

# Mapping the Return Migration: Estimating and Projecting Indian Emigrants from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

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**Abstract.** This study examines the phenomenon of return migration among Indian migrants in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with a focus on the period from 2002 to 2014. Drawing on data from various sources, including government reports and field surveys conducted from November 2018 to May 2019, the research provides valuable insights into the patterns, trends, and implications of return migration for India. The analysis reveals a significant surge in the number of Indian migrants returning from the GCC region during the specified period, with an estimated 3-4 million individuals expected to have repatriated to India. Factors driving this trend include changes in labour demand, economic conditions, and government policies in both India and the GCC countries. The study also highlights the challenges faced by returnees, such as reintegration into the Indian labour market, access to social services, and cultural adjustments. Despite these challenges, return migration presents substantial opportunities for India, including the transfer of skills, knowledge, and financial resources from the diaspora, as well as the potential for enhanced economic cooperation and development partnerships between India and the GCC countries. By understanding the dynamics of return migration and addressing the associated challenges, India can better leverage the potential of its diaspora for national development and prosperity.

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## 1. Introduction

Migration patterns exhibit a recurring phenomenon of reverse flow, observed across diverse contexts in both developed and developing nations, varying over time and space (Lee, 1996; Pottinger, 1987; Lee, 1974). Return migration trends are evident not only in high-income nations like the United States, Canada, and Japan (Suzuki, 1995; Vanderkamp, 1972) but also in lower-income and developing countries such as Mexico, China, and India (Fan, 2007; Fan, 2005; Reyes, 1997; Weisbrock, n.d.;). Market signals, including labour demand, supply, and wages, play a pivotal role in guiding the decisions of return migrants, alongside institutional constraints, inherited homeland attitudes, and familial ties. Studies on return migration typically dichotomize migrants into categories of success and failure, focusing on various aspects such as human capital acquisition, technical proficiency, remittance patterns, health outcomes, family dynamics, ethnic considerations, political dynamics, and socio-cultural integration (Hausmann & Nedelkoska, 2017; Williams & Balaz, 2014; Borjas, 2014; Constant & Massey, 2012; Sander, 2007;). In recent years, there has been a surge in research investigating the movement of labourers, professionals, scientists, and students within the migration and development paradigm, emphasizing their potential contributions to origin countries through diaspora engagement or eventual repatriation (Czaika, et al., 2021).

India serves as a prime example due to its abundant human capital, supplying skilled and unskilled labour to numerous countries globally. While West Asian and North African nations attract Indian talent, limited understanding exists regarding the intentions of skilled professionals and students from India, their commitment to homeland development, and their likelihood of returning. Moreover, the dynamics of return migration to India remain inadequately explored, warranting further investigation into this multifaceted phenomenon. The colonial era in India marked the onset of significant migration, driven largely by economic pressures imposed by the British. Starting in the early 19th century, people of Indian origin (PIO) began migrating overseas in substantial numbers. Unlike many other diaspora groups, the Indian diaspora exhibits a remarkably diverse migration pattern, comparable perhaps only to the Chinese. Initially, PIO dispersed to regions including Africa, Southeast Asia, Fiji, and the Caribbean islands. This migration wave followed the abolition of the slavery system in India during 1833-1834. Subsequently, a second wave of migration occurred in the late 20th century. This phase was characterized by the movement of Indian professionals to developed Western nations and the migration of skilled and semi-skilled labourers to West Asia and the Gulf region, prompted by the oil boom in those areas. While academia has made strides in studying return migration,

with numerous draft papers and discussions in meetings and conferences, the focus has primarily been on OECD countries. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of attention given to issues concerning Indian returnee migrants from GCC countries in both research and discourse. However, efforts have been made to review existing literature comprehensively. Recent research has shifted the discourse on return migrants from viewing them as obstacles to development to recognizing them as potential development assets. Evidence suggests that return migrants can bring valuable skills, knowledge, and investments through diaspora networks, business ventures, and eventual return to their home country (de Haas, 2014; Castles, et al., 2014; Carvajal, 2002). Without a critical analysis of return migration, the relationship between returnees and their well-being in origin countries remains ambiguous. Various theories and types of return flows have been proposed, highlighting the complexity of return migration (Cassarino, 2004; Black & Tiemoko, 2003; Constant & Massey, 2002; King, 2001; Stark, 1991; Gmelch, 1980; Laumann et al., 1978; Bovenkerk, 1974; Cerase, 1974). Studies have examined the linkages between migrants and their homeland, as well as the socio-economic advancement they can bring (CODEV-EPFL et al., 2013; Tejada & Bolay, 2010; Meyer, 2001). The Indian diaspora, being the largest in size and spread, presents significant development potential for the government to engage with (MOIA, 2016; Nathan, 2015).

Return migrants have contributed substantially to their origin countries through knowledge, skills, financial capital, and established networks. Additionally, there's recognition of the importance of resources beyond physical return, such as remittances, financial investments, and the transfer of social capital (Tejada, 2012; Brinkerhoff, 2008; Saxenian, 2006; Yingqi & Balasubramanyam, 2006). Countries of origin have introduced measures to engage their diaspora and attract highly skilled personnel back home. Return migration is often viewed as a cost-benefit decision, where individuals weigh the potential returns against migration costs (Sjaastad, 1962). Despite India benefiting from reverse flows of investments and remittances, there's a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the challenges and drivers influencing the transfer of knowledge and resources by returnees. Many return migrants face rehabilitation challenges upon returning home (Rajan & Joseph, 2017; Fazli, 2001). India leads globally in the number of migrants sent abroad, with over half of them, totalling 8.9 million out of 16.59 million, residing in the Gulf region, as per a UN report. The 2017 International Migration Report highlights those Indian migrants worldwide doubled from 7.98 million in 2000 to 16.59 million in 2017 (United

Nations, 2017). The United Arab Emirates hosts the largest number of Indian migrants, reaching 3.31 million, followed by Saudi Arabia with 2.27 million, Oman with 1.2 million, and Kuwait with 1.16 million (United Nations, 2017). Given the significant presence of Indians in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, studying migration-related issues becomes imperative.

The Gulf countries serve as a major source of income for Indians residing and working there. Therefore, it is crucial to address their concerns in both societal and policy contexts. With strategic measures and information dissemination, the return migration process holds the potential to bring about notable changes in various facets of society. Despite the substantial migration flow, there is a dearth of comprehensive information on return migration, particularly concerning Indians returning from GCC countries. It is essential to delve deeper into the complexities and characteristics of return migration beyond mere discussions on migrant flows and remittances. Understanding these dynamics can lead to more informed policies and interventions to facilitate successful return migration processes.

## 2. Methods

### NRIs, OCIs, and POIs from India

As of December 2018, the Indian diaspora, comprising NRIs and PIOs, exceeded 30 million, making it the largest in the world. Approximately 27.57% (8,546,416 individuals) of this diaspora resided solely in the GCC countries Figure 1 (a, b, c). Among PIOs, the United States had the highest number, followed by Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, France, and others, totalling 17.8 million, with 85% residing in the top 10 countries mentioned.

However, when considering NRIs, it was found that over 65% (8,533,512) lived in the GCC countries. In 2018, the UAE emerged as the leading hub for Indian NRIs in the GCC, comprising 23.64% of the total NRI population, followed by Saudi Arabia (21.45%), Kuwait (7.08%), Qatar (5.27%), Oman (5.25%), and Bahrain (2.39%). Interestingly, none of the GCC countries ranked among the top ten countries with the highest number of PIOs. In 2018, only 12,904 individuals of Indian origin were estimated to reside in the GCC countries, accounting for a mere 0.07% of the global PIO population. Among the GCC nations, the highest proportion of PIOs was observed in the UAE (35.54%), followed by Bahrain (25.24%), Saudi Arabia (16.74%), Kuwait (11.48%), Oman (7.12%), and Qatar (3.87%) (Figure 2). Further, the OCI Scheme, initiated on December 2, 2005, was established due to constitutional

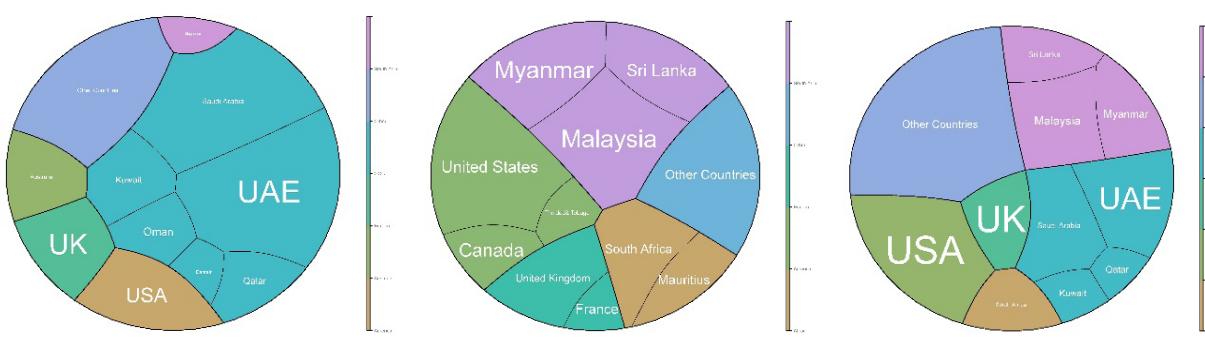


Figure 1 – Share of NRIs, OCIs, and POIs from India (MEA Statistics, 2019).

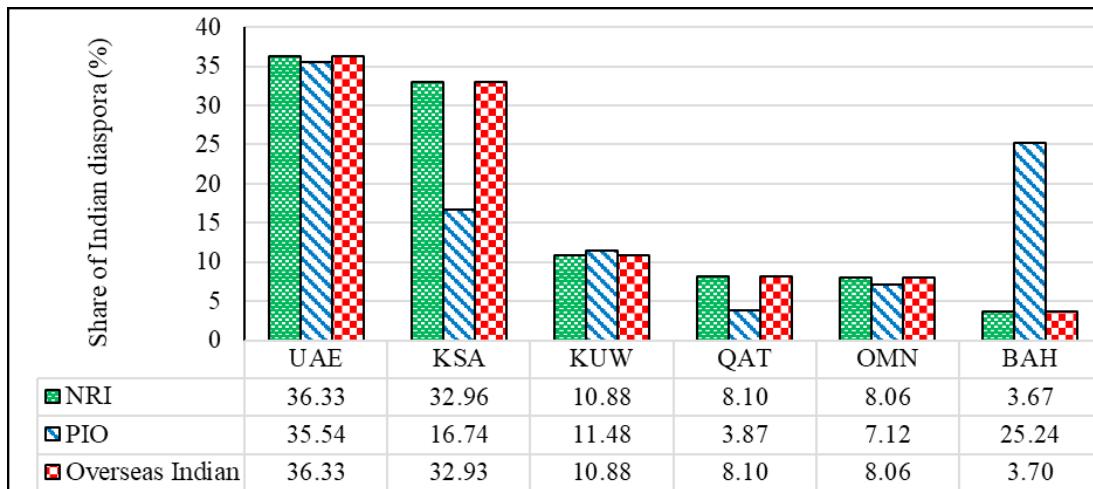


Figure 2 – Share of Indian Diaspora among GCC Countries (in %, MEA Statistics, 2019)

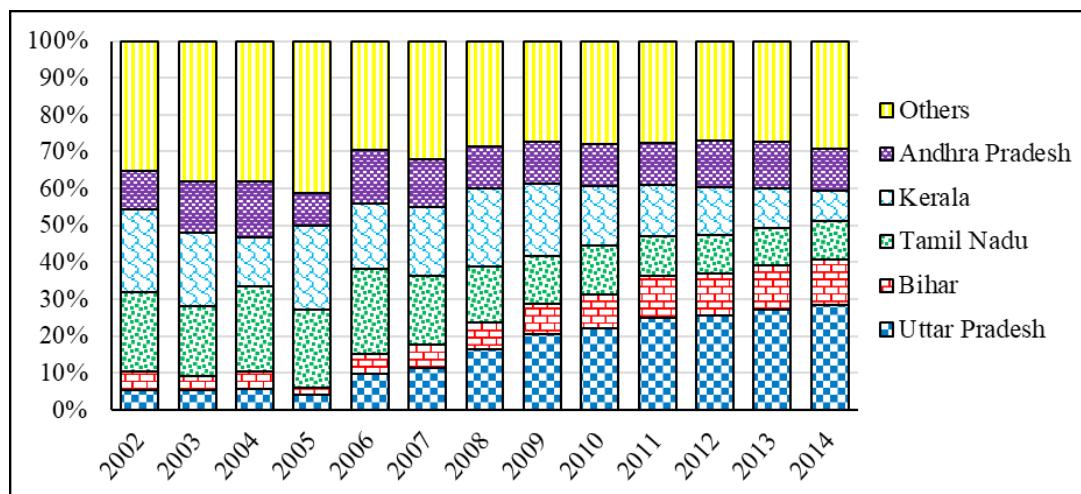


Figure 3 – Trend of migration among Indian States (Annual Reports, MOIA- various issues)

restrictions preventing individuals from holding Indian citizenship and citizenship of a foreign country simultaneously. Following recommendations from the High-Level Committee on Indian Diaspora, the Government of India implemented the registration of Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) under certain categories as Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) Cardholders, as outlined in Section 7A of the Citizenship Act, 1955. OCI Cardholders do not possess voting rights or eligibility for election to various governmental positions.

However, they enjoy several benefits, including lifelong multiple entry visas for visiting India, exemption from registration with the Foreigners Regional Registration Officer (FRRO) or Foreigners Registration Officer (FRO) during their stay in India, and parity with Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) in economic, financial, and educational opportunities. They also receive equal treatment with NRIs in matters such as inter-country adoption of Indian children and domestic airfare tariffs in India. Additionally, OCI Cardholders are charged the same entry fees as domestic Indian visitors for visiting certain sites.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### Indian Diaspora in the GCC Countries

The states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh have consistently ranked as the top contributors to outflow migration from India. Data spanning from 2002 to 2014,

drawn from the annual reports of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs and Ministry of External Affairs, underscores this trend. Notably, more than 70% of migrants in 2014 hailed from five states i.e. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. However, their combined contribution decreased from 64.74% in 2002 to 58.77% in 2005, largely due to the global economic downturn. Following the recession, migration witnessed a significant uptick post-2009, fuelled by escalating labour demand in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The total out-migration surged from 3,67,663 in 2002 to 8,48,601 in 2008, before tapering to 8,04,878 in 2014. Initially, Kerala and Tamil Nadu were prominent sources of out-migration, but this landscape shifted post-recession. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh emerged as the primary contributors to the outflow of labourers (Figure 3).

By 2014, Uttar Pradesh led the pack, accounting for 28.51% (2,29,444 migrants), followed by Bihar (98,721 migrants) and Andhra Pradesh (91,635 migrants), with shares of 12.27% and 11.38%, respectively. In contrast, the remaining 24 states and 7 union territories contributed only 29.30% (235818 migrants) to the total overseas migration. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region has historically attracted a significant number of Indian workers, making it the primary destination for Indian migrants. Figures 4 (a, b) depict this trend, projecting that Indian labour migration will continue to be concentrated in the GCC region until at least 2025.

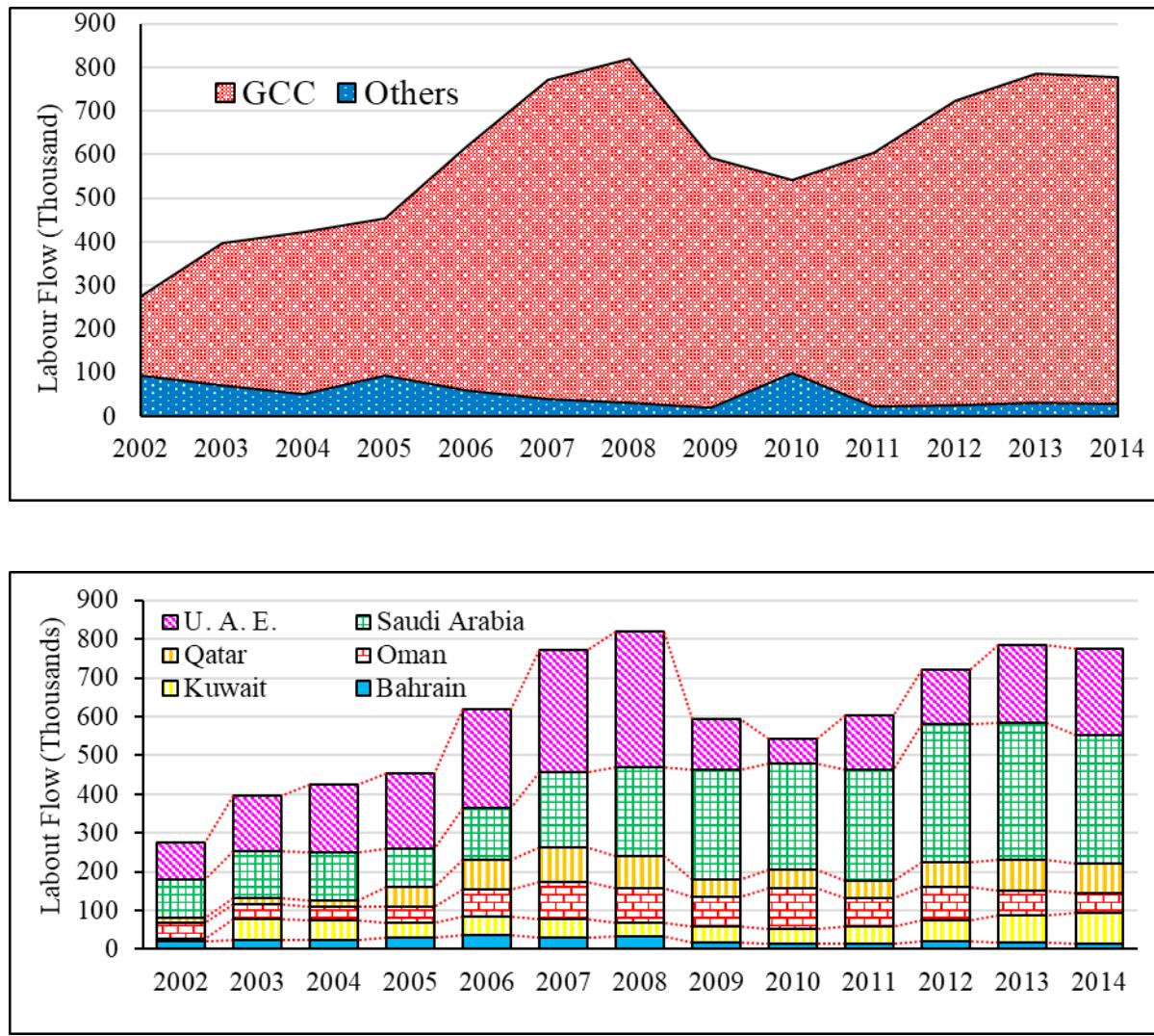


Figure 4 (a and b) - Annual Labour flow to the Gulf region and others (Annual Reports, MOIA – various issues)

Among the GCC countries, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stands out as the leading destination for Indian migrants, followed closely by the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain. Given this scenario, India's labour force migration policy requires special attention to safeguard labour rights and ensure sustainable welfare upon return, especially considering the absence of citizenship rights for migrants in the GCC region. Migrants are typically required to return to their home country upon completion of their job contracts or assigned work. In 2002, out of a total of 3,67,669 migrants, 2,73,958 individuals migrated to the GCC region alone, accounting for 74.51% of total migration from India. Following the 2008 recession, migration flows increased significantly, with the GCC region absorbing as much as 97.05% of the total 6,10,272 labour migrants in 2009. Despite fluctuations, the GCC countries have consistently hosted over 95% of Indian labour migrants since 2002, except for the period between 2002 and 2006, during which the proportion was approximately 90%. Within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, a notable shift in migration stock and yearly labour migration flow from India has been observed, particularly concerning the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In 2002, the Indian labour force constituted 25.85% (99,453 migrants) of the Kingdom's total migrants, which increased significantly to 42.53% (3,29,937 migrants) by 2014. Conversely, the UAE's share declined

from 25.49% in 2002 to 9.77% (62,657 migrants) in 2010 but has been gradually increasing since then, reaching 28.88% (2,24,033 migrants) by 2014. Meanwhile, the proportion of labour migration to Bahrain and Oman decreased from 7.59% to 1.83% and 11.32% to 6.38%, respectively, between 2002 and 2014, as a percentage of the total annual Indian migration flow. In contrast, Indian migration to Qatar increased from 4.60% in 2002 to 9.79% in 2014, and to Kuwait from 1.32% in 2002 to 9.99% in 2014.

Hence, the Indian diaspora embodies a rich and diverse array of social, cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, a facet yet to be fully explored in scientific discourse. Moreover, in line with Ravenstein's concept of migration waves, a notable trend of return migration has emerged among migrants, particularly those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. This return movement signifies a quest for roots and fresh opportunities in their homeland, driven by aspirations for readjustment and mutually beneficial engagements. The contributions of returning migrants encompass a spectrum ranging from investments, skills and technology transfer, to philanthropic endeavours, reflecting the evolving landscape of India's economy and its burgeoning opportunities. However, these contributions often remain unnoticed, both due to the multifaceted nature of migrant traits and the lack of institutional recognition. Welfare initiatives initiated by migrants frequently operate outside mainstream public

awareness. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive data on returnees, out-migrants, and human resources underscores the inadequacy in addressing this phenomenon. Until recently, there has been a dearth of mechanisms for estimating return migration endorsed by the Government of India. In response, this study seeks to fill this gap by providing a reliable estimate of returnees, drawing from firsthand data collected through field surveys conducted from November 2018 to May 2019 in GCC countries. While the survey encountered a diverse array of returnees with varied profiles, this paper offers only a brief overview of the survey findings. The primary objective remains the provision of a valid estimate of returnees, rather than delving into the characterization of individual returnees. Consequently, the scope of this study is delimited to specific issues outlined in subsequent sections.

### Mapping the Return Migration

In this section, we delve into the phenomenon of return migration, drawing upon insights obtained from an extensive field survey conducted over an extended period. Our analysis centres on the observation that a significant proportion of migrants tend to return to their country of origin after approximately 10-11 years of residence in their destination country, a pattern that aligns with Ravenstein's theory of

migration waves. To provide a comprehensive estimation of return migration, we have developed three predictive models i.e. liberal, moderate, and conservative (Figure 5).

Each model is based on varying assumptions regarding the annual cumulative return rate. The liberal model assumes a higher rate of return, with a cumulative return rate of 7 per cent per year, while the moderate model assumes a slightly lower rate of 6 per cent per year, and the conservative model adopts a more cautious estimate of 5 per cent per year. Based on the above assumption, the estimated return migrants were calculated linearly. Figure 6 illustrates these estimates in detail, breaking down the projected return migration figures on a country-wise basis. These figures offer valuable insights into the expected patterns of return migration from the Gulf region to India over the period under consideration, allowing for a nuanced understanding of migration dynamics.

Our projections indicate that between 2002 and 2014, approximately 3-4 million individuals are expected to have returned to India from the Gulf region. Under the liberal scenario, Saudi Arabia emerges as the primary source of return migration, with an estimated 1.44 million returnees, followed closely by the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain, each contributing substantial numbers of returnees (Figure 7). In the moderate scenario, the estimated

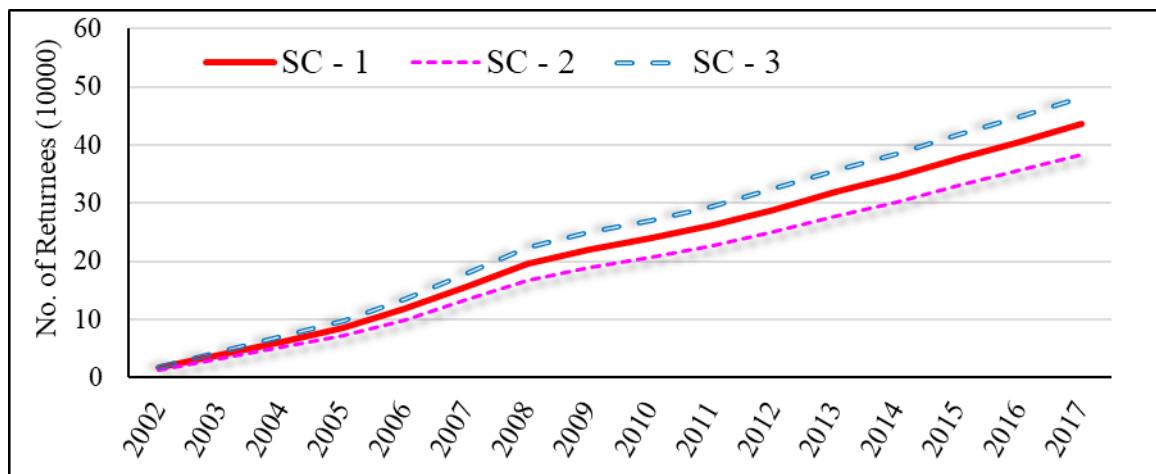


Figure 5 – Annual Return estimates from GCC countries (total)

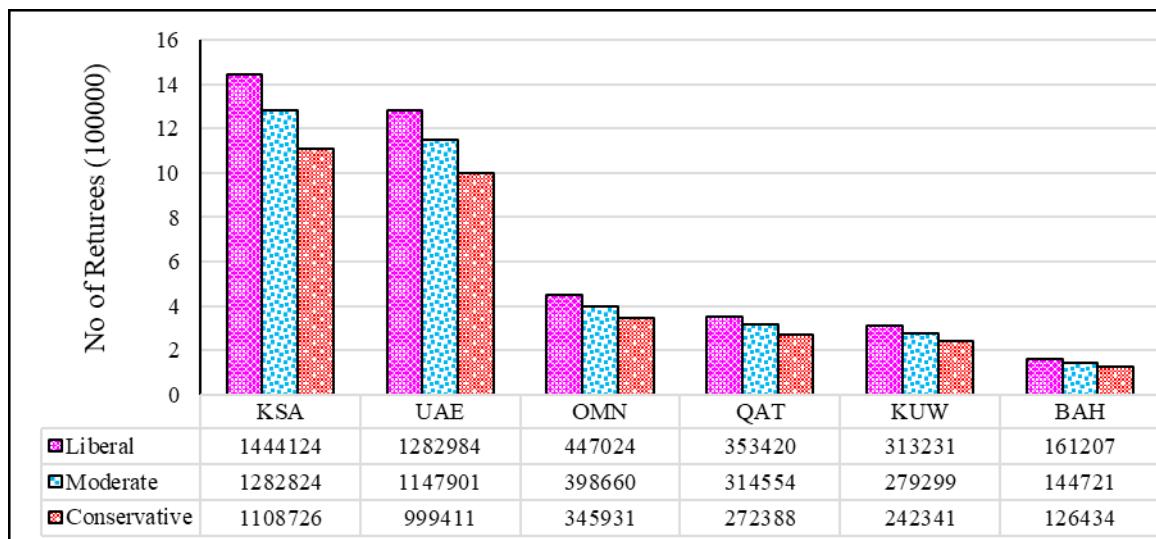


Figure 6 – Annual Return estimates from GCC under different scenario 2002-14

number of returnees from each country remains significant, albeit slightly lower than the liberal projections. Similarly, the conservative scenario presents a more cautious estimate of return migration figures, reflecting a more conservative approach to forecasting. Overall, our analysis offers valuable insights into the anticipated patterns of return migration from the Gulf region to India, providing policymakers and stakeholders with valuable data to inform decision-making and policy formulation in the realm of migration management and labour mobility.

Further, the study shows that there are several strengths associated with relatively high earnings, revenue receipt, economic and cultural linkage, and stakeholder acceptability. Indian diaspora constitutes a significant portion of the overall population, representing a valuable resource pool with diverse skills, expertise, and experiences. Overall, these strengths underscore the importance of leveraging the diaspora's potential as a key driver of economic, social, and cultural development, highlighting opportunities for further collaboration and partnership between the diaspora and their

home country. However, several weaknesses pose challenges to the effective management and integration of Indian workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which include low skills of Indian workers, lack of supportive institutions, inadequate legal and immigration mechanisms, low economic gain after return, and others.

Addressing these weaknesses will require concerted efforts from both the Indian government and relevant stakeholders to enhance the skills and knowledge of Indian workers, improve labour welfare policies, strengthen institutional support systems, reform legal and immigration frameworks, and facilitate reintegration and economic empowerment for returning workers. By addressing these challenges, India can better harness the potential of its workforce in the GCC countries while ensuring their well-being and prosperity. Moreover, there are significant opportunities for leveraging the Indian diaspora in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, which includes a large NRIs population, remittance inflows, diverse manpower categories, investment and philanthropic potential, Business partnerships and others.

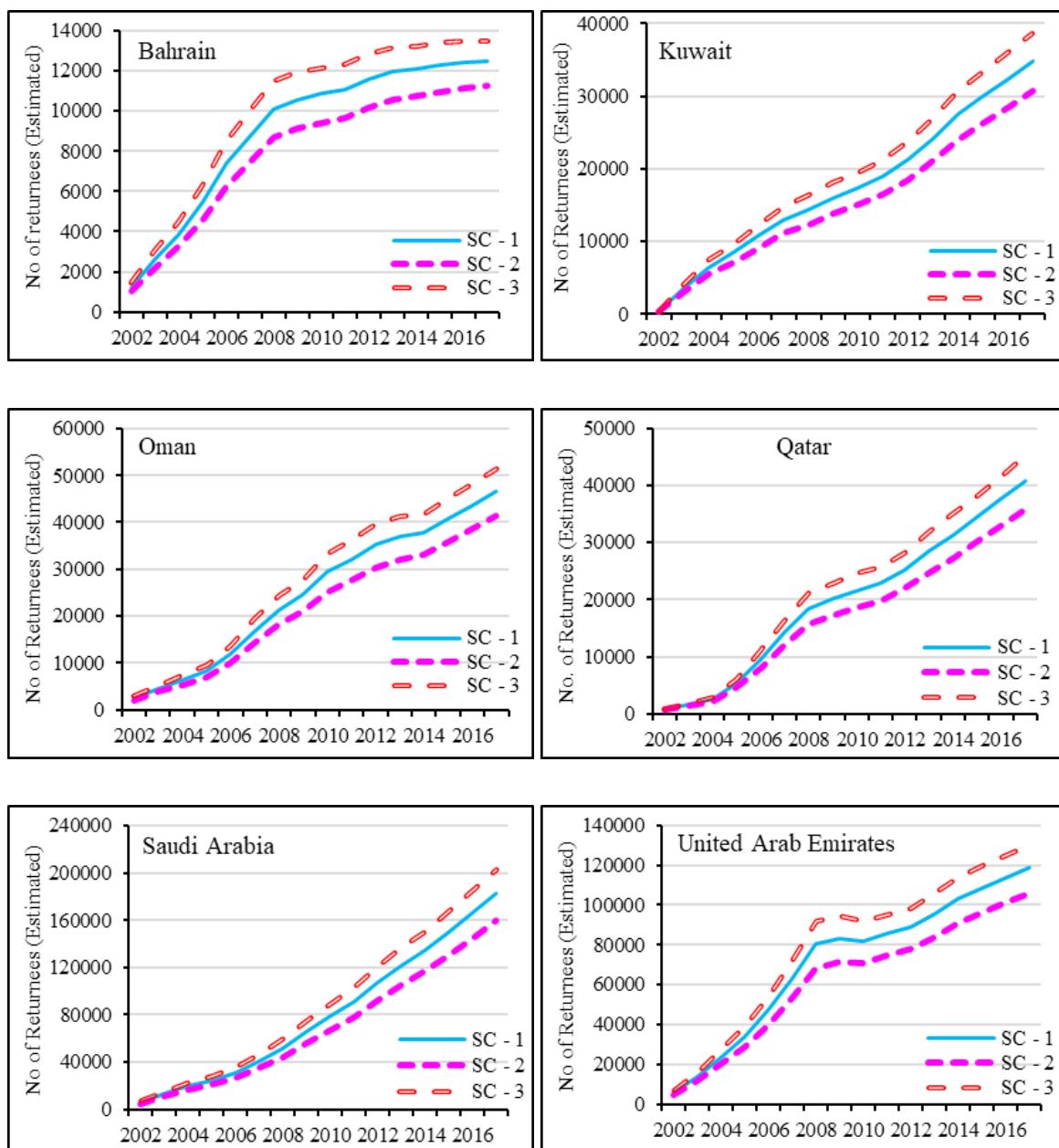


Figure 6 – Annual Return estimates from GCC by countries.

### 3. Conclusion

The study sheds light on the multifaceted phenomenon of return migration, particularly concerning Indian migrants in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Migration patterns, characterized by recurring waves of reverse flow, underscore the complex interplay of market signals, institutional constraints, and familial ties influencing migrants' decisions to return to their homeland. Despite significant strides in understanding return migration globally, there remains a dearth of comprehensive research focusing on Indian returnees from GCC countries. However, amidst these challenges lie significant opportunities. With over 65% of NRIs residing in the GCC, and an estimated 8.54 million Indian diaspora members in the region, there is immense potential for collaboration and partnership. Furthermore, with nearly 28% of the Indian diaspora residing in the GCC, and an estimated 3-4 million returnees expected between 2002 and 2014, there is a sizable pool of skilled individuals contributing to India's development. This estimated 3-4 million returnees can contribute substantially to the development of India as they bring back not only financial capital but also human, social and cultural capital. Moreover, with around 8.53 million NRIs in the GCC region, and approximately \$80 billion in yearly remittances globally, there is substantial economic potential. Additionally, the diverse manpower categories, investment opportunities, and business partnerships further highlight the opportunities for leveraging the Indian diaspora in the GCC. Strengths associated with Indian migration to the GCC region include relatively high earnings, significant revenue receipts, robust economic and cultural linkages, and stakeholder acceptability. However, several weaknesses pose challenges to effective migration management, including the low skills of Indian workers, limited knowledge of GCC affairs, lack of insurance and labour welfare policies, inadequate supportive institutions, and legal and immigration mechanisms. Addressing these weaknesses will require concerted efforts from the Indian government and relevant stakeholders to enhance skills, improve welfare policies, strengthen institutions, and reform legal frameworks. In conclusion, understanding the complexities of return migration and addressing associated challenges while leveraging opportunities are essential for maximizing the contributions of Indian migrants to both their host and home countries. Through strategic policies and interventions, India can ensure the well-being and prosperity of its diaspora while fostering mutually beneficial relationships with GCC countries.

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