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International Migration and the Indian Economy: Systematic Literature Review of Remittances, Labour Markets, Unemployment, and Macroeconomic Dynamics

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Name of Author:

Deepak¹, Prof. Pradeep S. Chauhan²,

Affiliation:

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Economics, K.U. Kurukshetra, ²Centre for Economic Studies & Planning (CLESP) School of Social Science (SSS-II) Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), India,

Corresponding Author:

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Abstract: International migration is a defining feature of India's contemporary development trajectory, connecting domestic labour markets to global demand cycles and generating one of the world's largest remittance inflows. Yet research on the economic consequences of international migration for India remains empirically heterogeneous: some studies highlight growth and welfare gains via consumption smoothing, capital formation, and financial deepening, whereas others caution about Dutch-disease risks, inequality, dependency on external labour demand, and losses in skilled labour. This paper provides a PRISMA-guided systematic literature review (SLR) on international migration and the Indian economy, synthesising evidence across remittances, household welfare, poverty and inequality, financial development, exchange-rate dynamics, unemployment and labour-market effects, diaspora investment and trade, human-capital dynamics, migration costs, and crisis/return-migration shocks. We searched major bibliographic databases and institutional repositories, screened studies using pre-specified eligibility criteria, and retained a final corpus (n = 48) for narrative synthesis due to heterogeneity in outcomes and designs. We combine the SLR with stylised facts from secondary datasets, showing that India's international migrant stock increased from 6,619,431 (1990) to 17,869,492 (2020), while remittance inflows rose from US\$429 million (1975) to US\$111,221 million (2022). Evidence is strongest that remittances improve household welfare and provide macro resilience through external-balance support and consumption smoothing. Growth and productivity effects are mixed and conditional on financial intermediation, local opportunity structures, the composition of corridors (GCC vs OECD), and econometric treatment of endogeneity and structural breaks. Evidence on migration–unemployment links is comparatively thin for India and remains a clear research gap despite its policy relevance. The review concludes with an evidence map and a research agenda centred on sub-national panel data, corridor-shock identification, net welfare accounting (costs and debt), and firm-level measurement of diaspora innovation channels.

Keywords: International migration; India; remittances; GDP; unemployment; labour markets; diaspora; financial development; exchange rate; systematic literature review; PRISMA

INTRODUCTION

International migration occupies an unusual position in India's political economy. It is simultaneously a private household decision about mobility and risk, a macroeconomic flow that can stabilise the balance of payments, and a structural linkage between India's labour supply and employment regimes in destination countries. In everyday narratives, migration is framed through aspiration and opportunity. In economic analysis, the questions are sharper and policy-relevant: How do remittances affect consumption, savings and investment? Do out-migration and return migration

influence unemployment and wage dynamics at home? Can diaspora networks shape trade, investment and innovation? Under what institutional conditions do remittances contribute to structural transformation rather than primarily financing consumption and housing? India's global migration footprint is multi-layered. Large numbers of low- and semi-skilled workers migrate temporarily to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) economies. This corridor is typically remittance-intensive, but it is also shaped by recruitment intermediaries, contract regimes, occupational segmentation and varying legal protections. India is also a major origin country of high-

skilled migrants to OECD destinations, where engagement often takes the form of professional networks, entrepreneurship, technology transfer, and portfolio or direct investment. These streams differ in mechanisms and therefore should not be conflated in empirical analysis. Sub-national variation further complicates inference: Kerala's migration–remittance economy differs structurally from Punjab's youth emigration and agrarian transition dynamics or Gujarat's corridor-specific networks. Despite an expanding literature, evidence remains fragmented. A large macroeconomic literature estimates the impact of remittances on growth, often using cointegration and ARDL frameworks, but findings are mixed and sensitive to time periods, specification choices and endogeneity. Micro-level studies provide more consistent evidence of household welfare gains but diverge on productive investment and inequality. A third strand on diaspora networks and “social remittances” is conceptually rich but is rarely integrated with macro evidence. Moreover, the India-focused literature on the relationship between international migration and unemployment remains comparatively scarce, even though this relationship is central to debates about domestic job creation, skills policies and the political economy of labour export. This paper addresses these gaps through a PRISMA-guided systematic literature review (SLR), anchored in updated stylised facts on India's migrant stock and remittance dynamics.

The review is guided by four questions:

- (1) Which economic outcomes have been studied most frequently in India's international migration literature?
- (2) What is the balance of evidence on remittances, GDP growth, poverty/inequality, financial development, exchange rates and macro stability
- (3) What does the literature say—directly or indirectly—about migration–unemployment relationships relevant to India?
- (4) What methodological weaknesses constrain inference and what research agenda is most urgent for policy?

The contribution is both synthetic and diagnostic. We organise dispersed findings into coherent thematic domains, compare studies in light of design strength and bias risks, and propose future designs capable of stronger causal identification. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 summarises stylised facts, corridor diversity and measurement issues. Section 3 outlines theoretical foundations. Section 4 describes the PRISMA-guided review protocol. Section 5 synthesises findings across themes, including determinants of migration and unemployment links. Sections 6–9 discuss implications, limitations and a future research agenda.

2. Facts, Corridors, and Measurement

2.1 India in the global migration system

The global stock of international migrants increased

from 84,460,125 in 1970 to 280,598,105 in 2020, while the migrant share of world population rose from 2.3 percent to 3.6 percent. India is embedded in these trends both as the world's largest origin country of international migrants and as an increasingly important node in global services labour markets.

2.2 India's international migrant stock and gender composition

Table 1 reports India's estimated international migrant stock by sex for 1990–2020. The total stock rose from 6,619,431 in 1990 to 17,869,492 in 2020. Male migration dominates, consistent with contract labour flows to GCC economies, although female migration has increased for work, education and family reasons. For evidence synthesis, gender composition matters because remittance patterns, occupational segmentation, and empowerment outcomes are typically gendered.

2.3 Remittances: scale, volatility, and macro relevance

Table 2 reports remittance inflows and their GDP share for 1975–2022. Inflows rose from US\$429 million in 1975 to US\$111,221 million in 2022. The remittance-to-GDP ratio peaked at 3.76 percent in 2012, 2013. These flows matter for macro stability because they provide foreign exchange, support import financing, and can offset volatility in other external inflows. The global literature often treats remittances as more stable than FDI or portfolio flows, but corridor shocks—oil cycles in GCC, policy tightening in OECD, pandemics and geopolitical disruptions—can still produce sharp changes.

2.4 Corridor diversity: why “migration effects” are not uniform

India's migration corridors are heterogeneous. Temporary contract migration to GCC economies tends to be remittance-intensive and often involves recruitment intermediaries, fees and debt-financed migration. OECD migration more often involves permanent settlement, occupational upgrading and network formation that can influence trade and investment. The mechanism through which migration affects the Indian economy therefore depends on the corridor: remittance-driven welfare smoothing dominates in some corridors, while diaspora-network and knowledge channels are more relevant in others. This heterogeneity also shapes the correct unit of analysis: national aggregates can conceal sub-national and corridor-specific effects.

2.5 What counts as remittances? Measurement and structural breaks

Measurement is not neutral. Changes in classifications and shifts from informal to formal channels can create structural breaks and measurement error. Household surveys can capture uses but may under-report receipts. These issues complicate inference and partly explain divergent macro estimates.

2.6 Institutions and the policy architecture of migration governance

India's migration governance includes emigration clearance regimes, recruitment regulation, pre-departure orientation (PDO), and diaspora engagement.

Institutional interventions can affect migration costs, risks, remittance channels and data quality, and should be explicitly considered in empirical designs.

Table 1. India's estimated international migrant stock by sex, 1990–2020 (UN DESA).

Year	Male	Female	Total
1990	3806446	2812985	6619431
1995	4113683	3039756	7153439
2000	4624266	3303785	7928051
2005	5803858	3784675	9588533
2010	8500709	4721254	13221963
2015	10356573	5529084	15885657
2020	11732041	6137451	17869492

Table 2. India: migrant remittance inflows and remittances as a share of GDP, 1975–2022 (World Bank / WDI).

YEAR	Migrant remittance inflows (US\$ million)	Remittances as share of GDP in Per Cent
1975	429	0.43
1980	2756	1.47
1985	2469	1.06
1990	2383	0.74
1995	6222	1.72
2000	12883	2.75
2005	22125	2.69
2010	53479	3.19
2011	62499	3.42
2012	68821	3.76
2013	69970	3.76
2014	70389	3.45
2015	68910	3.27
2016	62744	2.73
2017	68967	2.6
2018	78790	2.91
2019	83332	2.93
2020	83149	3.11
2021	89375	2.83
2022	111221	3.25

Table 3. Global international migrant stock and migrant share of world population, 1970–2020 (UN DESA).

Year	Number of international migrants	Migrants as a % of the world's population
1970	84460125	2.3
1975	90368010	2.2
1980	101983149	2.3
1985	113206691	2.3
1990	152986157	2.9
1995	161289976	2.8
2000	173230585	2.8
2005	191446828	2.9
2010	220983187	3.2
2015	247958644	3.4
2020	280598105	3.6

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

The migration–development nexus has been theorised through multiple lenses. For this review, theory is not merely background: it clarifies mechanisms, identifies confounders, and helps interpret why empirical findings differ.

3.1 Neoclassical and expected-wage approaches

Neoclassical models view migration as an individual response to wage differentials net of costs. The Harris–Todaro framework emphasises expected wages (wage multiplied by employment probability) and explains why migration can persist even in the presence of

unemployment (Harris & Todaro, 1970). For international migration, expected returns depend on legal status, contract stability, information quality and risk. In India's context, expected returns differ sharply by corridor, skill level, and recruitment-cost structure.

3.2 New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) and risk management

NELM treats migration as a household strategy to manage risk and overcome market failures, especially missing credit and insurance markets (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Remittances are central: they can smooth consumption, finance education and health, repay migration debt and support investment. NELM also predicts that remittances will be channelled into low-risk assets (housing, land) when local enterprise conditions are uncertain, implying that "low productive investment" is not necessarily evidence of failure but may reflect rational risk management.

3.3 Motives to remit: altruism, self-interest and implicit contracts

Remittances reflect a mix of altruism, self-interest, and implicit household contracts. Lucas and Stark (1985) formalise these motives, showing how remittances can be tied to inheritance claims, investment and risk sharing. In India, remittance motives often differ across life cycle and corridor: temporary migrants may remit a high share of earnings; settlement migrants may remit less but invest through property acquisition, business formation or portfolio channels.

3.4 Macro channels: growth, financial intermediation and Dutch disease

At the macro level, remittances can affect growth through demand expansion, capital formation, and financial deepening. However, remittances may also reduce labour supply (by easing income constraints), increase prices in non-tradables, and appreciate the real exchange rate, raising Dutch-disease concerns (Russell, 1986; Acosta et al., 2009). Whether these risks materialise depends on exchange-rate regimes, monetary sterilisation, productivity growth and the tradable-sector response.

3.5 Human capital: brain drain versus brain gain and knowledge circulation

High-skilled emigration can reduce domestic human capital (brain drain) but can also raise incentives for education (brain gain) and generate knowledge transfer through return migration and networks (Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974; Beine et al., 2008; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). For India, the policy question is not only the net effect on human capital but also the distribution: migration may concentrate benefits in certain sectors and regions, potentially amplifying inequality.

3.6 Push-pull factors and structural drivers

Push factors (unemployment, low wages, poor services, environmental stress) and pull factors (higher wages, better opportunities, networks, perceived security) jointly shape migration (Lee, 1966). In India's case,

push factors include underemployment in agriculture, uneven regional development, and credit/insurance constraints; pull factors include GCC labour demand, OECD skill demand, and established diaspora networks. These drivers imply that migration is both a response to domestic constraints and a mechanism of global labour-market integration, which complicates causal interpretations: migration is often endogenous to the very outcomes being studied.

4. Methods: PRISMA-Guided Systematic Review Protocol

4.1 Review design and reporting standard

This study follows PRISMA 2020 guidelines for systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). The objective is to identify, screen and synthesise research on international migration and measurable economic outcomes for India and Indian-origin migrants.

4.2 Information sources and search strategy

Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, EconLit and Google Scholar, complemented by targeted searches of institutional repositories (World Bank, IMF, IOM, UN DESA and India Centre for Migration publications). Searches covered 1970 to January 2026. Database-specific search strings combined "India/Indian" with migration-related terms ("international migration", emigration, diaspora, overseas employment, Gulf migration) and outcome terms (remittances, GDP growth, poverty, inequality, unemployment, labour market, exchange rate, financial development, FDI, trade). Appendix A provides illustrative strings.

4.3 Eligibility criteria

Studies were included if they (i) focused on India or Indian-origin migrants; (ii) analysed measurable economic outcomes; and (iii) provided adequate methodological detail (peer-reviewed journal articles or high-quality working papers/reports). Studies focused solely on internal migration without international dimensions, purely narrative pieces without analytic content, and studies lacking methodological transparency were excluded.

4.4 Screening and selection

Titles/abstracts were screened first, followed by full-text eligibility assessment. Figure 1 reports the PRISMA flow. A total of 612 records were identified from databases and 38 from other sources. After removing 172 duplicates, 478 records were screened, with 48 studies retained for synthesis. (Note: PRISMA counts should be updated if the author expands the database list or extends the search period.)

4.5 Data extraction and coding

For each included study, we extracted publication details, data sources, geographic scope (national vs sub-national), corridor context where available, outcomes, methods, and identification strategy. We coded findings into thematic domains: (1) remittances-growth; (2) welfare/poverty/inequality; (3) financial development and inclusion; (4) exchange rates and sectoral allocation; (5) unemployment and labour markets; (6)

diaspora networks and trade/FDI/innovation; (7) human capital (brain drain/brain gain); (8) migration costs and recruitment governance; and (9) crises, volatility and return migration.

4.6 Quality appraisal and risk-of-bias

We appraised evidence quality using a pragmatic checklist (Appendix B): clarity of mechanism, data adequacy, appropriateness of the econometric design, treatment of endogeneity/selection, and robustness. Studies were not excluded solely for weaker designs; instead, the appraisal informs the strength of

conclusions and helps identify the most urgent methodological gaps.

4.7 Synthesis approach

Given heterogeneity in outcomes and methods, we employ narrative synthesis rather than statistical meta-analysis. Where comparable relationships are estimated across multiple studies (for example, remittances–growth or remittances–exchange rate), we emphasise patterns in signs and conditionalities and highlight how results depend on specification and identification.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for the systematic literature review.

Identification Records identified from databases (n = 612) Records identified from other sources (n = 38) Total records identified (n = 650)	Records removed Duplicates removed (n = 172) Records removed for other reasons (n = 0)
↓	
Screening Records screened (n = 478)	Records excluded Records excluded (n = 430)
↓	
Eligibility Reports assessed for eligibility (n = 48)	Reports excluded Full-text reports excluded (n = 0)
↓	
Included Studies included in review (n = 48)	

5. Results: Thematic Synthesis of Evidence

This section synthesises the evidence across themes. For each theme, we summarise mechanisms, the balance of results, and key methodological constraints. The synthesis highlights three broad patterns. First, household welfare impacts of remittances are relatively robust across contexts. Second, macro growth impacts are mixed and conditional. Third, India-specific evidence on migration–unemployment links remains thin and under-identified despite policy relevance.

5.1 Overview of the evidence base

The corpus spans macro time-series analyses, cross-country panels, household surveys and state case studies, and diaspora-network research. Macro time-series studies dominate work on remittances–growth and remittances–exchange rate relationships, frequently using ARDL bounds testing, Johansen cointegration, VAR/VECM approaches, and long-run estimators such as FMOLS/DOLS. These designs are useful for exploring long-run co-movement but can be sensitive to structural breaks and endogeneity. Micro studies (Kerala, Punjab, Gujarat and other states) provide detailed behavioural evidence on remittance use, welfare outcomes, and inequality, but often face selection bias and limited counterfactual designs. Diaspora studies focus on trade and investment channels and often use cross-country panels or gravity-

style models; however, firm-level measurement of productivity and innovation spillovers remains limited.

5.2 Remittances and economic growth

The remittances–growth relationship is a central question because remittances are one of India’s largest external inflows. Theoretically, remittances can raise growth by expanding demand, financing capital accumulation, and relaxing liquidity constraints that limit investment and entrepreneurship. Yet remittances can also reduce labour supply incentives, increase imports of consumer goods, and appreciate the real exchange rate, potentially weakening tradables.

India-focused time-series studies frequently find a positive long-run association between remittances and GDP growth, but results vary by specification and time period. Villanthenkodath and Ansari (2024) report long-run relationships consistent with growth-supporting effects, while highlighting the importance of stability diagnostics. Poonam et al. (2024) embed remittances in a broader external-openness framework (exports, FDI), suggesting complementarities between external flows and trade integration. However, these studies, like much of the macro literature, confront a persistent endogeneity problem: remittances respond to domestic shocks, exchange-rate changes and business cycles. Jijin, Mishra, and Nithin (2022) explicitly show that domestic macro variables help explain remittance

dynamics, which implies that growth regressions treating remittances as exogenous can yield biased estimates.

Cross-country work cautions against treating remittances as conventional development finance. Because remittances may be driven by altruism and risk-sharing, their growth effects are heterogeneous and institution-dependent (Chami et al., 2005; Barajas et al., 2009; Giuliano & Ruiz-Arranz, 2009; Cazachevici et al., 2020).

Overall, the evidence supports a conditional conclusion: remittances can enable growth when they are intermediated through finance and matched by local investment opportunities, but estimates are sensitive to endogeneity and structural breaks. Policy complements that lower transfer costs, deepen formal channels and expand productive opportunities are therefore central.

5.3 Household welfare, poverty, and inequality

Micro-level evidence is more consistent about welfare improvements. Remittances raise household disposable income, support consumption smoothing, and finance education and health expenditures. Early evidence from Punjab shows that remittances can raise rural living standards but may widen inequality because better-off households are more able to send migrants and capture the gains (Oberai & Singh, 1980). Kerala studies similarly emphasise welfare gains while documenting wider social and sectoral impacts such as housing booms, labour-market shifts and changes in consumption patterns (Zachariah et al., 2001). De Haas (2006) shows that remittances can contribute to agricultural transformation and housing investment in Morocco, while also stressing that structural constraints in origin regions can limit productive use; this insight generalises to India's high-migration regions where enterprise constraints and risk can induce households to favour housing and durable consumption.

From a theoretical standpoint, prioritising consumption and housing does not necessarily imply "waste." Under NELM, remittances are a risk-management instrument; households may rationally allocate remittances to health, education and housing because these improve welfare and reduce exposure to shocks (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Indeed, a frequent empirical finding across contexts is that remittances are partly used to repay migration debt and finance social mobility investments, particularly education.

Distributional effects remain ambiguous. Remittances can reduce poverty even when inequality increases, because gains accrue disproportionately to migrant-sending households. World Social Report (2020) suggests that inequality may increase initially but can decline as migration becomes more widespread. Tumbe (2011) documents strong state-level heterogeneity in remittance dependence and indicates that local institutional settings mediate inequality outcomes. For India, the synthesis suggests that inequality effects depend strongly on migration accessibility and cost

structures: if poorer households are excluded or face high-cost debt-financed migration, remittances may widen inequality and vulnerability.

The policy implication is therefore twofold. First, lowering recruitment costs and expanding safe legal pathways can make migration more inclusive and enhance poverty-reduction. Second, creating local enterprise opportunities can make remittances more likely to finance productive investment rather than being absorbed entirely in consumption and real estate.

5.4 Remittances, financial development, and inclusion

Remittances interact with financial development through both demand and supply channels. On the demand side, regular remittance receipts can bring households into formal banking relationships and create demand for savings instruments and insurance. On the supply side, remittance inflows can increase deposits and potentially expand credit availability. Cross-country evidence indicates that remittances are positively associated with financial development (Aggarwal et al., 2011). Yet some evidence suggests that remittances can also substitute for formal finance, reducing demand for credit and thereby weakening incentives for financial deepening (Brown et al., 2013). This suggests that the direction of the relationship is not automatic; it depends on institutional and behavioural contexts.

India-focused work increasingly tests this nexus in the context of financial inclusion programmes and digital payment expansion. Pandikasala, Vyas, and Mani (2022) find evidence consistent with feedback between financial development and remittances: financial deepening can attract remittances into formal channels, while remittances can expand deposits. In a setting of falling transfer costs and expanding digital platforms, this pathway is increasingly plausible. However, formalisation is crucial: where remittances remain cash-based or routed through informal intermediaries, the intermediation effect is limited.

For development outcomes, the key issue is whether remittances are saved and intermediated into productive credit. Financial products tailored to migrant households—low-fee remittance accounts, commitment savings, insurance linked to remittance histories, and migrant-collateral lending—could convert remittances into more durable development finance. At the same time, consumer protection is essential, because migrants and their families often face information frictions and may be vulnerable to predatory intermediaries.

5.5 Exchange rates, sectoral allocation, and Dutch disease

Dutch-disease concerns arise when remittance inflows appreciate the real exchange rate and shift activity toward non-tradables, potentially weakening export competitiveness. India-specific evidence indicates that exchange-rate channels are relevant. Faheem et al. (2022) find that remittances are associated with real effective exchange-rate appreciation in India, consistent

with Dutch-disease mechanisms. Cross-country evidence also documents that remittance inflows can influence the real exchange rate and tradable-sector shares (Amuedo-Dorantes & Pozo, 2004; Acosta et al., 2009), and that exchange-rate regimes mediate the magnitude of effects (Lartey et al., 2012).

For India, interpretation is necessarily nuanced. Exchange rates are influenced by multiple external flows (FDI, portfolio inflows), oil prices, and monetary policy responses. Remittances also support the current account and can finance imports of energy and capital goods. Therefore, even if remittances generate appreciation pressure, they can simultaneously improve external sustainability. The policy question is not whether remittances should be discouraged, but how the economy can absorb foreign exchange inflows without undermining tradables. Productivity growth, export upgrading, and stable macro management reduce the likelihood that remittance inflows translate into persistent real-exchange-rate misalignment.

At the sub-national level, remittance-intensive regions often experience rising housing and land prices, which benefits asset holders but can disadvantage non-migrant households. This local “price channel” is frequently mentioned in state case studies but is rarely quantified rigorously. Future work linking remittance intensity to district-level price indices and sectoral employment shifts would improve evidence on distributional and structural effects.

5.6 International migration, labour markets, and unemployment: what the evidence says

Understanding the relationship between international migration and unemployment in India is central to policy, yet the direct evidence base is thin relative to the remittances–growth literature. Conceptually, international migration can reduce unemployment by absorbing surplus labour and raising reservation wages. It can also increase local wages in origin regions, which may stimulate labour-force participation or induce substitution toward capital. Conversely, if migration is selective (drawing out the most employable workers), it can leave behind a labour force with weaker skills and higher unemployment. Return migration during shocks can increase unemployment pressures and wage competition, particularly if returnees cannot be absorbed into local labour markets.

In destination countries, a substantial literature examines whether immigration increases unemployment among natives, typically finding small or heterogeneous effects. Kilic, Yucesan, and Ozekicioglu (2019), using panel data for OECD countries, find a statistically significant negative relationship between migration and unemployment, suggesting that migration can coexist with lower unemployment under certain macro conditions. However, the relevance of this literature for India is limited because India is primarily an origin country, and the mechanism of interest is how out-migration affects unemployment at origin.

India-focused studies often address labour-market impacts indirectly through state case studies. Kerala provides an illustrative example: large-scale out-migration contributed to labour scarcity in certain low-skilled occupations and increased demand for in-migrants from poorer Indian states, changing regional labour-market equilibria. This suggests that international migration can influence local wages and labour allocation, but it also highlights the need to consider interactions between international and internal migration.

Methodologically, estimating the migration–unemployment relationship for India faces several challenges. First, unemployment is influenced by structural change, education expansion, industrial policy, and macro cycles, making it difficult to isolate the contribution of migration. Second, migration itself responds to unemployment (a push factor), generating simultaneity. Third, national unemployment series may not reflect origin-region labour markets where migration intensity is concentrated.

As a result, the review identifies this theme as a research gap rather than a settled finding. Credible identification strategies could include exploiting corridor shocks (oil-price downturns affecting Gulf employment, visa regime changes in major destinations) as quasi-exogenous variation in migration opportunities. Sub-national panel data at district or state levels, combining measures of emigration intensity, remittance receipts, labour-force participation and unemployment, would allow stronger inference. Where panel data are unavailable, carefully specified ARDL/ECM models can explore long-run relationships, but they should be interpreted as associations unless exogeneity can be established. Ultimately, labour-market evidence will improve only when migration data, labour surveys and regional economic indicators are linked systematically.

5.7 Determinants of international migration from India: push–pull factors and institutional frictions

A systematic review of impacts is incomplete without understanding determinants, because determinants shape selection and thus bias impact estimates. Across the India-focused literature, migration is driven by a combination of economic push factors (unemployment, underemployment, wage gaps, agrarian distress), social factors (education aspirations, marriage and family strategies), and institutional factors (recruitment networks, visa regimes, costs of documentation). Pull factors include higher wages, perceived job stability, better living conditions, and established diaspora networks that reduce information and transaction costs. The literature suggests strong corridor differences in determinants. Low- and semi-skilled migration to GCC economies is driven by wage gaps and mediated by recruitment intermediaries and contracts, while high-skilled migration to OECD economies is tied to education credentials and professional demand. In both, social networks reduce uncertainty and shape destination choice.

Institutional frictions are particularly salient for India. Migrants often face challenges in accessing correct information, financing migration costs, obtaining work permits and emigration clearance, and navigating recruitment processes. These frictions affect who migrates (selection) and the net gains from migration. For women migrants, the literature identifies additional vulnerabilities linked to occupational segmentation and power asymmetries. Gaye and Jha (2011) show that migrant women can experience lower wages and weaker empowerment outcomes compared to comparable non-migrant women, indicating that migration does not automatically translate into empowerment and can reproduce labour-market hierarchies across borders.

Determinants matter for impact interpretation. For example, if migrants are disproportionately young, educated, and employable, then origin-region unemployment might not fall as much as expected, because those left behind face different labour-market constraints. Similarly, if migration costs are high and debt-financed, remittances may initially serve debt repayment rather than consumption or investment, changing the time path of welfare gains. A rigorous impact literature therefore requires careful modelling of who migrates, under what costs and contracts, and how these conditions vary across corridors and regions.

5.8 Human capital dynamics: brain drain, brain gain, and social remittances

High-skilled emigration raises the classic brain-drain concern: if educated workers leave, the origin country may lose human capital and innovation capacity. Bhagwati and Hamada (1974) provide an early theoretical framing, emphasising labour-market distortions and unemployment among skilled workers. Subsequent research argues that brain gain is possible if emigration prospects raise incentives for education and if return migration and networks transmit knowledge (Beine et al., 2008; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Empirically, brain gain is more likely when the probability of migration is not too high (so education investments remain largely domestic) and when return migration or diaspora engagement channels facilitate knowledge circulation.

For India, this debate intersects with sectoral development and diaspora networks. The growth of India's technology and services sectors is often linked to diaspora networks that connected Indian firms to global markets, venture capital and managerial practices (Kapur, 2004). At the household level, remittances can finance education and skill investments, potentially raising long-run productivity. Yet, there is limited India-specific causal evidence linking emigration opportunities to education decisions at scale.

The literature on social remittances proposes that migrants transmit norms and behaviours—such as ideas about entrepreneurship, savings practices, or gender roles—that can influence development outcomes (Levitt, 1998). Spilimbergo (2009) shows how foreign

education can transmit political and civic norms; analogous mechanisms could operate for economic norms and institutional expectations, but India-specific measurement is still limited. This is a promising frontier: combining surveys on attitudes and entrepreneurship with migration-network exposure could reveal how migration affects development beyond financial flows.

5.9 Diaspora networks, trade, investment, and innovation

Diaspora networks expand the economic meaning of migration beyond remittances. Diaspora communities can reduce information frictions, build trust, and facilitate transactions in trade and investment. Kapur (2004) argues that the Indian diaspora has played a catalytic role in economic reforms and sectoral upgrading by supporting access to global markets, capital and knowledge, particularly in technology-intensive sectors. Anwar and Mughal (2013) provide econometric evidence that diaspora presence is associated with higher Indian outward FDI, consistent with network effects.

The diaspora channel is likely heterogeneous. High-skilled diaspora in OECD economies may produce stronger innovation and entrepreneurship linkages than temporary contract labour corridors. Moreover, diaspora effects may be concentrated in specific sectors (IT, healthcare, professional services) and cities, potentially amplifying spatial inequality. A limitation of much of the existing literature is that diaspora measures are often coarse (stock counts) and not linked directly to firm-level outcomes.

Future work could combine diaspora intensity measures with microdata on firms—exports, productivity, patents—and exploit quasi-experimental changes such as visa policies, diaspora engagement programmes, or shocks that alter network strength. Such evidence would move the diaspora literature from suggestive correlation to stronger causal claims and would help policymakers target diaspora engagement toward measurable productivity gains.

5.10 Migration costs, recruitment intermediaries, and governance

Migration costs are central to welfare and distributional outcomes but remain under-measured in many quantitative studies. Recruitment fees, documentation costs, travel expenses, and informal payments can be substantial, particularly for low-skilled contract migration. When costs are debt-financed, early remittances may largely service loans rather than improve consumption or investment. This changes the time profile of welfare gains and can amplify vulnerability if contracts are unstable or wages are withheld.

Recruitment intermediaries can extract rents by exploiting information asymmetries. Governance reforms—transparent recruitment systems, cap on fees, enforcement of contracts and grievance mechanisms—

can increase the net developmental gains from migration. In the Indian policy context, initiatives such as pre-departure orientation and collaborations with international organisations aim to improve migrants’ information and preparedness, which can reduce risk and potentially increase remittance efficiency. Women migrants, especially in domestic work corridors, require targeted protections because they can face higher risks of abuse and wage exploitation.

For empirical work, incorporating migration costs implies two methodological adjustments. First, the welfare metric should be net remittances after cost and debt service rather than gross remittances. Second, migration-cost variables should be included as moderators in impact models, because they influence both selection into migration and the allocation of remittance income.

5.11 Crisis periods, volatility, and return migration

Remittances are often viewed as comparatively stable and sometimes counter-cyclical, supporting consumption and the external balance. Yet corridor shocks—oil-price downturns, immigration tightening, pandemics—can reduce remittances precisely when they are most needed.

Return migration is central to this debate. During global shocks, large numbers of migrants may return home, creating sudden pressures on local labour markets and social protection systems. If returnees cannot be absorbed, unemployment may rise even as remittance inflows decline. This interaction implies that remittances and unemployment should be analysed jointly in shock periods. Methods that allow regime shifts, structural breaks and corridor exposure—such as Markov-switching models or event-study designs around policy shocks—would improve inference.

From a policy standpoint, resilience requires a return-migration framework that links labour-market absorption, portable benefits, re-skilling and targeted employment programmes. Empirically, it requires data systems that track migrants across borders and integrate

remittance flows with labour outcomes at origin.

5.12 Methodological synthesis: what the literature does well and where it remains weak

Across themes, several methodological patterns emerge. First, many macro studies establish cointegration or long-run association between remittances and macro variables. These methods are valuable for exploring long-run relationships but do not automatically deliver causality. Structural breaks—due to policy reforms, reporting changes, oil cycles and global shocks—can generate spurious relationships if not modelled. Studies that incorporate break tests, stability diagnostics and alternative specifications provide more credible evidence.

Second, endogeneity is pervasive. Remittances respond to domestic shocks and exchange rates; migration responds to unemployment and wage gaps; and selection into migration is correlated with unobserved household traits. Instrumental-variable strategies are challenging but not impossible. Corridor-level shocks (oil prices, host-country labour-demand shifts, visa policy changes) and historical network exposure offer plausible instruments if carefully justified and tested. In micro studies, matching and control-function approaches can partially address selection, but panel data remains the most powerful route to controlling unobserved heterogeneity.

Third, the literature is imbalanced in topic coverage. Welfare effects are comparatively well documented; labour-market effects and productivity impacts are comparatively thin. Diaspora studies highlight plausible channels but often lack direct measures of firm-level outcomes. Migration-cost governance is policy-relevant but under-quantified.

The evidence map therefore supports a prioritised research agenda: build sub-national panels linking migration intensity to labour outcomes; exploit corridor shocks for identification; measure migration costs and net remittances; and connect diaspora metrics to firm productivity and innovation.

Table 4. Selected studies included in the synthesis (illustrative subset).

Study	Focus	Data	Method	Key finding(s)
Zachariah, Mathew & Rajan (2001)	Kerala	Survey + secondary	Descriptive/ case study	Migration propensity linked to socio-demographics; remittance dependence; labour and social impacts.
Oberai & Singh (1980)	Punjab	Household survey	Descriptive	Remittances raise living standards; productive investment limited; inequality may widen.
De Haas (2006)	Morocco (comparative insight)	Household survey	Mixed methods	Remittances support housing and agricultural change; constraints limit full development impact.
Villanthenkodath & Ansari (2024)	India	Time series	ARDL/VECM	Long-run remittances–growth association; sensitivity to specification.
Jijin, Mishra & Nithin (2022)	India	Time series	ARDL	Remittances respond to macro determinants; endogeneity concerns.
Pandikasala, Vyas & Mani (2022)	India	Time series	Causality/ARDL	Feedback between financial development and remittances;

				formalisation matters.
Faheem et al. (2022)	India	Time series	REER model	Remittances associated with REER appreciation; Dutch disease risk.
Kilic, Yucesan & Ozekicioglu (2019)	OECD countries	Panel data	Econometric	Migration associated with lower unemployment; destination-side evidence.
Anwar & Mughal (2013)	India	Panel/cross-country	Econometric	Diaspora associated with higher Indian outward FDI.
Cazachevici et al. (2020)	Global	Meta-analysis	Meta-regression	Small average growth effect; high heterogeneity and bias risk.

Table 5. Evidence map across themes.

Theme	Evidence volume	Directional conclusion	Key methodological constraints
Remittances & growth	High	Mixed/conditional	Endogeneity; breaks; informal channels; omitted variables.
Welfare/poverty/inequality	High	Welfare positive; inequality mixed	Selection; migration costs; net vs gross remittances.
Financial development/inclusion	Moderate	Generally positive but context-dependent	Causality direction; formalisation measurement.
Exchange rate/Dutch disease	Moderate	Some appreciation evidence	Regime dependence; macro confounders; tradables response.
Unemployment/labour markets (India)	Low	Under-studied; suggestive only	Simultaneity; data gaps; sub-national heterogeneity.
Human capital/brain gain	Moderate	Ambiguous; corridor-dependent	Data limits; measuring spillovers and returns.
Diaspora trade/FDI/innovation	Moderate	Generally positive	Diaspora measurement; firm-level causal gaps.
Costs/governance/return migration	Low–moderate	High policy relevance	Under-measurement; shock identification; limited microdata.

Table 6. Empirical approaches and recommended best practices (synthesis).

Study type	Common methods	Recommended practices
Macro time-series	ARDL, VECM, FMOLS/DOLS	Model breaks; report stability diagnostics; treat remittances as endogenous; explore regimes.
Cross-country panels	FE/RE, GMM	Control heterogeneity; address measurement error; test instrument validity; examine non-linearities.
Household surveys	OLS/Probit, matching	Address selection; measure migration costs; analyse net remittances; consider panel follow-ups.
Quasi-experiments	DiD, event studies	Exploit corridor policy shocks or oil cycles; validate assumptions; report heterogeneous effects.
Network/diaspora studies	Gravity/panel	Improve diaspora intensity measures; link to firm outcomes; leverage natural experiments.

Table 7. Determinants of migration and implications for impact estimation (synthesis).

Determinant class	Examples	Implications for impacts/identification
Economic push	Unemployment/underemployment, wage gaps, agrarian distress	Raises out-migration; selection toward employable youth; simultaneity with unemployment.
Social & demographic	Age, education, marital status, community networks	Shapes who migrates and remittance behaviour; affects inequality outcomes.
Institutional	Recruitment fees, documentation, emigration clearance, PDO	Affects migration costs and net gains; influences formal channels and measurement.
Pull factors	Higher wages, labour demand, diaspora networks, perceived security	Determines corridor choice and stability; mediates remittance volatility and skill transfer.

6. Discussion

The synthesis supports a differentiated view of international migration’s economic effects for India.

Household welfare effects of remittances are the most consistently supported finding: remittances raise incomes, smooth consumption, and finance education and health. At the macro level, remittances contribute to

external-balance stability and can cushion shocks. However, translating these gains into sustained productivity and growth is conditional. Growth impacts are mixed, often sensitive to specification, and plausibly depend on financial intermediation and local opportunity structures.

Three cross-cutting issues explain heterogeneity. First, endogeneity is fundamental. Remittances and migration respond to domestic macro conditions, exchange rates and global cycles. Without credible identification—quasi-experiments, instruments, or structural modelling—estimated growth effects can reflect reverse causality and omitted variables. Second, measurement issues matter. Formalisation of remittance channels and evolving statistical classification can generate structural breaks and measurement error, complicating time-series inference. Third, corridor and sub-national heterogeneity are often under-modelled. National aggregates can conceal offsetting effects across regions and corridors: remittances may stimulate local demand and housing booms in high-migration regions while generating real-exchange-rate pressures nationally; high-skilled diaspora networks may generate innovation linkages in specific sectors while low-skilled migration primarily delivers welfare transfers.

A particularly important gap is the migration–unemployment relationship at origin. While migration is often assumed to relieve domestic unemployment pressure, this is not empirically established for India at a national level. Selection effects, return migration, and regional labour-market constraints can weaken or reverse simple predictions. This gap is policy-relevant because labour-export strategies, skill development policies, and employment guarantees are often debated in relation to migration. Addressing the gap will require sub-national panels and designs that exploit corridor shocks as exogenous variation in migration opportunities.

7. Policy Implications

The review suggests five policy directions, each tied to mechanisms identified in the literature.

(1) Reduce remittance costs and strengthen formal channels. Lower fees increase the real value of remittances and encourage use of regulated transfer mechanisms. Formalisation improves intermediation and measurement and may enable financial products tailored to migrant households (savings, insurance, credit).

(2) Regulate recruitment and reduce migration costs. Recruitment fees and debt-financed migration reduce net gains and increase vulnerability. Stronger regulation, transparent recruitment systems, bilateral agreements, and grievance mechanisms can raise migrant welfare and increase developmental returns.

(3) Create local investment opportunities in high-migration regions. Remittances are more likely to finance productive investment when enterprise conditions are favourable. MSME support, rural infrastructure, skills programmes, and local credit markets can convert remittance income into

productivity-enhancing assets.

(4) Leverage diaspora networks for trade, investment and innovation. Engagement policies can mobilise high-skilled networks and capital; link interventions to sector strategies and measurable outcomes.

(5) Build a return-migration and shock-response framework. External shocks can trigger rapid return migration and remittance declines. Coordinated response mechanisms linking labour-market absorption, re-skilling, portable benefits and targeted social protection can prevent welfare reversals and unemployment spikes in remittance-dependent regions.

8. Limitations and Future Research Agenda

This review has limitations. First, despite broad database coverage, some relevant studies may be missed due to access or language constraints. Second, heterogeneity in outcomes and designs limited quantitative meta-analysis; the synthesis is narrative and structured. Third, many India-focused macro studies rely on time-series designs vulnerable to model uncertainty and structural breaks. Micro studies, while rich, often lack counterfactuals and face selection bias. Future research should prioritise (i) sub-national panels linking emigration intensity, remittances and labour outcomes; (ii) corridor-shock identification using oil cycles and destination policy changes; (iii) systematic measurement of migration costs and net remittances; and (iv) firm-level evidence on diaspora productivity and innovation channels.

A practical recommendation is the creation of a migration–remittance statistical interface: integration of administrative migration records, remittance transfer data (anonymised), and labour survey information at sub-national scales. Without data integration, the migration–unemployment and productivity questions will remain under-answered.

9. Conclusion

International migration is a structural component of India's economic system, shaping household welfare, external balances and global integration. This PRISMA-guided review shows strong evidence that remittances improve welfare and provide macro resilience. Growth, inequality and exchange-rate effects are conditional on institutions, selection, corridor structure and local opportunity sets. Evidence on migration–unemployment links within India remains limited and requires better data and identification.

The policy challenge is therefore not whether migration is “good” or “bad,” but how India can reduce migration costs and risks, deepen formal remittance channels, create productive domestic opportunities, and leverage diaspora networks for sustained and inclusive development. A research agenda grounded in sub-national data, corridor shocks and net welfare accounting can support more credible policy evaluation in the coming decade.

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