

**Living and Working Conditions in Bahrain country issued by**  
**Embassy of India, Bahrain country**

The Kingdom of Bahrain is home to more than 313,000 Indians, out of a total population of approximately 1.04 million. People from Kerala constitute approx. 65-70% of the Indian community. The other major groups are from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Goa and Punjab. Indians are visible in all walks of life: bankers, businessmen, IT specialists, doctors, nurses, journalists, management consultants, hotel managers, labourers, housemaids, etc.

**2.** Today, 65-70% of the Indian expatriate workforce is employed in the construction, contracting & maintenance sectors. There are also a relatively small number of Indian housemaids estimated at around 10,000-15,000. They come from various states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Goa. The retail and other business activities include provisions, hardware, jewellery, electronics, etc. Some others have taken up jobs as storekeepers, chemists, carpenters, barbers, etc. In addition to our predominant blue-collar work force, we have a sizable number of doctors, engineers, chartered accountants, bankers, managers and other professionals who play a vital role in Bahrain's socio-economic development.

**3.** There is hardly any established Bahraini business organisation which does not have a senior or middle level Indian employee playing an important role in its operations. The top Bahraini business houses such as Al Zayani, Al Moayyad, Fakhroo, Kanoo, Koohejis, Abdullah Nass, Mohammed Jalal; companies like Bahrain Aluminium, BAPCO, GPIC, banks, and ship repairing industries, etc. all have Indians in their senior or middle management cadres.

**4.** Our Indian workers enjoy a good reputation in terms of their conduct, loyalty, higher productivity and non-involvement in local affairs. There is a marked preference amongst Bahrainis to employ Indians over others. This is despite their experimenting with other nationalities. Thus, it is not by chance that Indians have been, over the decades, and continue to be by far the largest expatriate community in Bahrain.

**5.** Labour market reforms are currently underway in the Kingdom of Bahrain. As a first step in the on-going reforms, the Government of Bahrain had declared Amnesty from 1st August 2007 to 31st January 2008 to enable illegal employees in Bahrain to legalise their status, find alternative employment and/or to leave Bahrain without payment of fines or imprisonment. Under this Amnesty, 7,435 Indian nationals left Bahrain and nearly 22,000 Indian nationals got their residence permits regularised/renewed.

**6.** As a subsequent step in the labour market reforms, the responsibility for issuing work permits to employers has been transferred from the Ministry of Labour to the Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA), an organization tasked with the implementation of the reforms. Accordingly, with effect from 1st July 2008, the work visas are being issued by LMRA. In fact, LMRA had already started issuing work visas in respect of Government organizations from 1st January 2008. Since the household service workers such as housemaids, gardeners, cooks and chauffeurs do not come under the purview of Labour laws, the work visa for them would continue to be issued by the Ministry of Labour as in the past.

**7.** One of the important features of issue of work visas by LMRA is the facility for on-line verification of the genuineness of work permits/visas of prospective employees. All the relevant data can be accessed through e-services of the LMRA web-site: [www.lmra.bh](http://www.lmra.bh)

**8.** The availability of the information on-line in respect of prospective employees from India can be an important instrument in the hands of our authorities such as Immigration, POEs, RPOs etc. to not only check and curb malpractices but also to enable them to make necessary verifications easily without resorting to time-consuming correspondence with Missions and other authorities. Similarly, Immigration authorities in India would be able to verify the documents on-line at the points of exit not only in the case of ECR (Emigration Check Required) categories but also in the case ECNR (Emigration Check Not Required) categories.

**9.** Under the previous system, the Ministry of Labour issued work permits on generic terms i.e. the employer would be granted, for example, a certain number of work permits for a particularly category of workers such as carpenters, tailors, masons etc.

With this work permit, the employer scouted for suitable employees. After selection of suitable employees, the employer approached the Immigration Bahrain for issue of visas with copies of passports of prospective employees. This system was exploited by the employer by means of setting up 'ghost' companies and selling the work permits. This also encouraged the 'free visa' racket.

**10.** With the advent of LMRA and their on-line linkages with the Ministries of Justice, Labour, Immigration, Public Prosecution, Municipal Authorities and other authorities, work visas are issued by them after considering the views of these authorities. The issue of work visas by LMRA has, to a considerable extent, addressed the malaise of 'free visas'. This has also enabled LMRA to access information on violation of local laws by the prospective employer before issue of work visa.

**11.** Even though LMRA has come to play an important role in the issue of work visa, many aspects of employment and dispute settlement mechanism are still under the charge of the Ministry of Labour. The system of sponsorship is still in place. The employment conditions in the Gulf, with particular reference to Bahrain, is given below.

**12.** Bahrain, in general, offers good living and working conditions to its expatriate communities. They also display a higher level of cultural accommodation as compared to other countries in the region. The Indian community in general is permitted freedom of social and religious activities. The number of Indians is expected to maintain its level despite the competition from cheaper labour from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, etc. Indians are expected to continue to be the dominant expatriate community in the years to come. The fact that Indian workers were the earliest expatriate workers here and to whom locals have adjusted is also a contributory factor.

**13.** However, the overwhelming Indian expatriate presence, predominantly at the 'worker level' (approx. 70% of the total Indian expatriates) has, among some of the largely semi-educated and uninformed younger generation of Bahrain, led to the perception of disdain and sometimes even contempt towards Indians. This is compounded by a characteristic of a segment of Indians to bring in relatives and friends at low wages and salaries, prompting many Bahrainis to adopt a 'take it or leave it' approach on the assumption that there are several others waiting in India to eagerly join the Bahrain labour market.

14. The employment conditions in Bahrain, are summarized below :

**a) System of Sponsorship:** The present system of entry into Bahrain for employment as also for tourism, social visit or business is by means of sponsorship. The sponsor can be an individual, a business house, an organization or even a diplomatic Mission. In the case of those coming to Bahrain on employment visas, the sponsor is responsible for arranging their residence permit, insurance, etc.

ii) **Common complaints:** The system of sponsorship gives considerable advantage to the employer over the employee and consequently leads to exploitation. The different types of complaints received from Indian nationals are indicated below :

- Retention of passports of the employees by the sponsor in order to exploit them by denying permission to travel even in emergency. According to the Bahraini as well as Indian laws, the passports should be either with the holder or with a person authorized by the holder to keep his/her passport.
- Delay in payment or denial of payment of salaries and wages by the sponsor, knowing fully well that the employees have no means to seek quick redress or to find another job or to get back their financial dues.
- The directives of the Ministry of Labour effective 1st July, 2006, directing the companies having ten or more employees, to disburse the salaries only through banks have not been fully complied with by the employers. In an instance, it was reported that three months' salary of Indian doctors in one of the reputed private hospitals of Bahrain was being withheld. It has been found in many cases that up to three months salary of the employees is held back by the employers.
- Unauthorised deductions from salary on a/c of water, electricity, accommodation, food and transport. LMRA levy of BD 10/- per month etc
- Congested, unhygienic and unsafe accommodation in labour camps lacking in certain cases even basic facilities for cooking and washing. In one of the worst fire tragedies in Bahrain, 16 Indian nationals lost their lives in July 2006. So far, the company has not paid any amount ex-gratia or compensation.

- Unsafe working conditions and denial of safety equipment. Neglect of safety precautions was a major factor in Al Dana Boat disaster in March 2006 culminating in loss of 58 lives including 22 Indians.
- Unsafe mode of transportation to and fro place of work.
- Inability to leave Bahrain without 'no objection' certificate from the sponsor. As per the local laws, it is the responsibility of the sponsor to ensure that the residence papers of the employees are in order but it is the employee who gets arrested and not the employer if the employee's papers are not in order.
- Inability to change employer even if the employer does not follow contractual obligations.
- Forcing the employees to sign blank papers for misuse and exploitation.
- The sponsor does not provide employment nor regularizes the workers' stay, thereby rendering the latter's continued stay illegal leading to detention of the employees.
- The employees are sometimes falsely implicated and reported to police by the sponsors for offences such as theft resulting in their imprisonment and deportation.
- There have been instances where the sponsors have gone to treating their employees as their 'property' and inflicting atrocities in clear violation of human rights. An Indian national was kept chained to a wall in a shop in one of the local shopping centres. According to the sponsor, this was done to prevent the Indian national from leaving the sponsor and finding work outside.
- Reports of false 'runaway' cases against the workers being filed by the sponsors have also come to notice.
- Instances have also come to notice that female workers have been brought to Bahrain on 'visit visas' for three months and were not allowed to return to India.

- **Housemaids** : The housemaids are not covered by Bahraini Labour Laws and are mostly made to work long hours without break or weekly offs, There have also been instances where the housemaids have been victims of willful injury and even physical assault.
- Some of the female employees working in the beauty parlours also complain of exploitation. Even though the female employees are employed as Ladies Hairdresser/Beautician etc., they are also compelled to clean the toilets, mopping, sweeping, window cleaning etc. attached to the beauty saloons

iii) **Residence Permit** : As an off-shoot of the sponsorship, the grant of residence permits is also abused in many cases. The sponsor, instead of canceling the residence permit of the employee at the time of termination of the work contract, renews the residence permit for a further period of two years. Thus the employee is forced to work with the same sponsor. The residence permit can be changed only when the sponsor gives 'no objection' to the employee. For this, the sponsor sometimes demands a large sum of money.

**15. Work Contracts:** Articles 38 and 39 of the Labour Law for the Private Sector issued by the Ministry of Labour of Bahrain, lay down the conditions of employment to be mutually agreed upon by the employer and the worker. However, in actual practice, the worker is often presented with a contract which is violative of the workers' rights and loaded heavily in favour of the employer. Many of the contracts do not have any clause regarding hours of work, resignation and serving notice by the employees, should they wish to quit.

**16.** Although there is no such category as **Free Visa**, this term classifies instances where local agents/businessmen/shell companies manage to obtain visas for workers which are then sold in India for as much as BD. 1200/-. These workers come to Bahrain and are 'free' to find work and fend for themselves. Periodically, they are required to pay the sponsor/agent a certain percentage of their earnings for renewing their visas. Quite often, the sponsors do not renew their visas rendering the status of these workers illegal. These so-called 'free visa' workers are easiest to exploit as the employers do not have to meet any obligations such as air fare, leave, medical treatment, insurance etc for the workers.

**17. Visit Visas :** The Department of Immigration of Govt of Bahrain issues 'visit visas' for a short duration, i.e. for a period of one month, extendable up to maximum of three months, with the clear stipulation that no employment should be taken in Bahrain. However, such visas are sold for large sums, the proceeds of which are shared by the sponsors in Bahrain and agents in other countries. The expatriate worker is promised legal entry, work permit, residence visa and a regular job on arrival in Bahrain by his agent. These workers come to Bahrain and unable to have their visas regularized, find themselves at the mercy of the sponsor/agent in Bahrain and have to pay to him a certain percentage of their earnings. In most cases, the sponsors do not renew/regularize their visas rendering the status of these workers 'illegal'. Such category of illegal expatriate workers are exploited wherever they are able to find work.

**18.** The onus and responsibility of payment of fines for illegal stay rests with the Bahraini sponsor/agent and not on 'free' or 'visit' visa holders but in case workers are arrested by the authorities, fines are extracted from workers themselves and not from the sponsor. The workers due to inability to pay huge fines, even though willing to return to India, get caught in a vicious cycle and thus are forced to continue working illegally in Bahrain.

**19.** Some of the recruitment agencies in India also connive with local companies/sponsors by making false promises and alluring innocent people to Bahrain for jobs with salaries far below the contracted levels. Many of these victims incur heavy debts in India to pay the recruitment agencies for visa. There are many cases where even the relatives, friends and persons known to the gullible job aspirants lure them to Bahrain promising lucrative salaries and vanish after charging hefty sums from them. Consequently there have been several cases of hapless workers committing suicide after finding themselves thus trapped.

### **Dispute settlement mechanisms**

**20.** For those who come under the purview of the Bahrain Labour Laws, any case of dispute is first looked into by the Ministry of Labour. As per the Labour Law, notices are issued to both the sponsor and the employee. In case, either the sponsor or the employee does not turn up in response to the notice, fresh notices are issued. If after issue of three notices at a gap of one week each, the matter is not settled, Ministry of

Labour transfers the matter to Labour Court for settlement. The settlement of disputes between the workers and the employers is a tardy and time consuming process as the sponsors do not turn up most often. During the pendency of the case, the workers are not permitted to work outside. Out of sheer frustration, many a time the worker foregoes his claim and seeks repatriation. However, the worker can authorize lawyers in Bahrain to continue the case in Court on his behalf. For those not under the purview of Labour Laws, such as housemaids etc., Ministry of Interior is the agency to be approached for settlement of disputes.

### **Living Conditions:**

**21. Wages:** The wage level for expatriate workers has remained depressed over the years despite increase in cost of living. Whereas Government of Bahrain has fixed minimum wage for Bahraini nationals at BD. 200/- per month recently, there is no minimum wage law as yet for expatriate workers.

**22. Accommodation:** The minimum rent for a single bedroom semi-furnished apartment in a medium class area in Bahrain is BD. 200/- per month and BD. 250/- for two bed-room.

**23. Transport:** The public transport is not available all the times and does not connect various parts of the city. Taxis are expensive – minimum fare during daytime is BD.1/-. It is advisable to settle for the fare before boarding the taxi to avoid any dispute later.

**24. Medical:** There are Government run Health Centres and hospitals where expatriate workers having valid residence permit can avail free treatment including medicines, diagnostic tests and hospitalization. However, for consultation with specialists as private patients, a sum of BD. 10/- is charged. Consultation at other private hospitals and practitioners also costs minimum BD.10/- per visit. Medicines and diagnostic tests are also much costlier compared to that of India.

**25. Education:** Satisfactory facilities for education (CBSE syllabus) up to senior secondary (XIIth) level are available at two Indian schools; two others are up to secondary (Xth) level, two up to IXth and one up to VIth standard. Average monthly cost of educating a child is BD.40/-.



**26. Connectivity to India:** Air India, Indian Airlines, Gulf Air as also other carriers fly to major metro cities of India. Return economy air fare is approximately BD.200/-. However, during summer the demand is very high, seats are difficult to get and air fares go up.

**27. The Embassy has constituted two Committees – [Indian Community Relief Fund \(ICRF\)](#) and Indian Community Services (ICS) -** consisting of Indian community volunteers to assist the Embassy in mitigating the problems faced by the workers. A 24-hour helpline (17713509) is available for reporting any complaint of maltreatment, abuse or assault etc. or seeking any legitimate advice. A Legal Aid Cell has been formed to provide assistance to aggrieved workers in cases of illegal detention, maltreatment, non-payment of dues and claims for compensation for disability / accidents etc. The ICRF provides, in deserving cases, air tickets to stranded workers including housemaids and seriously ill destitutes. It also meets expenses on local cremation or transportation of mortal remains of destitute Indian nationals to India. ICRF also organizes medical camps where Indian workers can avail of facility of free of cost medical check-ups and consultations. The Embassy with the cooperation of the Ministry of Interior has constituted Local Help Committees with the in different parts of the city to assist needy Indians and to operate in close cooperation with local police station. The ICS, the task force of ICRF, comprises ICRF Managing Council members and representatives from medical, insurance, education, business and social welfare fields and acts under the guidance of the Embassy for community service. The local branch of YMCA has a team of 90 Indian nationals for extending Counseling facilities to Indians – school children especially at examination time and abused workers and housemaids etc.

**28. CAUTION :**

i) The Embassy extends assistance to Indian nationals only in cases where no violation of local laws, civil or criminal, on their part is involved. The Embassy can also take action such as blacklisting, impounding/revoking of passports and/or instituting proceedings against Indian nationals found indulging in exploiting fellow Indians or jeopardizing their interest in any way.

ii) The Indian nationals before proceeding to Bahrain for any job are advised to ascertain through the Embassy or from any reliable source about the standing of the company/employer, terms and conditions of the contract including salary, accommodation, transport, medical facilities, overtime, leave, airfares, insurance and indemnity. Under no circumstances, they should sign any blank papers/contracts or accept any open ended job offer or verbal assurance from any manpower agencies or 'contacts'