

Indian Diaspora in the United Arab Emirates (UAE): Migration, Challenges and Labour Reforms

Review Article | Volume 1 | Issue 4 | 2026 | Article Number: 041

Accepted: 01 September 2026 | Published: 10 September 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)



Crossref : <https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-NPXLHAMF>



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Abstract

Migration from India to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) constitutes one of the largest and biggest labour movements in the contemporary world. The migration of Indian workers to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), represents one of the largest and most important migration corridors in the world. Over the past five decades, millions of Indian workers have migrated to the UAE in search of better economic opportunities, contributing significantly to both the countries. Indian diaspora, particularly semi-skilled and unskilled labourers, play a crucial role in the UAE's economy, especially in construction, domestic work, and service sectors. While migration provides economic opportunities through remittances and employment, it also raises serious concerns regarding labour rights, citizenship exclusion, and welfare protections. This paper critically examines the issues, opportunities, citizenship constraints, and labour reforms affecting Indian diaspora in the UAE.

Keywords: Indian Diaspora, Migration, Contributions , Issues and Labour Reforms

INTRODUCTION

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has become a major hub for the Indian diaspora. Indian diaspora constitute the largest expatriate community, with approximately 4.3 million people, comprising about 35% of the UAE's population. Migration to the UAE is motivated by economic aspirations, higher wages, and employment opportunities. India represents 28% of the professional workforce migrating to the United Arab Emirates. ¹ The UAE is one of the most chosen destinations for Indian diaspora workers due to its tax-free income, better wages, and employment opportunities. Millions of Indians are employed in industries like domestic services, construction, hospitality, and healthcare. These workers' remittances are vital to India's economy and household livelihood. However, migration is not without challenges. The

diaspora experience often involves economic, social, and legal difficulties that affect workers' well-being. The oil boom and rapid infrastructure development in the UAE created a massive demand for Indian labour. Over time, migration patterns have diversified, including professionals in technology, healthcare, and finance alongside blue-collar workers.

The UAE has emerged as a major destination due to higher wages compared to India, demand for cheap labour and rapid urbanisation and infrastructure growth.²

Brief History of United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven emirates located in Western Asia on the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Abu Dhabi serves as the nation's capital. The seven emirates are: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah. The UAE celebrates its National Day every year on December 2 to commemorate its founding in 1971.³ The year 2021 coincides with the celebration of the 50th anniversary of its establishment. The United Arab Emirates is a small nation on the Persian Gulf that borders Oman to the east and Saudi Arabia to the south.⁴ Arabic is the official language of the UAE, but English serves as the main language of business and daily life due to a high expatriate population. Other major languages spoken by resident communities include Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, Bengali, and Farsi.⁵ Islam is the state religion. The country covers an area of 83,600 km².⁶ As of April 2026, the estimated population of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is approximately 11.57 million. Roughly 89% of the UAE's population consists of non-citizens, which accounts for nearly all of the country's religious diversity. There is a significant gender imbalance, with males accounting for approximately 64% of the population due to large male foreign workforce. About 80-88% of people live in urban areas, primarily concentrated in the three largest emirates Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Sharjah. The United Arab Emirates is home to world-renowned architectural wonders, including the Burj Khalifa—the tallest human-made structure on Earth—and the Burj Al Arab, one of the world's tallest and most luxurious hotels.⁷ The UAE is well-known for several artificial islands like the Palm Jumeirah Island, the World, and the Universe archipelagos.⁸ The UAE is actually the third-largest oil producer in the Gulf region, following Saudi Arabia and Iraq.⁹ The United Arab Emirates is a member state of the Arab League (officially the League of Arab States), having joined the regional organization on 6 December 1971 shortly after achieving independence.¹⁰ The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is governed as a federal constitutional monarchy composed of seven emirates, rather than an absolute monarchy. The Federal Supreme Council serves as the highest legislative and executive authority, comprising the hereditary rulers of each emirate. The President serves as the head of state and is officially elected every five years by the Council. However, because the Ruler of Abu Dhabi customarily holds the presidency, the office is de facto hereditary. The Vice President also serves as the Prime Minister and head of government. Economically, the UAE boasts one of the most prominent economies in the Middle East, consistently ranking among the top three alongside Saudi Arabia and Turkey or Iran depending on GDP metrics.¹¹

Profile of Indian Diaspora in UAE

The United Arab Emirates and India have been trading pearls, spices, and textiles for millennia. Among the first people to settle in the Gulf region were Indian traders. This relationship grew stronger over time, particularly after the UAE was established in 1971. The Indian community is regarded as one of the "three pillars" of the UAE's success, according to reports, underscoring its enduring significance. Indians now predominate in industries like technology, healthcare, retail, and construction.¹²

There is a sizable Indian population in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In 2026, an estimated 4.39 million Indians—roughly 37.96% of the country's total population—will reside in the United Arab Emirates. They comprise the majority of expats and have a significant influence on both daily life and the

economy of the United Arab Emirates.¹³ The majority of Indians in UAE around 35% are from the southern state of Kerala followed by migrants from Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. About 99% of workers in the United Arab Emirates are migrant laborers, with Indians making up the majority.¹⁴ In recent years, there has been a notable shift in the standing of the Indian diaspora in the United Arab Emirates. The workforce is becoming more technical, despite the fact that construction and hospitality continue to be important occupations. Twenty percent of Indian workers in the UAE are working in professional and technical fields, while more than thirty-five percent are employed in manufacturing, transportation, and related industries.¹⁵ In 2025-2026, skilled trades (such as AC technicians, electricians, and hospitality professionals) accounted for over 60% of deployments, a sharp rise from roughly 38% in 2018. The average age of new Indian migrants has dropped to 32, reflecting a younger, more specialized workforce entering the market.

The UAE is one of the most chosen destinations for Indian migrant workers due to its tax-free income, better wages, and employment opportunities. Millions of Indians are employed in industries like domestic services, construction, hospitality, and healthcare.¹⁶ These workers' remittances are vital to India's economy and household means of subsistence. Indian laborers are divided into three categories: business and entrepreneurial, white-collar, and blue-collar. The bulk of immigrant blue-collar workers in the UAE are now Indian. They work as construction workers, drivers, housekeepers, cleaners, and security personnel. They are usually low-to-semi-skilled, have shorter contracts (two to three years), and pay less. Rural and low-income households make up a sizable part. The UAE's infrastructure and service sector rely heavily on these labor. Electricians, plumbers, mechanics, and technicians are semi-skilled occupations. They make somewhat more money than unskilled workers and frequently have vocational training. Blue-collar laborers reside in cooperative housing or labor camps. They have worked for a long time (10-12 hours). They have limited access to healthcare in some cases.¹⁷ In UAE, 35% Indian workers are white-collar workers. They are engineers' doctors, IT professionals, accountants, managers and teachers etc. They are highly skilled with better salaries and living conditions and long-term residency. White-Collar Workers live in apartments/villas. They have better healthcare and lifestyle access. The important category is business & entrepreneurial class. They are small traders, shop owners and large business investors. They are predominantly male workers, especially in construction and manual labour. They are mainly in the 20 to 45 age group. However, there has been a gradual increase in female migration, particularly in domestic work, nursing and healthcare and hospitality sector. Despite this increase, women still represent a smaller proportion of the total migrant workforce.¹⁸

The Indian diaspora in the UAE shows a highly diverse educational profile, ranging from illiterate and semi-skilled labourers to highly qualified professionals such as engineers, doctors, and managers. This diversity reflects the dual nature of Indian migration—low-skilled migration to Gulf countries and high-skilled migration globally. In terms of educational attainment, the Indian workforce comprises 1.4% below-primary, 7.1% below-secondary, 20.3% secondary, and 40.7% above-secondary educated workers, while degree holders and postgraduates account for 29.4% and 1.1% respectively. These figures highlight a stark skill gap: only a small fraction of the workforce possesses higher education credentials, whereas nearly 70% have achieved a secondary education or less.¹⁹ Despite the dominance of semi-skilled labour, the UAE also hosts a significant number of highly educated Indians, including engineers, IT professionals, doctors, and managers. Indian diaspora in UAE includes people with “diverse educational backgrounds, from highly qualified professionals to blue-collar workers.”²⁰

Migration from India to the UAE began on a small scale in the early 20th century but expanded significantly after the oil boom of the 1970s. The discovery of oil and subsequent economic transformation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries created an unprecedented demand for labour, particularly

in infrastructure development. Migration from India to the UAE began in large numbers after the oil boom of the 1970s. The discovery of oil transformed cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi into economic hubs, creating massive demand for foreign labor. Indians quickly became one of the largest expatriate communities. Many migrants do not settle permanently. They work for several years, send money home, and return to India. This creates a continuous flow rather than permanent migration. The UAE is one of the highest sources of remittances to India. Remittances from the UAE serve as a vital economic lifeline for millions of households across India. It supports families, education, housing, and local economies.²¹ India emerged as a major supplier of labour due to several factors including large population and labour surplus, historical trade links with the Gulf, geographic proximity, and availability of both skilled and unskilled workers. During the 1970s and 1980s, migration was dominated by low-skilled workers employed in construction and manual labour. Over time, the profile diversified to include professionals such as doctors, engineers, accountants, and IT specialists. The UAE became a preferred destination due to its relatively liberal economic policies, better wages compared to India, and continuous demand for foreign labour. Indian diaspora cannot access full social security benefits. They depend on employers for healthcare and housing. They are statelessness-like conditions. They have no political rights.²²

Importance of UAE for India

The UAE is one of India's largest trading partners and a major hub for re-exports to West Asia and Africa. The United Arab Emirates is India's third largest trading partner.²³ In 2022–2023, bilateral trade was approximately \$85 billion. Sovereign wealth funds from Abu Dhabi invest in Indian projects.²⁴ Bilateral trade exceeds tens of billions of dollars and has expanded further after the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA, 2022).²⁵ The UAE is also a major investor in India (infrastructure, energy, logistics). The UAE investors play a major role in India's infrastructure and real estate sectors.²⁶

India and UAE enjoy a deeply rooted and long-standing bond that includes close political, economic and cultural ties since centuries. Around 4.3 million Indians live in the UAE, forming the largest expatriate community.²⁷ Many Indians send money home to support their family while working in the United Arab Emirates. This money helps millions of households in different Indian states pay for daily needs. They contribute significantly through remittances (about \$20 billion annually). They are contributing to the UAE economy. They are strengthening cultural and economic ties. Indians constitute the largest expatriate community in the UAE, serving as a vital bridge that strengthens bilateral ties between the two nations.²⁸ The Indian diaspora in the United Arab Emirates act as a channel between the two countries.²⁹ The UAE serves as a root source of India's West Asia policy and global economic strategy. This dynamic relationship seamlessly integrates strong economic partnerships, energy security guarantees, influential diaspora ties, and deep strategic cooperation.³⁰

CONTRIBUTIONS OF INDIAN DIASPORA IN UAE

Role of Indian Diaspora in UAE Economic Contribution

For many years, the Indian diaspora has shaped the economic and social fabric of the United Arab Emirates. The Indian diaspora in the UAE plays an important role in promoting economic growth between India and the UAE. The UAE is a critical engine for the Indian economy. Indian diaspora form the backbone of the UAE's economy, making up roughly 40% of the country's total population of Indians in the United Arab Emirates. Over 35% of the Indian diaspora operate in construction, manufacturing, transport, and related fields, while about 20% serve as doctors, architects, and engineers. India imports a large amount of its gas and oil from the United Arab Emirates, making it a major energy supplier. Conversely, India stands as one of the UAE's premier export destinations. This trade relationship is further strengthened by a vibrant Indian diaspora, which actively drives economic growth across vital Emirati

sectors, including infrastructure, technology, healthcare, and finance. Indian diaspora in the UAE contribute to the Indian economy, while remitting billions of dollars to support India's rural and national development.³¹ The Indian diaspora in the UAE is one of India's biggest remittance sources. They are sending home approximately \$21–22 billion annually. Approximately 19.2% of India's overall international remittances in recent years have come from UAE.³² In 2024, the UAE ranked as India's second-largest source of remittances, contributing a substantial \$21.6 billion. In FY 2022, UAE -to-India remittance flows reached \$111 billion, serving as a primary driver for family welfare and rural development in India.³⁴ As a result, the UAE is an important ally of India's economic stability. Millions of people in states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar receive vital household financial help from these transfers, which cover debt repayment, housing, healthcare, and education. They stabilize the balance of payments and bolster the nation's foreign reserves by providing the Indian government with a steady supply of foreign exchange on a national level.³⁵

In addition to generating significant remittance flows, Indian business communities and entrepreneurs in the UAE are essential to strengthening bilateral economic relations. Their impact spans several strategic dimensions. The UAE operates as a premier regional commercial and re-export hub, attracting substantial numbers of traders, professionals, and investors. By establishing a strong presence across vital sectors like finance, retail, and technology, these entrepreneurs continuously strengthen economic cooperation between both nations. Indian entrepreneurs in the UAE have built some of the region's most dominant and recognizable brands. There are big Indian names and well-established Indian business houses in the UAE. They migrated during the oil boom in 1974–75. The majority were from populations along India's west coast, such as the Sindhis, Kutchis, Gujaratis, Mangaloreans, and Malayalis. In terms of faith, they are primarily Hindu, Muslim, or Jain.³⁶ The UAE hosts a large number of Indian entrepreneurs and prominent business leaders. Some are the big Indian names and business houses are run by Yousaf Ali, MA, Lu Lu Group International, Hiro and Mohan Jashanmal of Jashanamal National co. LLC, Ram Bauxani of ITL-Cosmos, Magangal Pancholia, KM Bhatia brothers, P Bava Haji, Micky Jagtiani and BR Shetty, M Syed Salahuddin, Krishna Murthy Kumar, Vasu Sharaff, Sunny Varkey, Bharat Kumar Jyanti Lal Shah, Shri Azad Moopen, Sri Sunder Memon etc. All the business houses have enjoyed total freedom in doing business in the UAE. They are Indian nationals with permanent residency in the UAE.³⁷

The Indian diaspora in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) serves as the foundational geopolitical anchor transforming a historically transactional, trade-oriented relationship into a highly institutionalized Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Numbering approximately 4.3 million, this expatriate community acts as a critical conduit for track-two diplomacy, soft power projection, and economic interdependence.³⁸ Indian entrepreneurs and laborers have played a vital role in turning the UAE into a top global hub for business and tourism. Additionally, India and the UAE's economic relations are being strengthened by the fast growing tourist and aviation sectors. Due to the UAE's sizable Indian diaspora, there is a significant movement of people between the two areas, which has increased demand for air travel and hotel services. Major Indian cities and UAE destinations are often connected by Indian airlines and UAE-based carriers like Emirates and Etihad Airways. As a result, the number of Indian tourists visiting the United Arab Emirates has increased, making them one of the largest visitor groups in the nation. Additionally, tourism-related investments, such as Indian-owned hotels, restaurants, and travel offices that serve both local residents and tourists, have been stimulated by this strong exchange. The UAE and India share flourishing tourism and cultural exchange, supported by strong connectivity. India is the UAE's busiest international aviation market, with over 1,065 weekly flights driving a massive influx of both middle- and high-income Indian tourists. Beyond travel, cricket serves as a major cultural bridge between the two nations.³⁹

Many Indian workers move to the UAE for better jobs, higher pay, and close proximity to India, working extensively in blue-collar construction roles while others build successful billionaire-led enterprises.⁴⁰ India and the UAE must better protect low-paid workers by stopping illegal visa sales and reforming the Kafala system. Meanwhile, the Indian diaspora helps connect New Delhi and Abu Dhabi through shared values of tolerance and respect.⁴¹

The large Indian diaspora in the United Arab Emirates serves as a critical pillar in advancing Abu Dhabi's ambition to be a stabilizing force in the Middle East. By supporting India's energy and maritime security, the UAE has become India's top partner in West Asia. This community connects India's policy toward the West with the UAE's focus on Asian markets, creating a strong political and economic bond.

The UAE acts as a logistics and trade hub. Indian companies use UAE for re-export markets, financial services and connectivity to Middle East & Africa, UAE is a gateway to Middle East and Africa. The UAE is among India's top trading partners. The UAE has firmly established itself as a global trade and logistics powerhouse, acting as a vital launchpad for international commerce. Indian businesses heavily influence the Emirates' business-friendly free zones, advanced financial services, and multimodal transport networks to optimize re-export operations and seamlessly reach high-growth African and Gulf markets.⁴² The UAE invests in infrastructure (ports, highways), renewable energy start-ups and fintech. cooperation expanding into AI, space and green energy.⁴³ The UAE's expansion is being accelerated by the numerous Indian businesses that operate there. Indians have made significant investments in these businesses. The UAE is home to eminent businesses like the Jumbo and Lulu Groups, and Indian investors have made significant financial contributions in a number of areas. These businesses actively encourage commerce and investment between the two nations. The Indian diaspora makes up the majority of foreign investors in the UAE real estate market. Indians have always influenced the UAE's economy. Over the past few decades, trade and commerce in the United Arab Emirates have expanded extremely quickly, and the nation is now recognized as a Middle Eastern commercial center. It is impossible to ignore the role that Indians have played in the UAE's success. Furthermore, the 2022 signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) significantly enhanced economic relations and increased mutual contributions to unprecedented levels.⁴⁴ The Indian diaspora in the UAE has enormous potential to improve bilateral trade ties. Startups and companies established by people from the diaspora are in a unique position to boost foreign investment and commerce. Furthermore, Indian professionals in key sectors like technology, healthcare, and entertainment can collaborate with UAE companies to forge strategic joint partnerships and spearhead innovation.⁴⁵

India and UAE have been trading partners for thousands of years. Their commercial relationship began around 3000 B.C. through ancient sea routes. Early trade connected the Indus Valley Civilization in India, Mesopotamia, and the region that is now the UAE. The UAE traded seafarers brought spices, cotton, silk, ivory, rice, tea, and meat from India. India traded high-quality Gulf pearls and dates. Indian business owners and boatbuilders helped build the Gulf's early pearl fisheries. India provided essential everyday goods to the region long before oil was discovered. Today, the UAE remains one of the largest global markets for Indian exports.⁴⁶

The discovery of oil in the UAE drastically altered trade dynamics of India-UAE relations. Energy is one of the most critical aspects of India-UAE relations. India became a vital presenter for the UAE's energy security. India receives a significant supply of natural gas and crude oil from the United Arab Emirates. India imports a lot of energy from the UAE.⁴⁷

Indian diaspora generate over \$21 billion annually, making the UAE India's second-largest remittance source. They provide a non-debt-creating capital cushion that mitigates India's Current Account Deficit

(CAD). They support household consumption, education, and real estate booms in states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra etc. They accelerated India-UAE digital infrastructure linkages, connecting India's UPI network with UAE's AANI. They accelerated non-oil bilateral trade past \$100 billion under the India-UAE CEPA framework. They attracted billions in sovereign investments from the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) into Indian banks and infrastructure.⁴⁸

Role of Indian Diaspora in UAE Socio-Cultural Contribution

India and the United Arab Emirates participate in formal and informal cultural exchanges and have strong cultural links.⁴⁹ The Indian diaspora in the UAE has been instrumental in fostering closer social and cultural ties between the two countries. By fostering religious tolerance and social pluralism, this vibrant community has deeply enriched the UAE's multicultural fabric.⁵⁰ For decades, the community has established places of worship that serve as focal points for cultural preservation and cross-cultural dialogue. The historic Shiva and Krishna temples in Bur Dubai have long stood as symbols of coexistence. The opening of the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi, which was constructed on land donated by the UAE government, marked a significant turning point in this route. These institutions not only cater to the spiritual needs of the diaspora but also introduce traditional Indian architecture, philosophy, and values to the wider Emirati and international communities, fostering mutual respect.⁵¹

The 1975 bilateral Cultural Agreement solidifies cultural negotiations between India and the United Arab Emirates. This framework has sustained consistent, official, and people-to-people cultural exchanges for decades.⁵² Indian diaspora have profoundly enriched the linguistic and cultural diversity of the UAE. Languages such as Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu have fluently integrated into the daily fabric of Emirati life, bridging communication across diverse social spaces.⁵³ The diaspora actively maintains its cultural roots through the establishment of Indian-curriculum schools, vibrant cultural centers, and active literary forums. Organizations such as the Indian Tamil Fine Arts Association in Dubai and the Indian Social and Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi regularly host impactful educational and cultural events. Vernacular radio stations, television networks, and print publications cater extensively to the community, keeping unique regional identities alive.⁵⁴

The Indian diaspora has made a profound cultural impact on the UAE's arts and media landscape, establishing the country as a premier global hub for Indian cinema. Indian classical and contemporary arts enjoy a thriving platform in the UAE, facilitated by diaspora organizations and local patrons. The widespread popularity of Bollywood and South Indian films, alongside Indian television programming, underscores this regional influence. Indian production houses frequently utilize the UAE's iconic locations for filming, host star-studded global premieres, and draw massive, multicultural audiences to local theatres—cementing Indian pop culture as a mainstream fixture. Beyond cinema, prestigious cultural institutions and community festivals across the Emirates regularly host classical Indian dance performances, such as Kathak and Bharatanatyam. These events captivate diverse audiences and beautifully showcase the rich tapestry of India's artistic heritage.⁵⁵

The Indian diaspora has profoundly influenced the UAE's food landscape, introducing a rich tapestry of flavors that has shaped local palates. Known for its complex spices and diverse regional traditions, Indian cuisine is now an integral part of Emirati food culture. Its presence spans the entire economic spectrum, from affordable, historic cafeterias in Deira serving karak chai and samosas to Michelin-starred fine-dining establishments in upscale districts. Over the decades, a distinct culinary fusion has emerged, mixing traditional Indian spices with local UAE ingredients. The increasing number of eateries offering both North and South Indian cuisine is indicative of the Indian community's enduring cultural influence. Indian

cuisine has become a mainstay of daily life in the UAE thanks to these establishments, which serve not only Indian expatriates but also Emirati nationals and other foreign residents.⁵⁶

India and UAE share centuries-old trade and cultural interactions. Indian diaspora form the pillar of the UAE's construction, healthcare, and finance sectors, significantly driving infrastructure development since the 1970s. Culturally, the diaspora fosters strong bilateral ties through shared festivals, Yoga diplomacy, and extensive historical trade links. Cultural ties date back to the pre-oil era, primarily through the pearl harvesting and trading industries between the Gulf states and Bombay. Indian festivals have become significant highlights on the UAE's national cultural calendar, transcending local boundaries. In the UAE, Emiratis participate in the widespread celebration of major Indian holidays like Diwali, Holi, Eid, Navratri, and Onam.⁵⁷

The Indian diaspora significantly shapes the UAE's cosmopolitan background. By introducing vibrant festivals, establishing prominent educational and religious landmarks, and popularising diverse cuisine, cinema, and sports, the community enriches the local social fabric. Ultimately, these cultural contributions foster deep, enduring people-to-people ties. Major landmarks, including Downtown Dubai and Global Village, host official public festivities featuring traditional decorations, illuminated displays, and street performances. These events draw participation from Emiratis and expatriates of various nationalities, transforming exclusive heritage celebrations into shared civic experiences that reinforce the UAE's promise to tolerance and inclusivity. The celebration of Hindi Divas, Ayurveda, and the International Day of Yoga strengthens social and cultural linkages.⁵⁸

The widespread celebration of International Yoga Day in the UAE and the growing popularity of yoga underscore the practice's importance as a pillar of India's cultural legacy. These programs are a reflection of India's larger global efforts to advance wellness, health, and holistic living. In addition, the Indian diaspora in the UAE actively takes part in cultural activities that promote and preserve Indian traditions. While firmly preserving India's cultural presence in the area, the creation of specialized cultural institutions and organizations has been essential in promoting cross-cultural contacts and understanding among varied people.⁵⁹

The India Social and Cultural Centre (ISC) in Abu Dhabi serves as a cornerstone of this relationship providing a vital platform for preserving Indian culture and tradition. Its story began in 1967 with the Unity Club, launched by pioneering expatriates who envisioned a vibrant social hub that would keep their homeland close. Today, the ISC is celebrated as the premier community organisation for Indians in the UAE capital. Carrying a similar mission, the Indian Association Sharjah was established in 1979 to strengthen Indo-Arab friendship and provide essential educational and socio-cultural spaces for children.⁶⁰ Over the decades, its scope has expanded significantly; the association now operates local Indian schools and manages vital community welfare services, offering everything from passport assistance to legal aid for citizens in distress. To further strengthen these ties, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) opened an Indian Cultural Centre within the Embassy of India in Abu Dhabi in December 2009. The centre has become a vibrant hub for cultural programmes, art exhibitions, seminars, and Indian festivals. It regularly hosts educational events and promotes Yoga to showcase the richness of Indian heritage.⁶¹

Indian expatriates in the UAE maintain an exceptionally vibrant network of over 100 registered and unregistered cultural groups. Often organized around regional or linguistic identities—including Goan, Keralite, Tamil, and Bengali associations—these groups look beyond community welfare to actively drive cultural diplomacy and showcase India's rich heritage. These initiatives enjoy strong local backing. Members of the UAE ruling families and prominent Emirati business leaders frequently attend major events as chief guests, while local citizens regularly participate in cultural programs like Mushairas (poetry

symposiums). This deep cultural integration is further strengthened by the UAE's inclusive religious policies, which allow the diaspora to establish churches, temples, and gurudwaras. Ultimately, this vibrant community stands as a powerful pillar of India's soft power diplomacy in the region.⁶² The Indian diaspora in the UAE is closely connected through robust cultural networks, including the India Club, the Indian Association, and numerous regional organizations. Alongside major educational institutions like The Indian High School, Dubai, and the Abu Dhabi Indian School, these groups provide an essential community infrastructure. For an expatriate population that typically cannot obtain permanent residency status, these organizations offer vital welfare support, education, and social cohesiveness.

The Indian diaspora serves a vital dual purpose globally accelerating social integration into host nations while actively preserving cultural heritage. In the UAE, expatriates seamlessly adapt to the multicultural Gulf landscape through active community initiatives and dedicated cultural centres. By maintaining deep roots in their homeland traditions and showcasing India's diverse customs, they foster cross-cultural understanding, mutual respect, and strong international ties on a global stage. The Indian diaspora in the UAE serves as a vital bridge for cultural diplomacy. Through shared festivals, language, cuisine, and the arts, this vibrant community deeply enriches the UAE's multicultural fabric. This vibrant cultural mixture not only preserves Indian heritage but also cements a lasting bond of mutual respect and friendship between both nations.

Role of Indian Diaspora in UAE Education and Health Contributions

Education is a top priority for the Indian diaspora in the UAE. To support this, many schools offer Indian curricula alongside diverse extracurricular activities. Higher education is also highly accessible, with universities providing varied academic programs and strong career placement opportunities. Ultimately, the Indian diaspora has shaped the UAE's educational landscape by blending high-quality learning with global standards and financial affordability. As the largest expatriate group in the country, Indian professionals and institutions have built a vast network of schools and universities that serve both South Asian and international students.⁶³

In the fields of healthcare and education, the Indian diaspora in the UAE has assumed a revolutionary role. For example, thousands of students are served by more than 75 institutions in the United Arab Emirates that formally offer Indian educational systems.⁶⁴ These primarily include the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE). Indian schools offer competitive fee structures. This allows mid-income expatriate families access to globally recognized, high-standard schooling. The Indian High School in Dubai was established in 1961. It stands as the oldest and largest non-profit Indian community school in the Arab region. Founded by the Varkey family (of Indian origin), GEMS has evolved into one of the largest private K-12 education providers globally. It operates dozens of premium multi-curriculum schools across the Emirates. Groups like Delhi Private School (DPS) and various community-run boards have established multi-city branches to absorb the massive student enrollment demand.⁶⁵

There are several other institutions like BITS Pilani, Dubai Campus was established in 2000 as one of the earliest premier engineering institutions in Dubai International Academic City. Since its founding, the campus has anchored itself as a leading educational hub, producing thousands of skilled technology graduates and serving a vast student community that follows the Indian curriculum. Prominent Indian universities with large campuses in the UAE such as Manipal Academy of Higher Education and Amity University, provide training in disciplines like engineering, management, and medical. Schools in India and the UAE run active student exchange programs, collaborative curriculum training, and cultural immersion events. Approximately 20,000 Indian doctors and 60,000 nurses are central to delivering

healthcare services.⁶⁶

Educational ties between India and the UAE have developed expressively through academic expansion, research collaborations, and cross-cultural initiatives. In Abu Dhabi, former Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan and his UAE counterpart, Dr. Ahmlad Al Falasi, signed a historic Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This agreement deepens academic cooperation through reciprocal student and faculty mobility, joint research, dual-degree programmes, and collaborative curriculum design. Additionally, it paves the way for both nations to co-host and participate in scientific exhibitions, academic conferences, and educational symposia of mutual interest.⁶⁷ Driven by top-tier infrastructure and high academic standards, premier Indian institutions have established specialized campuses in Dubai, offering medical, engineering, and management training to both Indian expatriates and local citizens. Complementing higher education, Indian professionals have developed a vast network of schools across the UAE, creating a robust foundation for standard academic exchanges between the two nations.⁶⁸

Strategic and literary collaborations further deepen this bilateral relationship. The Abu Dhabi-based Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research actively studies India's foreign policy and routinely engages with Indian policymakers. This was formalised in December 2008 through a cooperation agreement with the Indian Council of World Affairs. While Indian universities promote Gulf studies to analyse the UAE's political and economic developments, UAE institutions mirror this focus on Indian systems.⁶⁹ Prominent Indian literature is regularly translated into Arabic through dedicated projects by the India-Arab Cultural Centre at Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI), alongside UAE initiatives like Ketab and Kalima, which operate under the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH). To foster deeper educational integration, the Indian Ministry of Education (formerly Ministry of Human Resource Development), alongside the Ministry of External Affairs, expanded access for qualified Indian and foreign residents in the UAE to take the premier IIT-JEE entrance examinations locally.⁷⁰

The presence of the ICC in Abu Dhabi and historical events like the IPL matches hosted in Sharjah solidify the UAE as a top destination for Indian cricket tourism. Bollywood and South Indian cinema act as highly effective soft power tools, promoting Indian culture, food, music, and geography to a wide audience in the UAE. Institutional ties have successfully brought Indian media to the Gulf.⁷¹ National Indian newspapers (like Malayala Manorama and Mathrubhoomi), keeping the diaspora connected. Vernacular Indian radio channels (such as Radio Mirchi and Voice of Kerala) actively recruit presenters from diverse linguistic backgrounds across India, reinforcing the cultural connection. Both countries share strong prospects for mutual growth in medical tourism and sports tourism.⁷²

Issues Faced by Indian Diaspora in UAE

The Indian diaspora in the UAE faces several hurdles like recruitment exploitation, legal restrictions under the Kafala system, wage exploitation & financial issues, poor working conditions, confiscation of passports & restricted freedom, health issues & lack of healthcare access, social isolation & cultural challenges, legal vulnerability & lack of rights and a lack of permanent residency options, and severe socio-economic hardships for blue-collar workers.

1. Issue of Recruitment Exploitation

Indian migrant workers in the UAE face severe recruitment exploitation and debt bondage. and debt bondage. Many recruitment agencies exploit workers by charging overpriced visa fees leading to debt bondage. Corrupt agents charge excessive fees, leading to illegal contract substitution and forced labor under the restrictive Kafala sponsorship system. Despite being illegal, workers are routinely charged excessive fees by recruitment agencies in India. Many workers pay high

recruitment fees to agents in India. This leads to debt bondage, forcing them to accept poor conditions. Workers often arrive with false job promises.⁷³ Although it is illegal in the UAE, it is challenging to stop this practice because many of these agencies operate outside of the country. The UAE and India have signed bilateral agreements with the aim of eliminating these “middlemen.”

2. Issue of Kafala (Sponsorship) System

The Kafala (sponsorship) system governs UAE operations. The legal position of employees is linked to their employers. Indian workers are not allowed to leave the nation or change jobs at will. A migrant worker's visa is directly linked to their employer under the Kafala labor system. This power imbalance allows abusive employers to restrict job mobility, confiscate passports, and legally bind workers, making it exceedingly difficult to escape poor working conditions or formally file complaints without fear of deportation. In the UAE, employers often confiscate passports. There is a risk of forced labour conditions. Most low-and semi-skilled laborers remain bound to a specific local employer (sponsor). This leads to restricted mobility and dependency and creates power imbalances that can lead to contract violations. Despite reforms, the system continues to enable employer control.⁷⁴ Political organizing, trade unions, and public protests are strictly illegal under UAE law, leaving workers without collective bargaining mechanisms to dispute unfair labor practices.

3. Issue of Wage Exploitation & Financial Issues

Indian migrant workers in the UAE face systemic financial abuses, including severe wage theft, unpaid overtime, exorbitant recruitment fees, and passport confiscation. These exploitative practices trap vulnerable laborers in debt and severely restrict their ability to send remittances home, leaving many stranded without basic food or housing. Many companies, particularly in construction and lower-tier service sectors, arbitrarily delay or withhold salaries. In the UAE, instances of Indian workers going unpaid for three to eight months have stranded individuals without basic living necessities. Indian workers often pay exorbitant fees to fraudulent recruiting agents in India, taking out high-interest loans to secure these jobs. Earning far less than promised makes debt repayment take years. The steep cost of living, private schooling, and comprehensive medical insurance heavily strains middle-class families, often preventing workers from bringing their dependents to live with them. There is a notable shortage of higher education institutions matching Indian curriculum standards in the UAE, forcing many families to send their children back to India for university.⁷⁵ In UAE, delayed or unpaid wages are common, exploitation and wage theft and salaries may be lower than promised. During crises like COVID-19, income and remittances declined.⁷⁶

4. Issue of Poor Working Conditions

Many Indian migrant workers in the UAE face severe exploitation, including wage theft, excessive recruitment fees, and debt bondage. Bound by the restrictive kafala (sponsorship) system, workers frequently suffer passport confiscation, illegal working hours, and hazardous conditions, leaving them highly vulnerable to labor abuses.⁷⁷ In sectors like construction and renewables, Indian workers are routinely exposed to extreme heat and unsafe working environments without adequate compensation or safeguards. In UAE, many low-income laborers reside in crowded, dormitory-style labor camps on the outskirts of major cities, where they are housed in cramped, unhygienic, or substandard accommodations, sometimes lacking basic necessities like sufficient food or access to proper healthcare. Blue-collar workers regularly endure intense physical labor in extreme summer heat and hazardous environments, unsafe working environments, long working

hours(10–15 hours daily), lack of safety measures, especially in construction jobs. Language barriers, physical distance from urban hubs, and vast income inequality cause near-total social segregation between low-wage laborers and the local Emirati population.⁷⁸

5. Issue of Confiscation of Passports & Restricted Freedom

In the UAE, passport confiscation and restricted mobility remain systemic challenges for low-income Indian migrant workers. Although UAE law explicitly prohibits passport withholding, the structural remnants of the Kafala (sponsorship) system perpetuate a severe power imbalance between employers and workers. This dynamic often traps blue-collar workers in conditions of de facto forced labor and debt bondage. In the UAE, employers often confiscate passports. Indian workers without passports cannot travel freely home during emergencies or navigate the host country safely. It creates conditions similar to forced labour. Indian workers can file formal complaints through the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization to demand document return. The Indian Embassy (Abu Dhabi) and Consulate (Dubai) can issue Emergency Certificates (EC) for stranded citizens.⁷⁹

Nearly one-third of Indian emigrants live in densely populated worker camps, typically sharing a single room with four to six individuals. Furthermore, under the Kafala labor system, a migrant worker's visa status is tied directly to their employer. This power imbalance allows abusive employers to restrict job mobility, confiscate passports, and legally bind workers, making it exceedingly difficult to escape poor working conditions or formally file complaints without fear of deportation. Many Indian migrants work in construction and manual labor, making them highly vulnerable to extreme climate conditions. Outdoor exposure without adequate breaks can lead to chronic health issues like end-stage kidney failure. According to Human Rights Watch, these workers often return home with debilitating chronic conditions and no financial or medical support. In the UAE, female domestic workers in the UAE face unique, unregulated challenges. According to iPleaders, these workers often endure illegal imprisonment, excessive overtime without extra pay, and physical or psychological harassment while operating outside the standard legal protections afforded to formal workers.⁸⁰ Overcrowded labour camps. Lack of sanitation and basic facilities. Domestic workers often live in isolated and vulnerable conditions.⁸¹

6. Issue of Healthcare Access

The Indian diaspora in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) faces substantial physical and mental health challenges. These issues are severely worsened by critical gaps in healthcare access, creating a compound liability for this population. As the backbone of the UAE's construction, service, and transport sectors, these low-income individuals often encounter systemic disparities. While the UAE has introduced regulatory improvements, structural, legal, and financial barriers continue to alienate this vulnerable workforce from timely medical intervention. Indian laborers in UAE work extended shifts in extreme desert heat, suffering from heat exhaustion, severe dehydration, and heat strokes. Over time, these conditions manifest as chronic cardiovascular issues, hypertension, and kidney ailments. In the UAE, blue-collar workers run a high risk of workplace injuries, musculoskeletal disorders, and respiratory infections caused by routine exposure to construction dust and heavy machinery. They are isolated from their families. They have pressure to send remittances, and job insecurity generates severe psychological distress. Academic studies show that over 70% of low-income migrants experience extreme anxiety, loneliness, or depression. Despite mandatory health insurance regulations, many basic employer-provided plans only cover emergencies or inpatient hospitalizations. In UAE, low-income Indian workers must pay

out-of-pocket for routine outpatient clinical visits, prescriptions, and diagnostics. They have a lack of fluency in Arabic or English prevents basic medical communication, hindering proper diagnosis and patient trust.⁸²

Indian workers have limited access to medical services. In the UAE, employers may refuse to cover medical expenses of Indian workers. They have high levels of mental stress and psychological issues. They have faced systematic human rights violations poor housing, overcrowding, and lack of healthcare and high vulnerability to occupational diseases.⁸³

7. Issue of Social Isolation & Cultural Challenges

Indian diaspora form the backbone of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) infrastructure, yet they face profound social and cultural hurdles. While economic migration offers financial relief for families back home, the lived experience of these workers is often defined by alienation, emotional distress, and cultural dislocation. In the UAE, blue-collar Indian workers mostly live in industrial labor camps far outside main city centers. In the UAE, strict income thresholds for family sponsorship visas frequently force Indian workers to leave their spouses and children behind. The absence of a familial support system can lead to profound emotional distress and clinical depression. In the UAE, rigid and demanding work schedules often leave Indian migrant workers with virtually no time for socializing or community building. The inability of Indian workers to speak Arabic or fluent English limits meaningful interaction with locals and supervisors. They are treated as temporary economic units rather than community members. Moving from tight-knit Indian villages to highly individualized, transactional urban spaces causes identity confusion. They have limited access to familiar regional foods in shared camp kitchens diminishes a vital sense of home.⁸⁴

In UAE, Indian workers often carry heavy debt from recruitment fees, forcing them to endure hostile conditions. The cultural stigma surrounding mental health in the diaspora prevents them from seeking help, rendering their suffering invisible. Ultimately, while the UAE offers economic survival, it demands a heavy toll on the social well-being and cultural identity of Indian migrant workers.⁸⁵

8. Issue of Legal Weakness & Lack of Rights

Indian diaspora in the UAE face severe legal weaknesses due to the highly restrictive kafala (sponsorship) system, which binds an employee's legal residency entirely to a single employer. While recent legislative updates aim to restrict passport confiscation and improve contract clarity, widespread enforcement gaps continue to leave blue-collar and domestic workers exposed to systemic exploitation.⁸⁶

The Kafala system remains the cornerstone of legal vulnerability for Indian migrant workers. Under this framework, a worker's legal residency is tied entirely to their sponsor (kafeel). If an employee flees an abusive workplace without prior permission, the employer can file "absconding" charges, which trigger immediate detention, deportation, or other legal penalties. This mechanism effectively strips employees of job mobility, trapping many in exploitative conditions. Furthermore, despite being explicitly illegal under UAE Federal Law, the confiscation of passports by employers remains a pervasive practice.⁸⁷ Without physical custody of their identification, Indian laborers cannot travel, return home during emergencies, or seek assistance from local authorities. Compounding these issues, the UAE legal framework strictly prohibits trade unions, labor strikes, and collective bargaining. Consequently, Indian workers cannot organize for structural improvements and must instead pursue disputes individually through the Ministry of Human

Resources and Emiratisation (MoHRE). Organizing or participating in public strikes routinely results in rapid administrative deportation and permanent employment bans.⁸⁸

In UAE, Indian workers have limited legal protection, limited access to legal systems, difficulty accessing justice due to language barriers and fear of deportation especially for domestic workers. Recent data shows thousands of distress complaints from Indian workers abroad, including the UAE.⁸⁹ Despite the introduction of long-term Golden Visas for highly-skilled professionals, the UAE rarely grants formal citizenship. Most expatriates face eventual repatriation once their employment contracts end or upon retirement.

Indian diaspora in the UAE face multi-dimensional challenges—economic, legal, social, and health-related. While migration offers better income opportunities, systemic issues like the Kafala system, wage exploitation, and poor living conditions continue to affect their well-being. Indian migrant workers form the backbone of the UAE's rapid infrastructural and economic development, while their remittances heavily support the Indian economy. Despite recent labor reforms initiated by both the UAE and Indian governments—such as stricter regulations on recruitment and digital wage tracking—gaps in implementation leave many workers vulnerable. Addressing these challenges requires deeper bilateral cooperation, strict enforcement of anti-exploitation laws, and the eventual dismantling of the restrictive elements of the sponsorship system to ensure that migration is safe, fair, and dignified.⁹⁰

Prominent Indians in UAE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) hosts one of the world's largest Indian diasporas. This vibrant community has evolved into a vital pillar of the nation, actively driving its economic growth, enriching its cultural landscape, and elevating its global standing. Prominent Indians in the UAE have distinguished themselves in business, healthcare, education, philanthropy, and social service, contributing significantly to the nation's rapid development. Several Indians have achieved prominence and recognition for their contributions of business leaders, healthcare and social service, community leaders and award winners etc.

There are big Indian names and well-established Indian business houses in the UAE. They moved during the 1974–1975 first oil boom. The majority of them were from the Sindhi, Kutchi, Gujrati, Mangalorean, and Malayali populations on the west coast of India. They are either Jain, Muslim, or Hindu. Refer to Jain (2010). Yousaf Ali, MA, Lu Lu Group International, Hiro and Mohan Jashanmal of Jashanamal National Co. LLC, Ram Bauxani of ITL-Cosmos, Magangal Pancholia, KM Bhatia brothers, P Bava Haji, Micky Jagtiani and BR Shetty, M Syed Salahuddin, Krishna Murthy Kumar, Vasu Sharaff, Sunny Varkey, Bharat Kumar Jyanti Lal Shah, Shri Azad Moopen, Sri Sunder Memon, etc. Every company has had complete freedom to conduct business in the United Arab Emirates. They are citizens of India who have permanent residency in the UAE⁹¹

Citizenship and Residency Status of Indian Diaspora in UAE

Indian business families have lived in the UAE for years, despite the fact that only a small number of people may obtain UAE citizenship. In the UAE, many people are gold trader.⁹² The United Arab Emirates made historic changes to its citizenship laws in January 2021, enabling a number of foreign persons, including scientists, doctors, their spouses, and their offspring, to become citizens of the UAE.⁹³ The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has launched an initiative to grant citizenship to exceptionally talented individuals, including qualified Indians. The program was established under directives from the late President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan and approved by a Cabinet led by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Ruler of Dubai, Vice President, and Prime Minister of the UAE.⁹⁴ While the UAE

citizenship program has opened to expatriates, it is highly selective and not available to everyone. Nominees must belong to specific categories, including investors, scientists, doctors, inventors, specialists, and individuals with exceptional creative talents. However, simply meeting the baseline eligibility requirements does not guarantee approval. The application is a stringent process, even for elite professionals who have added significant value to the nation. Ultimately, the final authority to grant citizenship and residency rests solely with the Ministry of Interior (or the relevant UAE executive authorities).⁹⁵

West Asian nations have historically had conservative views on foreign nationals' citizenship. The United Arab Emirates is currently the first country in West Asia to provide citizenship and residency to foreigners. Rulers, the Crown, the Princes Court, the Executive Council, and the Cabinet will nominate candidates for UAE citizenship based on nominations from federal bodies. Among the many advantages of UAE citizenship is the ability to own or own businesses and real estate.⁹⁶

Key Labour Law for Indian Diaspora in UAE

The evolution of UAE labor law for Indian migrants has transitioned from a rigid, employer-dominated system established at the nation's founding to a modern, flexible framework focused on worker rights and international standards. Following the formation of the UAE in 1971, the nation experienced a massive influx of foreign labor, primarily from South Asia and India, to support its burgeoning oil and infrastructure sectors. The newly proposed law introduces significant advancements across several critical areas, notably transforming employment agreements, regulated hours of labor, leave benefits, termination procedures, and Kafala system reforms.⁹⁷ Earlier labour systems in the UAE were governed by restrictive policies linked to employer sponsorship (kafala system), limiting worker mobility and exposing migrants to exploitation.

The Kafala (sponsorship) system of the old UAE labour law legally tied an Indian migrant worker's residency permit, visa status, and employment contract directly to a single local employer or citizen, known as the kafeel. This framework gave employers disproportionate power over the workers, which often resulted in severe exploitation and human rights concerns. Under the old law, Indian migrant workers faced stringent limitations that restricted their personal freedoms and job flexibility. Workers were legally banned from changing employers without obvious, written permission from their initial sponsor. Leaving a job without permission was treated as "disappearance," a punishable offense leading to fines, imprisonment, or deportation. Indian workers could not leave the UAE or re-enter without an explicit exit visa approved by their employer.⁹⁸

The old UAE Labour Law (Federal Law No. 8 of 1980) governed the private sector for over four decades before being completely replaced by Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021. This historical framework significantly impacted millions of Indian migrant workers. For millions of Indian migrant workers, the old law established foundational protections but also contained rigid frameworks that heavily impacted job mobility, resignation benefits, and dispute resolutions.⁹⁹

The 1980 law recognized two distinct types of employment contracts: limited terms contract and unlimited term contract. Limited contracts were fixed-duration agreements (usually 2–3 years). Leaving early meant the worker had to pay structural compensation to the employer and face an automatic 6-month or 1-year employment ban. Unlimited contract was contracts with a start date but no end date, which could be terminated via a standard notice period. While more flexible, they penalised the worker heavily upon voluntary resignation.¹⁰⁰

While the old law established the right to an End-of-Service Gratuity after one year of continuous service,

it penalised workers who chose to resign voluntarily from unlimited contracts. Long work hours were unrestricted under the previous labor laws. There was no provision in the previous labor law to address excessive hours without stringent limitations. It was limited to eight hours a day or forty-eight hours a week. This was often increased to 9 hours for service sectors like retail and hospitality. While overtime pay was technically mandatory under the law, widespread implementation challenges meant blue-collar Indian workers in construction often faced longer undocumented shifts. Although, passport confiscation was prohibited by the UAE judiciary over time, but the old law did not contain aggressive internal penalties to stop employers from confiscating workers' passports.¹⁰¹

Recent Labour Reforms and Policy Shifts in UAE for Indian Diaspora

The UAE has significantly modernised its private sector employment framework through Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021, which took effect on 2 February 2022. This landmark overhaul entirely replaced the decades-old Federal Law No. 8 of 1980. The updated legislation aligns the nation's workplace practices with global standards, introducing flexible work models and enhanced protections tailored to the post-pandemic global economy.¹⁰²

The UAE introduced a new private sector labor law (Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021) to better protect workers and meet international standards. The law officially recognizes part-time, temporary, flexible, remote, and job-sharing roles. It bans discrimination based on race, gender, or religion. It strictly prohibits workplace harassment and forced labor. Men and women must receive equal pay for doing the same job. All companies must use the same official contract templates. Employers cannot change contract terms after a worker arrives in the country. Overall, these reforms modernize the job market and create a safer, fairer workplace for everyone.¹⁰³

Key Legal Protections for Indian Diaspora in UAE

The new law eradicate the Kafala System in UAE. It modernized legislation and shifted the UAE labour market from unlimited, sponsor-tied agreements to mandatory fixed-term employment contracts. The UAE Labour Law (Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021) is the primary legislation regulating private-sector employment. This comprehensive legal framework was enacted to modernize the labor market, enhance workforce flexibility, and strengthen worker rights. It provides vital protections for the millions of expatriate workers, including Indian nationals, by enforcing zero-tolerance policies against workplace discrimination and harassment, as well as mandating transparent, fixed-term contracts. Workers are now able to terminate contracts, change employers legally without leaving the country, and avoid forced labor.¹⁰⁴

Under the current law, all private-sector employees must be on fixed-term contracts. The law introduced flexible, part-time, temporary, and remote work arrangements, allowing Indian professionals more options beyond traditional 9-to-5 roles. All employees must now be under written, fixed-term contracts (maximum three years), which can be renewed indefinitely by mutual agreement. Unlimited contracts are abolished. Contracts must specify the job title, salary, and duration, and fit one of six work patterns full-time, part-time, flexible, temporary, remote, or project-based.¹⁰⁵

The primary legal framework for employment in the United Arab Emirates is Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021, which governs the private sector and was designed to modernize the labour market and protect expatriate workers, including the millions of Indian migrants. The law recognizes six distinct work patterns like full-time, part-time, flexible, temporary, remote, and project-based. As of 2026, digital contracts signed through platforms like the MoHRE Digital Contract Platform carry the same legal weight as physical documents.¹⁰⁶

Wage Protection and Financial Security

The UAE's new labour law highlights the Wage Protection System (WPS), a government-mandated electronic salary transfer framework. Developed by the Central Bank of the UAE and overseen by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MoHRE), the system ensures that private-sector employees, including Indian migrants, receive their full wages on time. By legally barring employers from paying salaries in cash or unmonitored cheques, the WPS creates a secure, fully digital trail for every dirham earned. The Wage Protection System (WPS) ensures electronic salary transfers, heavily penalizing employers who default on wage payments. The UAE uses a rigorous system to ensure Indian migrants and other expats receive their salaries on time. This mandatory electronic system monitors salary transfers. In UAE, employers must pay salaries through the Wage Protection System (WPS), and failure to do so can lead to work permit freezes and fines ranging from AED 100,000 to AED 1,000,000. It is illegal for employers to charge workers for recruitment or visa costs. Workers with at least one year of continuous service are entitled to a gratuity based on their basic salary. Alternatively, a Voluntary Savings Scheme is being expanded, allowing employers to contribute monthly to a portable investment fund instead of a lump-sum payment. It is effective from June 1, 2026 in UAE.¹⁰⁷

Working Hours

Long working hours were unrestricted under the old labor laws. There was no provision in the old labor law to address excessive hours without strict limitations. Under the new labor code, standard working hours are capped at 48 hours per week and 8 hours per day, or 6 hours for hazardous roles. The law also ensures worker welfare by mandating at least one day off per week and reducing daily shifts by two hours during Ramadan. Overtime is permitted but must be compensated at a higher rate, protecting employees from exploitation and promoting work-life balance.¹⁰⁸

Leave Entitlements

The new labor law greatly increases the amount of leave that employees can take. After a year of service, employees are entitled to at least thirty calendar days of paid leave. In Dubai and Abu Dhabi, employers are required to offer private health insurance and unemployment insurance. The length of maternity leave has been increased to 60 days (15 days of half pay and 45 days of full pay). Additionally, male employees are now eligible for up to five days of paternity leave. Employees may take up to 90 days of sick leave annually, with the first 15 days being paid in full, the next 30 being paid in half, and the latter 45 days being unpaid. Expanded leave benefits are giving employees more time for rest, recovery, and personal obligations. It acknowledges the importance of work-life balance and promotes the wellbeing of employees. Under the new labour law, the UAE has also introduced compassionate leaves.¹⁰⁹

Termination Procedures

Under the old labour law, companies could end contracts without providing a reason. Organizations were subject to stricter regulations under the new labor law, which mandated that employers follow the correct procedures and provide justifications for terminations. Additionally, it specifies a notice period of one to three months, based on the length of the position. Standard notice durations range from 30 to 90 days. The maximum duration of probation is six months. If an employer wants to fire an employee during this time, they must give 14 days' written notice. The employee may receive up to three months' worth of compensation if the court determines that the termination was retaliatory (for example, for submitting a complaint). Under updated labour regulations, employees completing one year of service are entitled to an end-of-service gratuity calculated from their basic salary. These reforms significantly enhance job security and protect workers from arbitrary dismissal. By establishing clear statutory benefits, the new rules empower employees to confidently navigate career transitions and pursue new opportunities.¹¹⁰

Institutional Grievance Redressal Mechanisms for Indian Diaspora in UAE

Indian workers can file grievances for free via the MoHRE Smart App. The Ministry can issue final, binding decisions on claims under AED 50,000 without needing a full court process. It is strictly illegal for employers to confiscate an employee's passport. The law explicitly prohibits discrimination based on race, nationality, gender, or religion. Employers are legally required to provide and pay for health insurance; they cannot deduct premiums from an employee's salary.¹¹¹

The Government of India and the UAE have established several institutional grievance redressal mechanisms legal and digital channels to address migrant distress:

1. The eMigrate system is a mandatory digital platform managed by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India. It is designed to safeguard Indian workers abroad, the system streamlines the verification of foreign employment contracts, grants clearances for Emigration Check Required (ECR) passport holders, and maintains a registry of blacklisted foreign employers to prevent labor exploitation.
2. The Pravasi Bharatiya Sahayata Kendra (PBSK) is a welfare initiative established by India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to assist distressed Indian expatriates living and working in the UAE. Formally known as the Indian Workers Resource Centre (IWRC), the centers operate out of diplomatic premises to provide a secure environment for vulnerable nationals, particularly blue-collar workers. They offer extensive help via a 24/7 toll-free helpline, WhatsApp messaging, and dedicated walk-in consultation rooms.
3. MADAD and CPGRAMS are centralized, web-based portals established by the Government of India to register, track, and resolve grievances, including those filed by overseas Indian citizens. While MADAD specifically addresses consular and diaspora-related issues managed by the Ministry of External Affairs, CPGRAMS serves as a broader platform for grievances against any central or state government department.
4. The Ministry of External Affairs runs the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) to support citizens abroad. It aids with emergency food, legal help, tickets home, and repatriation. It provides food and shelter for distressed or stranded Indian workers.
5. Shelter Homes for Distressed Indian Workers in the UAE: Indian diplomatic missions in the UAE operate temporary safe houses to support helpless citizens. These facilities provide free boarding, food, medical assistance, and legal aid to distressed domestic and construction workers while they await repatriation or the resolution of their cases.

Indian diaspora in the UAE are closely linked to labour migration patterns, working conditions, and ongoing labour reforms in the Gulf region. The UAE is one of the largest destinations for Indian migrant workers, especially in construction, services, and domestic work. In 2025, over 200,000 Indian blue-collar workers migrated to the UAE, making it the top destination globally for such workers. Indians form a major share of the UAE workforce and contribute significantly to remittances to India.¹¹²

Essential Protections

The safety and security of the Indian diaspora in the UAE remains a top priority. The UAE government has assured India that the security of Indian nationals living in the Gulf country is paramount, stressing that they are fully protected and treated like family.¹¹³ The new labor law strictly prohibits employers from confiscating an employee's passport and explicitly bans discrimination based on race, nationality, gender, or religion. Additionally, employers are required to provide and pay for health insurance coverage without making any premium deductions from an employee's salary.

Dispute Resolution for Indian Diaspora in UAE

Digital Dispute Resolution is a platform established by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (MoHRE) to make it significantly easier to process grievances. For Indian expatriates and investors in the UAE, resolving legal disputes demands a clear understanding of the region's unique dual legal system. Employment concerns (unpaid wages, wrongful termination, gratuity issues) are the most common disputes faced by Indian expats. The Indian government complements these host-state reforms by maintaining dedicated labour wings, establishing the Pravasi Bharatiya Sahayata Kendras (PBSK) for legal and counselling aid in Dubai, and operating open houses to directly address grievances. Indian workers can now file complaints digitally. They can access labour courts and mediation systems. They can receive legal support in disputes. This process is entirely free of cost for workers.¹¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The Indian diaspora in the UAE forms one of the world's most dynamic and socio-economically vital migration corridors, standing as a testament to cross-border success. Over 4.3 million Indian diaspora, spanning low-skilled labourers, white-collar professionals, and billionaire entrepreneurs. This diaspora serves as a critical economic lifeline for India through billions of dollars in annual remittances, while simultaneously acting as the primary engine driving the UAE's ambitious infrastructure, service, and technology sectors. For decades, the low-skilled and semi-skilled workforce—which forms the bedrock of the diaspora—faced weaknesses rooted in the traditional Kafala (sponsorship) system. Issues such as contract substitution, non-payment of wages, substandard living conditions in labour camps, and restricted job mobility long dominated the human rights discourse surrounding Gulf migration. Furthermore, the temporary nature of residency in the UAE meant that generations of workers faced perpetual geopolitical and economic precarity, with no legal pathway to permanent integration or citizenship. In response to these persistent weaknesses and changing global economic realities, the landscape of migration has undergone a paradigm shift driven by progressive labour reforms and proactive bilateral diplomacy. The UAE's comprehensive labor law overhaul marks a historic shift toward dismantling the exploitative elements of the Kafala system. By introducing the Wage Protection System (WPS), flexible work contracts, mandatory unemployment insurance, and eliminating harsh exit permits, the nation has significantly strengthened protections and freedom of movement for its workforce. Simultaneously, the introduction of long-term residency schemes like the Golden Visa and Green Visa reflects a strategic shift from treating migrants as transient labor to viewing them as long-term partners in the UAE's transition toward a knowledge-based economy. From the Indian side, enhanced institutional frameworks like the eMigrate system, pre-departure orientation programs, and strong consular support networks have added layers of safety and digital tracking to protect vulnerable workers from rogue recruitment agents. These domestic reforms are further reinforced by a historic tightening of diplomatic ties. The signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and its accompanying strategic framework signals a paradigm shift for the Indian diaspora in the UAE. Moving beyond its historical role as a source of labour and remittances, the Indian diaspora has evolved into a strategic anchor for a high-level geopolitical alliance. Ultimately, its future is transitioning from economic survival toward high-value integration and mutual strategic empowerment.

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