

Growth of the Indian Diaspora Population in the 21st Century:

Trends, Patterns, and Determinants

1. Introduction

India has been the top source country for international migrants for most of the past two decades. The UN DESA International Migrant Stock 2024 report ranks India first globally, with approximately 18.5 million individuals residing outside the country (UN DESA, 2025). Using the Ministry of External Affairs' (MEA) broader measure, which incorporates both Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) holding foreign citizenship, the total reaches 34.36 million across 208 countries and territories as of January 2025, making the Indian diaspora the largest in the world in absolute terms (MEA, 2025).

The growth of the Indian diaspora has been demographically uneven, its composition has shifted substantially over time, and its relationship with India itself has evolved from one of remittance dependency toward an increasingly complex configuration of economic, cultural, and political interdependence. This paper analyses these dynamics systematically, drawing on demographic datasets, bilateral administrative records, and migration studies literature to trace the principal trends, regional patterns, and structural determinants of Indian diaspora growth since 2000.

2. Historical Antecedents

Indian emigration over the past two centuries has occurred in three broadly identifiable phases, each driven by distinct structural conditions and producing demographically distinct diaspora communities (Khadria, 2012).

The first phase, spanning approximately 1830 to 1920, was defined by the colonial indenture system. Following the abolition of slavery in British territories, workers drawn primarily from the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of present-day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and from Tamil-speaking Madras Presidency were transported to sugar plantations in Mauritius, Trinidad, British Guiana, Fiji, and other colonial territories. Approximately 1.5 million Indians were contracted under this system (Kapur, 2010). These communities formed the nucleus of the 'old diaspora'. This population is now multi-generationally settled and their current demographics are shaped by internal fertility, generational change, and secondary emigration rather than any direct relationship

with contemporary India. It is precisely this dynamic (demographic growth of settled communities through natural increase rather than new inflows) that distinguishes the old diaspora from more recent migration flows, and it accounts for a portion of the MEA’s higher total diaspora count that the UN DESA emigrant stock figure does not capture.

The second phase, roughly between 1950 and 1990, comprised two distinct streams. The first was professional emigration to the United Kingdom, facilitated by Commonwealth membership and the National Health Service’s active recruitment of South Asian medical and nursing personnel (Walton-Roberts, 2012). The second, and quantitatively larger, was labour migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states triggered by the oil price shock of 1973-74 and the construction boom it generated across the Arabian Peninsula. By 1990, approximately 3.5 million Indians were employed in the Gulf region (Khadria, 2012).

The third phase began gathering momentum in the early 1990s with India’s economic liberalisation and has continued through the present. Each phase has left a distinct demographic imprint on the overall diaspora, and the cumulative layering of these phases accounts for much of its internal heterogeneity (Rajan and Mishra, 2023).

3. Growth Trends: 1990 to 2024

The Indian emigrant stock, as measured by UN DESA, grew from approximately 6.6 million in 1990 to 7.8 million by 2000 and to 18.5 million by 2024; an almost tripling over three decades and a doubling since the turn of the millennium (UN DESA, 2025). The MEA’s broader measure, incorporating PIOs alongside NRIs, produces the significantly higher figure of 34.36 million across 208 countries as of January 2025 (MEA, 2025). The discrepancy between these two figures reflects fundamental differences in methodology, rather than any inconsistency in the underlying data.

Table 1: Indian Emigrant Stock, 1990–2024

Year	Emigrants (in millions)		
	Total	Male	Female
1990	6.6	4.0	2.6
1995	6.9	4.2	2.7
2000	7.8	4.7	3.1
2005	9.5	6.0	3.5
2010	12.4	7.8	4.5
2015	15.3	10.0	5.3

2020	16.5	10.7	5.9
2024	18.5	11.9	6.6

Sources: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *International Migrant Stock 2024; Data for India (2025)*.

The growth has been uneven across time. The 2000s saw acceleration on both the skilled professional and student fronts. The 2010s were characterised by the most rapid sustained growth: Canada’s Express Entry system (launched in 2015), Australia’s skilled migration points test, and the United Kingdom’s expansion of Tier 2 visas collectively created new settlement pathways that redirected a significant share of the global Indian migration stream toward permanent residence in OECD economies (Rajan and Mishra, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-21 produced a temporary but significant disruption. GCC governments issued return orders for large numbers of migrant workers, emigration clearances from India fell sharply, and international student flows contracted as borders closed (ILO, 2021). Recovery was rapid from 2022 onward, and in several corridors exceeded pre-pandemic levels. Total remittances to India, which stood at \$83.1 billion in 2019, fell only modestly in 2020 before surging to \$89.1 billion in 2021 and reaching \$125 billion in 2023 (World Bank 2023; Business Standard 2023).

4. Country-Level Distribution and Regional Patterns

The most granular available dataset on country-wise distribution is the MEA’s Annexure A published in January 2025, compiled from Indian missions’ estimates and destination-country administrative data (MEA 2025). Table 2 presents the top fifteen countries by total overseas Indian population drawn from this source.

Table 2: Country-wise Distribution of the Indian Diaspora (MEA, January 2025): Top 15 Countries

Rank	Country / Territory	PIOs	NRIs	Total Overseas Indians	% of Total Diaspora
1	United States of America	37,75,194	19,18,415	56,93,609	16.57%
2	United Arab Emirates	6,614	38,90,953	38,97,567	11.35%
3	Malaysia	27,50,000	1,85,000	29,35,000	8.55%
4	Saudi Arabia	0	27,47,551	27,47,551	8.00%
5	Canada	18,59,680	17,51,610	36,11,290	10.51%
6	Sri Lanka	16,00,000	7,500	16,07,500	4.68%
7	Mauritius	8,71,140	26,357	8,97,497	2.61%
8	Trinidad and Tobago	5,48,286	1,259	5,49,545	1.60%
9	Kuwait	2,356	10,07,961	10,10,317	2.94%

10	United Kingdom	9,70,969	3,69,000	13,39,969	3.90%
11	Oman	1,754	6,60,299	6,62,053	1.93%
12	Australia	6,26,000	3,50,000	9,76,000	2.84%
13	South Africa	13,18,431	74,057	13,92,488	4.06%
14	Qatar	N.A.	8,30,491	8,30,491	2.42%
15	Singapore	1,07,180	3,50,000	4,57,180	1.33%
	TOTAL (All Countries)	1,71,81,071	1,71,75,122	3,43,56,193	100%

Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Data on Indian Diaspora Abroad as of January 2025 (Annexure A, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 196). PIOs = Persons of Indian Origin (foreign-citizen descendants); NRIs = Non-Resident Indians (Indian-citizen nationals residing abroad).

The GCC collectively hosts approximately 14 million Indians across its six member states, representing roughly 40 percent of the UN DESA migrant stock count and nearly half of all NRIs in the MEA dataset (United Nations DESA 2025; MEA 2025). The UAE is the single largest host country for NRIs at 3.89 million, while Saudi Arabia hosts 2.75 million. Indians constitute approximately 40 percent of the UAE's total population, nearly a third of Saudi Arabia's, and a quarter of Kuwait's. The Gulf corridor is structurally distinct from all other Indian emigration corridors in one critical respect: it is non-settlement migration. The *kafala* system ties workers to their employers and denies them pathways to permanent residency or citizenship regardless of length of stay. This produces a circular migration pattern in which workers arrive on two-to-three-year contracts, remit aggressively, and either renew or return (Rajan and Mishra, 2023). The demographic implications are significant: the GCC Indian community is younger and more male-dominated than diaspora communities in settlement destinations, with a median age of approximately 31 years and male predominance of around 72 percent.

The United States hosts the largest Indian-origin community in any settlement destination: 5.69 million as of the MEA count, of whom 3.78 million are PIOs and 1.92 million are NRIs (MEA, 2025). This compares with an estimated 1.7 million persons of Indian origin in the US in 2000, making it the fastest-growing diaspora community in proportional terms among major destinations over the past two decades. The H-1B visa programme has been the primary structural mechanism enabling this growth: Indians receive approximately 71 percent of all approved H-1B visas annually, reflecting their dominance in the information technology sector (Rajan and Mishra, 2023). The per-country cap on employment-based green cards, currently set at 7 percent, has created a severe backlog for Indian nationals, with wait times for an EB-2 green card estimated at between 50 and 150 years under current application volumes (Rajan and Mishra, 2023). This

structural obstruction has diverted a significant stream of would-be US permanent residents to Canada, which imposes no per-country caps on its employment-based immigration.

Canada (3.61 million total, MEA) has become the fastest-growing Indian diaspora destination in the post-2015 period (MEA, 2025). Between 2015 and 2023, the number of Indian students in Canada grew from approximately 172,600 to over 427,000, fuelled by Canada's deliberately student-friendly immigration architecture (ApplyBoard, 2025). Canada's imposition of caps on international student intakes in 2024 produced a sharp reversal, with a 41 percent decline in Indian student enrolments between 2023 and 2024 (ICEF Monitor, 2024), illustrating the acute sensitivity of diaspora demographics to bilateral policy changes.

The United Kingdom hosts 1.34 million overseas Indians (MEA), constituting the largest Indian diaspora community in Europe and the third-largest settlement destination globally (MEA, 2025). Its base was formed by Commonwealth migration in the 1950s and 1960s, supplemented by the secondary migration of East African Indians, most notably the Ugandan Asians expelled in 1972. And also by the sustained nursing and healthcare chain between Kerala and NHS (Walton-Roberts, 2012). Indian migration to the UK tripled from approximately 76,000 arrivals in 2020 to 250,000 in 2023 following the UK–India Migration and Mobility Partnership (Rajan and Mishra, 2023).

Germany (450,390 total, MEA) has emerged as the most rapidly growing destination in continental Europe (MEA, 2025). Sixty thousand Indian students were enrolled in German universities in 2025, more than double the 28,905 enrolled in 2020, with 60 percent concentrated in engineering programmes (upGrad TEN Report, 2024-25). Germany's share of Indian student interest rose from 13.2 percent in 2022 to 32.6 percent in 2024, overtaking both the US and Canada in stated preference among Indian prospective students (upGrad TEN Report, 2024-25).

Beyond these major corridors, historical diaspora communities in Africa, principally in South Africa (1.39 million), Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, descended largely from indentured and trading-class migrants of the nineteenth century. And the Indian-origin populations of Fiji, Guyana, Suriname, and the wider Caribbean, constitute significant components of the MEA's aggregate count whose population growth is driven primarily by natural increase rather than fresh migration flows (Vertovec, 1997). In the Asia-Pacific region, Malaysia's community of 2.75 million and Singapore's half-a-million professional diaspora complete the principal geographic distribution (MEA, 2025).

5. Key Determinants of Growth

The growth of the Indian diaspora over the past quarter century reflects the interaction of supply factors in India, demand conditions in destination economies, bilateral policy architectures, and the dynamics of established migration networks. These determinants do not operate in isolation; they function simultaneously and in mutual reinforcement (Massey et al. 1993; Castles, de Haas, and Miller, 2014).

The foundational determinant is the wage differential between India and its principal destination countries. Despite GDP growth averaging 6-8 percent annually since 2000, India's per capita GDP at purchasing power parity remains a fraction of that of GCC states and OECD economies. These differentials are transformative at the household level and constitute a pull of considerable intensity even after accounting for migration costs and the non-material costs of relocation (Kapur, 2010). Wage differential alone is, however, insufficient as an explanatory variable. Tens of millions of Indians face similar or greater differentials but do not emigrate. The realisation of migration requires access to information, financing, and social networks, and frequently a prior family or community migration history. The spatial concentration of high-emigration communities in specific districts of Kerala, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Gujarat, and Goa reflects the constitutive role of such networks in converting wage differentials into actual mobility (Massey et al. 1993).

The skilled versus unskilled divide is analytically important and has shifted significantly over the period under review. The unskilled and semi-skilled stream is principally directed toward the GCC and is regulated under India's Emigration Act of 1983, which requires Emigration Check Required (ECR) passport holders to obtain clearance from the Protector of Emigrants before departure. This provision applies to workers without a matriculation certificate, effectively demarcating the lower-skilled Gulf-bound stream from the higher-skilled stream that emigrates without such restriction.

One of the most significant structural changes in Indian emigration since 2000 has been the emergence of international student flows as a major and self-sustaining demographic channel. Indian student numbers abroad grew from approximately 675,541 in 2019 to a peak of 1,318,955 in 2023 before a modest adjustment to 1,335,878 in 2024 (The PIE News, 2024; ICEF Monitor, 2024). Unlike direct labour migrants, students enter on temporary educational visas but are in most

high-value destinations eligible for post-graduation work rights and subsequent permanent residency, making student migration a structured pathway to settlement.

India’s total inward remittances reached \$125 billion in 2023, an increase of 12.3 percent over the \$111.2 billion received in 2022, and equivalent to approximately 3.4 percent of GDP (World Bank, 2023; Business Standard, 2023). India has held the top position globally in total remittance receipts since 2008. The geography of remittance sourcing has undergone a decisive structural shift: the Reserve Bank of India’s Sixth Remittances Survey (2023-24) recorded that the United States overtook the UAE as the single largest source country, with a share of 27.7 percent of total remittances, up from 23.4 percent in 2020–21 (RBI, 2025). Collectively, advanced economies like the US, UK, Canada, Australia, and Singapore now account for a majority of India’s inward remittances for the first time in recorded data, reflecting the compositional shift in the diaspora from GCC labour migration toward skilled professional settlement in OECD countries.

Table 3: India’s Inward Remittances by Source Country (% Share)

Source Country	2016–17	2020–21	2023–24
United States	22.9	23.4	27.7
United Arab Emirates	26.9	18.0	19.2
United Kingdom	3.0	6.8	10.8
Saudi Arabia	11.6	5.1	6.7
GCC Others	10.2	8.5	12.0
Singapore	5.5	2.4	6.6
Canada	3.0	1.6	3.8
Australia	0.0	0.0	2.3
Others	16.9	34.2	10.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Sources: Reserve Bank of India, Report on India’s Inward Remittances Survey, Round 6 (2023–24), RBI Bulletin, March 2025; World Bank Group, Migration and Development Brief 40, December 2023.

6. Gender, Age, and Demographic Composition

The Indian diaspora as a whole remains male-majority. The UN DESA International Migrant Stock 2024 dataset records approximately 55 percent of Indian emigrants as male and 45 percent as female, a modestly male-skewed distribution that places the Indian diaspora near the Asian regional average of approximately 58 percent male but well below the GCC-specific figure (UN DESA, 2025). At the regional level, however, gender composition varies dramatically.

The GCC corridor is the primary driver of the overall male skew. Labour migration to the Gulf in construction, transportation, manufacturing, and low-skilled service occupations remains

overwhelmingly male-dominated: GCC countries hosted roughly 8 million Indian men and 1 million Indian women in NRI status as of 2024. This pattern is deeply embedded in the legal structure of Gulf employment and the sector-specific demand for male labour (Khadria, 2012; Rajan and Mishra, 2023). A significant counter-trend within this corridor is the nursing and healthcare migration stream, predominantly from Kerala, which has supplied nurses to GCC hospitals in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain since the 1970s (Walton-Roberts, 2012).

In settlement destinations, the gender picture is strikingly different. The Indian-American community is essentially gender-balanced (approximately 48 percent male, 52 percent female), as are the British Indian and Canadian Indian communities. The convergence toward gender balance in settlement destinations reflects family reunification immigration, equal access of women to student visas, and the active recruitment of Indian women into healthcare and education sectors. Female students now constitute approximately 43-46 percent of Indian student cohorts in the US, UK, and Australia, representing a structural feminisation of the high-skilled emigration channel that will shape diaspora demographics over the coming decade (The PIE News, 2024).

One of the most consequential demographic developments since 2010 has been the student-to-settler pipeline in Canada, Australia, the UK, and the US. Unlike older migration channels, this pathway produces demographically distinctive migrants: they arrive young, acquire host-country education and work experience, and demonstrate substantially higher naturalisation and permanent settlement rates than equivalent cohorts entering on direct labour visas (ApplyBoard, 2025).

The Indian diaspora is predominantly a working-age population. The median age of Indian migrants across all corridors is estimated at approximately 33 years, reflecting the strong selection effect of labour markets and educational institutions toward the 22-45 age bracket. The historical diaspora communities of Mauritius, Trinidad, South Africa, Fiji, Guyana, and Suriname carry substantially older age profiles, reflecting multi-generational settlement and the demographic ageing of communities not significantly refreshed by new inflows from India (Vertovec, 1997; Kapur, 2010).

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The Indian diaspora of the 21st century is a dynamic, heterogeneous, and structurally complex phenomenon that defies reduction to a single narrative. It has been shaped by a layered interaction

of economic, demographic, policy, and network factors, and its composition has undergone transformations that are at least as significant as its quantitative expansion.

Several analytically important observations emerge from the evidence reviewed above. First, the composition of Indian emigration has shifted decisively toward skilled migration. In 2000, the GCC labour migration stream dominated aggregate outflows by volume and by economic significance. By 2024, the combination of skilled professional migration to OECD economies and international student flows has become quantitatively comparable to the Gulf stream. The United States alone now accounts for 27.7 percent of India's \$125 billion in annual remittances, nearly matching the entire GCC's collective share of approximately 29 percent (World Bank, 2023; RBI, 2025).

Second, policy operates as a structural variable of the first order, not merely as background context. Canada's Express Entry system, the US per-country green card caps, Germany's Skilled Immigration Act, the UK's Graduate Route visa, and the GCC's *kafala* and nationalisation frameworks actively determine which kinds of migration are possible and which populations can form stable diaspora communities (Kapur, 2010). The 41 percent decline in Indian students in Canada within a single year following policy cap changes (ICEF Monitor, 2024) illustrates the speed and sensitivity with which diaspora demographics respond to bilateral policy shifts.

Third, the relationship between India and its diaspora has deepened into mutual economic interdependence. India's \$125 billion in annual remittances represent 3.4 percent of GDP and exceed total foreign direct investment inflows (World Bank, 2023). For Kerala, remittances have historically constituted approximately 36-38 percent of the state domestic product. Beyond the purely financial dimension, the return of diaspora professionals, the transfer of knowledge and technology through transnational networks, and the political leverage diaspora communities exercise in shaping bilateral policy represent further dimensions of an interdependence that a narrowly remittance-focused analysis would miss (Kapur, 2010; Rajan and Mishra, 2023).

Fourth, the Indian diaspora's demographic future is likely to involve continued aggregate growth, driven by India's young population, sustained global demand for both skilled and semi-skilled Indian labour, and the institutionalisation of student mobility as a pathway to settlement. The GCC corridor will face structural headwinds from nationalisation policies and construction sector

automation but is unlikely to contract sharply given the scale of Saudi Vision 2030 projects and the UAE's continued infrastructure expansion (Rajan and Mishra, 2023).

The Indian diaspora, in sum, is not a demographic category that can be analysed in isolation from its structural determinants. India's own developmental trajectory, the demand structures of global labour markets, and the architectures of bilateral immigration policy all shape the form and volume of its mobility. Its growth is an index of all three simultaneously, and its composition at any given moment is a detailed register of the intersection between what India produces educationally and demographically, what the world demands, and what policy frameworks have made legally possible.

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