is not only a workforce, but they are the face of India's soft power in the Middle East. They play a significant role and project the values of their homeland such as tolerance and diversity onto the global stage. The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, the agency dedicated to supporting India's diaspora, states that the country's tolerant, pluralistic society "in which people of different faiths, languages, ethnicities and political persuasions co-exist and thrive" is key to India's positive migratory movements and labor mobility. (Pethiyagoda, 2017) The Indian diaspora is the largest expatriate group in the Middle East, numbering approximately 9.25 million as of 2024 (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2024). Their economic impact is foundational, spanning from infrastructure development to high-end professional services.

One of the most significant aspects of India's involvement with the Middle East is the movement of Indian human resources there and the remittances that these nations send back. In the six GCC nations, the population of Indians barely was 1,23,000 in the year 1975 which was increased in the year 1980 approximately to 7,00,000 and then to 1.5 million in 1991. (GOI, 2020b, 2020c, MEA) The movement continued in the 1990s and 2000s, and by 2020, there were around 8.5 million Indians living in the GCC countries prior to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, which risen up to 3.2 million in the year 2000 and 6.5 million in the year 2010.

Growth of Indian Diaspora in GCC States

Year	Approximate Indian Population	Trend
1975	1,23,000	Initial Stages of Migration
1980	7,00,000	Rapid Growth (nearly 6 times increase)
1991	1.5 Million	Doubled in a decade
2000	3.2 Million	Continued steady climb
2010	6.5 Million	Significant surge in labor demand
2020	8.5 Million	Pre-pandemic peak

Data compiled from Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Government of India (GOI) reports (2020b, 2020c)

Although, no official numbers are available to suggest it with certainty, but given the pattern of return migration owing to COVID-19 and labor sector reforms in GCC nations, it is expected that the figure will alter somewhat in coming years. And now its seems clear that the number of Indian migrants are continuously increased in middle eastern countries due to new opportunities. According to the report of PEW research center, in 2024-2025, the number of Indian migrants in Middle Eastern countries is estimated to be around 10 million, with the majority residing in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. This includes countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain. The Indian diaspora in the Middle East is a significant part of the overall global Indian diaspora, which is estimated to be over 18.5 million. (Pew Research Report. 2024).

Contribution of Indian Diaspora in different Sectors

Indians form the world's largest expatriate (or diaspora) community. A significant proportion—approximately 85%—reside in countries near the Gulf region, particularly the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. For project execution, service delivery, and supply chain maintenance, these nations rely heavily on foreign expatriates.

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Indians play a critical role in the development of the Gulf, with more than three million working in the healthcare industry alone, Indian expatriates in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries primarily work in three main occupational categories.

The first category comprise of semi-skilled or blue-collar jobs, which include drivers, artisans, craftsmen, technicians, and various other skilled manual workers, often in sectors such as transportation, construction, manufacturing, and services.

The second category includes unskilled labour, extensive roles such as agricultural or livestock support, general labourers in construction sites, retail assistance, and other entry-level manual positions. This category also involves the care economy, which is growing economy in the Arab region, particularly migrant domestic workers who perform household tasks. This includes cooks, nannies, cleaners, elderly caretakers, and caregivers for the sick or disabled. The Arab Gulf region depends heavily on international migrant domestic workers—many of them women from South Asia, including India—to fulfil required care needs within private households, especially as more local women enter the formal workforce, increase demand for child, elderly, and family care support. Recent estimates indicate that approximately **70%** of Indian migrants in the GCC are engaged in blue-collar, semi-skilled, or unskilled roles (including domestic work). Data of ILO shows that the Arab States employ around 6.6 million domestic workers aged 15 and above, who account for approximately 12.3% of total employment in the region. Most domestic workers in the Arab States are from Asian and African countries like Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Ethiopia. (International Labour Organization. (n.d.))

The third category includes white collar jobs such as doctors, engineers, architects, academicians and accountants. India continues to be a major supplier of skilled labor for Gulf countries, per UNCTAD data from 2020. (Pattnaik, et al., 2024). The vast majority of them semi-skilled or unskilled workers. These workers constitute an important source of income for India and are contributing to the success and well-being of Gulf economies. (Pethiyagoda, 2017). As GCC nations move toward "Vision 2030" goals (diversifying away from oil), the Indian diaspora is increasingly involved in high-growth sectors such as AI, fintech, and blockchain (Times of India, 2025).

But this distribution highlights the predominance of low- to medium-skilled labor among Indian expatriates, which supports key sectors of the Gulf economies but often involves challenging working conditions.

Contribution of Indian Diaspora in Economy

The economic contributions of the Indian diaspora are substantial and varied. India is the world's largest beneficiary of remittances. According to World Bank estimates, remittances to India topped \$125 billion in 2023. Remittances account for about 3.4% of GDP in the economy. Highly skilled migrants from the UK, US, and Singapore account for three-quarters of all remittances. After US, the UAE is the second-largest source, accounting for 18% of all remittances to India.

According to World Bank, India's inward remittances are estimated of US\$ 129.1 billion in 2024 with a share of 14.3 percent in global remittances, the highest ever for a country in a year. (The Hindu, 2024). This capital inflows not only support the Indian economy but also strengthen trade and investment opportunities by fostering economic linkages between India and the Middle East. The Indian diaspora also contributes economically by remitting large

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sums back home, which helps the economy of their host Gulf nations. The Indian diaspora helps to facilitate trade between India and their host countries by opening up new markets and opportunities. The diaspora population opens up new markets for Indian goods and boosts the host economy by bringing Indian goods to the host countries and consuming them themselves.

Additionally, migrant workers frequently save an amazing 55%–75% of their earnings, which strengthens the economic advantages they provide to India. Thus, the Indian diaspora acts as a conduit for bilateral collaboration in a number of areas, such as commerce, travel, healthcare, and education. (Pattnaik et al., 2024).

Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi addressed the Indian Diaspora about India's success during his prime ministerial tenure, during the visit of Abu Dhabi in January 2018. (Srinivas,2019). On the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary, on 2 October, 2016, Mr Modi inaugurated Pravasi Bharatiya Kendra (Indian Diaspora Centre) stating that: "Indian Diaspora should be looked at, not just in terms of its numbers, but also in terms of its strength. Modi said that for years the term "brain drain" has been in vogue. But if we look at the Diaspora as our strength, we can convert this into "brain gain". It shows importance of Indian Diaspora for Indian Government as well as for destination countries.

The Middle East is a vital transcontinental region includes Southwestern Asia and parts of North Africa. In the **western Middle East** (primarily the Gulf Cooperation Council countries—Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain), the Indian diaspora—numbering is differed than the **eastern Middle East** (including countries like Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria). The **eastern Middle East** hosts a much smaller and less economically prominent Indian community.

Indiaspora, a non-profit organization has released a report on the Indian Diaspora in the UAE. This report says, the Indian Diaspora is a part of the UAE's transition beyond oil dependency towards a knowledge-based economy driven by high growth sectors such as AI, technology and fintech. "Their expertise and entrepreneurial spirit will add to the UAE's competitive edge and global positioning." Sesh Iyer, managing director of BCG X told the Times of India, "Indian Diaspora in the UAE, provides a platform to look at the extent of meaningful contribution in their karma bhumi." (Ishani Gupta, 2025, 25 Feb.) There are 22.19 lakh Indians employed in a variety of industries in Saudi Arabia. Indians make up a significant portion of Kuwait's workforce, with about 8.29 lakh employed in a variety of industries, including construction, healthcare, and services. Approximately 8 lakh Indians reside in Qatar and work in a variety of industries, such as engineering, construction, healthcare, and hospitality. (Chauhan, Rishabh. 2024). These workers' remittances are an essential source of foreign cash for India and have a major impact on the country's economic expansion. With a nominal GDP of \$5.2 trillion in 2024, the Middle East has a sizable economy. Indian migrants primarily contribute to this economy through remittances. These remittances support local economies across the Middle East as a result of workers' consumption of goods and services.

The UAE, and specially Dubai, has carved out a prominent positioned itself as a commercial and re-export hub, attracting Indian traders, professionals and businesspeople. Indian business have established a significant presence in sectors such as finance, retail, technology, and hospitality. The UAE's investment-friendly policies, tax incentives, and ease of doing business have inspired many Indian companies to set up their regional headquarters in Dubai

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or Abu Dhabi. Indian businesses play a key role in UAE's commercial sector, contributing to its economy and promoting bilateral trade with India. Indian businesses in the UAE also re-export goods to Africa, Europe, and other parts of the Middle East, further enhancing India-UAE trade links (Gallo, 2020)

In important industries including retail, hospitality, healthcare, and construction, a sizable percentage of the workforce is made up of Indians. With an astounding 35.54 lakh employed Indians, the UAE has the highest Indian workforce. It has developed into a thriving destination for highly qualified professionals and is a major center in the Middle East. In the UAE alone, there are approximately 25,000 Indian doctors and 55,000 Indian nurses, making them integral to the region's healthcare ecosystem (Times of India, 2025). Furthermore, over 400,000 children in the UAE are educated in Indian-run schools, contributing to the human capital development of the host nation. Large Indian-owned conglomerates like LuLu Group International (retail) and Aster DM Healthcare have become household names. These businesses provide thousands of jobs for both expatriates and locals, stimulating internal consumer spending (ForumIAS, 2024).

This joint venture showcase the considerable depth of economic collaboration, where the Indian diaspora often acts as a facilitator in connecting business interests on both sides (Pant, 2019) instance, in 2019, Saudi Aramco, in partnership with the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), signed an agreement to invest in a massive oil refinery project in Maharashtra, India, further strengthening energy cooperation. Indian diaspora entrepreneurs have built massive empires in the Middle East (UAE), such as M.A. Yusuff Ali (Lulu Group), Micky Jagtiani (Landmark Group), and Ravi Pillai (R.P Group), who transformed the region's retail and infrastructure sectors. Indian-owned companies are also major economic players in the Middle East such as the LuLu Group International and Aster DM Healthcare. These are major employers and contributors to the retail and healthcare sectors. As of year 2023, over 90,000 Indian-owned companies were registered with the Dubai Chamber of Commerce.

Tourism is also a growing sector in UAE, specially Dubai is the most preference country for Indian tourists. This interest encouraged tourism investment, such as Indian-owned hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies in the Gulf, which cater Indian diaspora and Indian visitors alike. (Rana, 2016) The Middle East, particularly UAE and Saudi Arabia have a thriving Indian hospitality sectors. For example, Tresind Studio & Carnival by Tresind, Zafran Indian Kitchen (Riyadh), Indego by Vineet & Indya by Vineet, Avatar (Dubai), Rameshwaram Cafe (UAE), Taj Hotels (UAE): The Tata-owned IHCL (Indian Hotels Company Limited) operates multiple high-end properties, including Taj Dubai (Downtown), Taj Exotica Resort & Spa (The Palm), and Taj Jumeirah Lake Towers etc.

Saudi Arabia hosts India's largest expatriate community, with roughly 2.6 million Indian nationals forming a vital economic force. They deliver significant remittances to India, strengthen foreign exchange reserves, supply skilled labor across infrastructure, IT, and healthcare, and advance Saudi Vision 2030 goals, further reinforced by the establishment of numerous Indian firms in the country. (Pattnaik & Panda, 2025) The diaspora acts as a bridge for bilateral trade between India and Saudi Arabia, which stood at US\$ 41.87 billion in FY25, with India acting as a vital partner in Saudi food security and the diaspora supporting both economies. (Pattnaik & Panda, 2025)

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The Indian diaspora in Lebanon, although relatively small, numbering between 2,000 and 4,000 individuals as of 2023–2025, who plays a significant role in specific sectors of the Lebanese economy, particularly construction, manufacturing, and services. (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023) The Indian expatriate community (nearly 3.5 Lakhs) enjoys great goodwill from the Bahraini authorities and the employers alike. Indians are preferred over other expatriates from the subcontinent. The main reasons for this include the trust factor, strong work ethics and the “apolitical” orientation of Indian expatriates. There is also an area called “Little India” in Bahraini Capital. Bahrain launched ‘Little India in Bahrain’ project in November 2015 to acknowledge and mark the contribution of Indian community to the history and progress of Bahrain. (Embassy of India, Bahrain, 2025)

Data Chart: Indian Population & Sectoral Impact (2024-2025)

Country	Estimated Indian Population (2024)	Key Sectors of Contribution
United Arab Emirates	3,554,274	Construction, Healthcare, IT, Retail
Saudi Arabia	2,645,302	Oil & Gas, Healthcare, Construction
Kuwait	1,000,726	Domestic Services, Retail, Logistics
Qatar	835,000	Engineering, Banking, Infrastructure
Oman	673,000	Manufacturing, Education, Finance
Bahrain	350,000	Hospitality, Trade, Finance
Total (GCC)	9,258,302	—

Source: Compiled from Ministry of External Affairs (2024) and Indiaspora Report (2025).

Countries like Jordan, Egypt, Iran, and Israel don't have as many Indian migrants as places like the UAE or Saudi Arabia, but the Indian community there still plays an important role in specific industries and areas. Jordan, where most of the Indians are engaged in key sectors like garments, manufacturing, constructions, healthcare and IT. Although the number of Indians in Jordan is less than other middle eastern countries but approximately 15 garment companies of Indian origin, with investment of around USD 500 million in Jordan, play a significant role in country's export oriented manufacturing sector. (PIB, 2025)

Although the Indian diaspora in Egypt is comparatively small (approximately 3,600–4,300 people), its members are deeply integrated into local society and make substantial contributions to Egypt's economy via individual efforts and established Indian enterprises. Over 500 Indian companies are registered in Egypt, with about 50 active in sectors like chemicals, textiles, agriculture, and automobiles. These companies have invested over US\$ 3 billion in the Egyptian economy. Indian companies in Egypt provide direct and indirect employment to approximately 38,000 to 48,000 Egyptians. Indian companies such as INDORAMA are investing in fertilizer plants, while ReNew and OCIOR have signed agreements for green hydrogen production. Indian companies in Egypt also contribute to over US\$ 1 billion in annual exports from Egypt. (Lentin, 2023)

The Indian diaspora's direct, large-scale economic contribution to Iran is limited compared to GCC nations, yet Indian engagement primarily drives economic ties through strategic infrastructure, particularly the Chabahar Port development. Indian diaspora significantly contributes to Iraq's economy, primarily through labour, technical expertise, and business operations, particularly in the post-war reconstruction phase. While the Indian community in Iraq is smaller compared to other Gulf nations—estimated at around 15,000–17,000

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individuals—their presence is vital in specific, key sectors. As of 2024, the Iraqi Ministry of Health has recruited hundreds of nurses from India to uphold its healthcare system, with 846 nurses working in various Iraqi hospitals. Indian visitors to holy cities like Karbala and Najaf, which total 30,000–40,000 annually, also contribute to the local economy through tourism and related services. (Indo Iraq Economic and Cultural Council, 2025)

The Indian diaspora remains comparatively small in countries such as Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Yemen, Tunisia, Palestine, Iraq, and Iran relative to the much larger communities in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. However, recent bilateral agreements—particularly with Israel following 2023—have facilitated the recruitment of up to 100,000 Indian workers, primarily in construction and caregiving sectors, to address labor shortages and sustain key industries amid regional geopolitical shifts.

The obvious difference in the economic contributions of the Indian diaspora between the eastern (Gulf Cooperation Council countries) and western (Levant nations like Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine) regions of the Middle East appear mainly from the scale of migration, with around 9 million Indians in the Gulf sending home over \$50 billion in remittances annually, spurred by high-consumption sectors like construction and oil amid economic stability. In contrast, the western region hosts fewer than 100,000 Indians, contributing negligibly to remittances due to political instability, conflicts, and limited job opportunities, which have historically restricted large-scale labor inflows. This disparity is further intensified by the Gulf's robust bilateral economic ties with India, enhancing trade and investment, while the Levant's challenges prioritize evacuation and welfare over economic migration. (Kumar, 2025)

Cultural Contribution of Indian Diaspora

One common way through which diasporas support their home countries is through remittances, or money sent home by those who work abroad. These remittances provide crucial economic assistance, particularly to developing countries. However, their significance extends beyond their monetary clout. Additionally, diasporic communities can serve as cultural ambassadors, promoting their home country's interests, values, and culture abroad and strengthening soft power. (Gamlen, 2019). As Joseph Nye suggests that countries don't always need to use force or money to get what they want. Instead, they can use 'soft power'—the power of attraction. By sharing their culture and values, they can convince others to join their cause voluntarily because they find those values appealing. (Nye, 1990)

There are deep and enduring cultural ties between India and the Middle East. It appeared in every aspect of life, from cuisine and language, in art and architecture. The influence has grown over millennia of interactions.

The role of the Indian diaspora in cultural diplomacy goes beyond entertainment and the arts. In the business sector, building economic relationships is greatly aided by cultural diplomacy. Business ties between Indian and Middle Eastern entrepreneurs are frequently sparked by shared cultural values and customs. Seamless business negotiations and collaborations are made possible by the diaspora's cultural awareness and insights. (Singh, 2012). Indian film festivals are now commonplace in the Middle East due to the popularity of Bollywood movies, which has increased interest in Indian cinema. An annual event that promotes Indian cinema and draws moviegoers from the Middle East and India, the Indian Film Festival of Dubai helps to deepen cultural ties. (MEA, India-UAE Bilateral Relations, 2017).

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Educational institutions also contribute a significant role in India's soft power strategy. The establishment of Indian schools and universities in the Gulf has provided educational opportunities for Indian expatriates while promoting Indian culture and values among local populations. These institutions serve as platforms for cultural exchange, fostering an appreciation for Indian traditions among diverse student bodies. Furthermore, collaborations between Indian and Gulf educational institutions have facilitated academic exchanges, research partnerships, and joint programs, enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation (Rana, 2016)

The Indian diaspora actively amplifies India's soft power through visible cultural diplomacy. A landmark example is the inauguration of the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi in February 2024, the first traditional Hindu temple in the UAE, (also recognized as largest Hindu temple in West Asia), which symbolizes interfaith harmony and has become a major tourist and cultural attraction (Times of India, 2024; Arab News, 2024). Various institutions such as India Social and Cultural Centre (ISC), Abu Dhabi, Bahrain's Indian Social Club and Kalamandalam, Kuwait's India Social and Cultural Centre and Indian Community Welfare Committee, Qatar's Association of Indian Professionals and Bharathi Kalai Mandran, Saudi Arabia's Indian Doctors Forum, and the UAE's Indian Tamil Fine Arts Association are examples of active Indian cultural entities in the Gulf that are legally established in their respective host countries. In 2019, India launched a USD 4.2 million redevelopment project of the **Sri Krishna temple** in the Bahraini capital, Manama. The 200-year-old temple stands as an evidence for the enduring India-Bahrain friendship. Indian Social Club (ISC), Oman is a registered body that, through its language and regional wings (e.g., Kannada wing, Tamil wing), hosts various cultural, literary, and social events.

Indian classical dance forms such as Odissi, Kathak, and Bharatanatyam, along with traditional music, have captured the attention of Middle Eastern audiences. Indian dance troupes and performers frequently perform at prestigious festivals and events, contributing to the region's cultural scene. For example, the Festival of India, which took place in Qatar, encouraged cultural exchange between the two areas, by bringing together well-known Indian classical dancers and musicians. The Indian diaspora has contributed significantly to the culinary culture of the Middle East. Because of its rich flavors, aromatic spices, and diverse menu, Indian cuisine has become one of the most beloved and sought-after culinary experiences on a global scale. The Middle East has embraced Indian food and its own vibrant culinary culture, which has led to a dramatic rise in its popularity over time. The Middle East and the Indian subcontinent have had close cultural and economic ties for a very long time.

These interactions facilitated the sharing of spices, ingredients, and culinary practices, laying the groundwork for the integration of Indian flavors into Middle Eastern cuisine. The demand for authentic Indian restaurants has grown as a result of the strong cultural ties created by the large populations of Indian expatriates in countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait. Culinary innovation has been largely responsible for the Middle East's growing interest in Indian cuisine in recent years. Many restaurants have creatively blended Indian flavors with local ingredients to produce delectable fusion dishes that appeal to the diverse palates of the area's cosmopolitan population. This culinary fusion has created new opportunities for Indian and Middle Eastern chefs, as well as resulting in unique and delectable dining experiences across the MENA Region. Indian festivals, cuisine, music, and Bollywood movies have become more well-known in the region as a result of a strong cross-cultural exchange. Indian cultural elements have left a lasting impression on Middle Eastern culture. Bollywood films, Indian traditional dance performances, and music concerts attract a

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sizable audience to the region. These artistic mediums are powerful tools of cultural diplomacy because they help audiences in the Middle East and India feel more familiar and connected while bridging the cultural gap. The Indian diaspora in the Middle East has actively contributed to the establishment of educational and religious institutions. (Gautam, M.K. 2013 Indian Diaspora. MEA, India)

Historically, maritime trade routes fostered deep linguistic ties. Today, the presence of various Indian languages (Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil) in the public sphere creates a multicultural environment that assists in the region's globalized outlook (Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.). Similarly, large-scale Diwali celebrations featuring public fireworks, cultural performances, and events at Expo City Dubai and the BAPS Temple regularly draw thousands of local residents and expatriates. The annual International Day of Yoga is enthusiastically celebrated across Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar, often in collaboration with host governments and the Indian diaspora, further embedding Indian wellness traditions into Gulf societies. These initiatives, supported by diaspora-led organizations and Indian missions, enhance India's image as a tolerant, culturally rich partner and foster people-to-people bonds.

Challenges Before Indian Diaspora in the Middle East

According to scholarly analyses, the majority of Indian migrants and diaspora members in the Middle Eastern region—particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states consists of low and semi-skilled labourers who typically arrive on temporary work visas. This migration pattern, while economically beneficial through remittances, exposes these workers to significant vulnerabilities, including exploitative labor conditions, limited legal protections, and health risks, underscoring the need for enhanced bilateral policies to safeguard their rights and welfare. (Pethiyagoda, 2017)

Many Indian migrants have moved abroad for employment purposes; India is a significant source for low- and semi-skilled workers, as well as professionals in the health-care and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. (Ruchi Singh, 2022) In the Middle Eastern region, the majority of migrants arrive on temporary basis, and the implementation of short term contracts ensures a swift turnover of migrant workers. (Thiollet, H. 2016).

Indian migrants are maintaining close socio-economic and cultural relations with their origin country. Hence, there arose a need for taking care of emigrants in different countries regarding their rights, employment, exploitation, cheating and so on. (Binod Khadria,2009)

In the Middle Eastern region, the majority of migrants arrive on a temporary basis, and the implementation of short-term contracts ensures a swift turnover of migrant workers (Thiollet, 2016). Entry into the Middle Eastern countries is restricted to individuals with a firm job offer and a contract sponsored by an employer. These contracts bind employees to work for a specific period at a predetermined wage level. In return, sponsors are responsible for providing accommodation and food, and covering the travel expenses of the migrant workers (Levaillant, 2017). Although, many Indians especially those with low educational qualification have repeatedly been targeted by misleading or offensive foreign employers, particularly in the Middle East. This situation has prompted government efforts to protect Indians employed abroad, including by trying to certify recruitment agents. (Ruchi Singh, 2022)

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In addition to denying foreign workers the basic human right of freedom of movement, the kafala system creates an environment where employers and employment agencies can exploit the legal system by depriving migrant workers of fundamental safeguards. For instance, sponsors can delay paying wages, confiscate passports, and deport workers without cause. Meanwhile, authorities have often failed to charge and prosecute sponsors for breaking laws and breaching contracts. (HRW Report, 2016)

Similarly, workers in infrastructure and development projects often end up living in small work camps with poor amenities and difficult working conditions, where they are unable to participate in social and cultural activities. (Binod Khadria, 2014)

Female domestic workers who work in family homes also have a lack of legal protections that exposes them to abuse in many ways. According to HRW (Human Rights Watch), Middle East failing to Protect Domestic Workers (2013), these abuses include excessive workload, inadequate access to food, forced detention, and sexual, verbal, physical, and psychological harm. Similarly, workers involved in infrastructure and development projects usually end up living in overcrowded labor camps with poor facilities and taxing working conditions. They denied the chance to participate in social and cultural activities under these circumstances (Khadria, 2014).

The recent incident in which more than 40 Indian migrant laborers perished in a fire in Kuwait has brought the unsafe and appalling living circumstances of Indian migrants in Gulf nations to the attention of the world once more. The severe working conditions and human rights abuses that occurred during the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the quick construction of infrastructure for the Dubai Expo, and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on migrants in Saudi Arabia because of their small living quarters are examples of similar incidents that have occurred recently. The majority of workers are between the ages of 20 and 40, and while men predominated in this sector, the Huntr research indicates that there are now more women, especially in the hotel industry. The majority of Indian migrants and laborers in the Middle East are blue-collar workers. (15 June, 2024).

India has taken measures to secure the status of its migrant workers in the middle eastern states. It has been determined that the common Kafala system in the Middle East, which ties Indian migrant laborers to their employers, is a type of contemporary slavery that causes great stress and even death among Indian migrants. In order to address these issues, the Indian government created the Indian Workers' Resources Center in the United Arab Emirates and implemented Community Welfare Funds, which offer financial support to Indian migrants in need. (Calabrese, J., 2020)

In the Middle East, the Indian diaspora has created a thriving community, however integration can occasionally be challenging. Problems with social acceptance, prejudice, and cultural differences can make it difficult for the diaspora to fully engage in their host nations. As the Indian government works to safeguard the interests of its citizens, these issues may cause tensions in relations between India and the Middle East, particularly with Gulf states (Vora, 2013)

Safeguarding India's Diaspora: Government Initiatives for Migrant Welfare in the Gulf

The Indian government has implemented a range of protective mechanisms, including mandatory insurance schemes, emergency welfare funds, grievance redressal portals, and bilateral agreements, to address the vulnerabilities faced by its expatriate workers in the

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Middle East. These efforts aim to mitigate exploitation, ensure timely assistance during crises, and promote safer migration practices for the large Indian community in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

One significant decision taken by Manmohan Singh's government when the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) was established in the year 2004. The MOIA's mission was to "establish a robust and vibrant institutional framework to facilitate and support mutually beneficial networks with and among overseas Indians to maximize the development impact for India and enable overseas Indians to invest and benefit from the opportunities in India." In 2016, Modi government merged the MOIA into the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and gave responsibility for overseas Indians to the MEA (Minister of External Affairs), to recognize the diaspora as an integral part of India's broader foreign affairs agenda. By the time of the merge, the MOIA was relatively small, with two overseas diplomatic representatives, one of them in Washington DC and the other in Abu Dhabi (UAE). (MOIA, Annual Report, 2014-15)

Indian Government has a strong monitoring mechanism working conditions and grievance redressal of all Indian workers abroad. The Indian government is vigilant, actively monitoring and following each grievance received from Indian nationals in foreign countries, through various channels i.e. Emergency telephone number, Walk-ins, e-Mails, social media, 24x7 Multilingual Helpline and Open Houses etc. The Government of India also established Portals such as MADAD and e-Migrate. Pravasi Bharatiya Sahayata Kendras (PBSK) which have been set up in Dubai (UAE), Riyadh, Jeddah (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) to provide guidance and counselling to Indian workers abroad on all matters.

Indian Missions/Posts utilize the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) time to time to provide financial and legal assistance to Indian national in distress abroad on a 'means tested basis'. Since year 2014 until March 2024, around Rs.656/- crores has been utilized by Indian Missions/Posts abroad under the Fund and around 3,50,194 Indians were extended assistance. (MEA, 2024)

India also signed several labor agreements and Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with GCC nations like UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain to enhance protection for workers. These agreements cover key areas like employment contracts, model labor policies and worker rights.

IWRCs (Indian Workers Resource Centre) has been set up at Dubai to provide guidance and counselling on all matters pertaining to overseas Indian workers, and four more IWRCs have been also approved in Sharjah (UAE), Riyadh and Jeddah (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) and Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), (ForumsIAS).

CONCLUSION

The Indian diaspora in the Middle East represents a rare case of "circular migration" that provides a symbiotic advantage to both the host and home nations. Economically, they have evolved from providing basic labor to becoming essential pillars of the professional and entrepreneurial landscape. While they send record-breaking remittances back to India (surpassing \$136 billion in FY25), their "staying power" in the Gulf has contributed to the region's rapid modernization and its shift toward a knowledge-based economy. Culturally, they have served as a bridge of soft power, turning the Middle East into a vibrant, multicultural hub. However, as the region looks toward 2030, the challenge remains for host

governments to further improve labor rights and living conditions for the blue-collar segment of this diaspora to ensure the sustainability of this partnership.

In summary, the Indian diaspora in the Middle East is evidence of the significant influence that transnational groups have. Their cultural and economic contributions have combined to create a rich and priceless fabric in the area. From their crucial contribution to the labor force and remittance flows to their professional skills and entrepreneurial endeavors that promote economic diversity. Beyond economic metrics, the diaspora has an undeniable cultural influence. By introducing Indian traditions, cuisine, and artwork to the Middle East, they have effectively transcended cultural boundaries while simultaneously integrating and adapting to their new surroundings.

Ultimately, the Indian diaspora in the Middle East has proven to be more than just a source of labor or investment. They are essentially "bridge builders," creating long-lasting ties between two historically connected areas. Unquestionably, their ongoing contributions will be crucial in determining the future of the Middle East and India, promoting a partnership based on respect, prosperity, and understanding.

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