

OCI cardholders get respite in domestic airfare

Holders of the 90,000-odd Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) cards can now fly on domestic routes in India by paying the same fare as resident Indian nationals.

This was announced by Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs Vayalar Ravi at the inauguration of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) 2007, the annual conclave of the Indian diaspora, here Sunday. He also announced three additional benefits for holders of the OCI card.

Apart from parity in airfares, they have also been given parity with non-resident Indians (NRIs) on inter-country adoption. Also, OCI cardholders can now visit national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in India paying the same entry fees as Indian nationals.

Launched by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at PBD 2006 in Hyderabad, the OCI scheme grants cardholders all benefits that an Indian citizen enjoys except for voting rights and the right to hold constitutional posts like the president, vice-president or a judge of the Supreme Court or high courts. Persons of Indian origin (PIOs) in countries that allow dual citizenship can apply for the card.

Stating that the scheme has met with overwhelming response, Ravi said, 'We have so far issued over 90,000 OCI cards. We hope to step up our efforts and cover a much larger number of overseas Indians in the ensuing year.'

He also added that the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) is working on a host of other benefits including allowing overseas Indian doctors to practice in the medical field in India.

Capping the achievements of the MOIA in 2006, Ravi said the ministry is working on policies and programmes that will best serve India's development effort and meet the expectations of the Indian diaspora.

Talking about the plight of Indian workers abroad, Ravi mentioned the social security agreement that was signed between India and Belgium last year.

According to the agreement, Indians working on a short-term, contract of up to 60 months in Belgium are exempted from social security contributions in the host country provided they continue to make social security payments in their home country.

Those who live and work for periods longer than 60 months and make social security contributions under the host country laws will be entitled to the export of social security benefits should they relocate to the home country on completion of their contract or on retirement.

'The agreement will serve as a model for similar agreements with other countries in the European Union and the developed world,' the minister said.

Coming to Indian workers in the Gulf, he said, 'Each year, about one million workers from India go overseas for employment. The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are the top destination countries.'

In this connection, he mentioned the memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) last month that grants the protection of the rights of Indian

workers in that country.

'Over the next few, I am confident that we will conclude and sign similar bilateral agreements with Kuwait, Bahrain and the other GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries,' he said, adding that a similar agreement with Malaysia is also under negotiation.

Ravi also mentioned his ministry's initiative to start a skill upgrade programme for Indians planning to emigrate in search of employment.

'Beginning this year, our objective will be to train 50,000 workers annually in diverse trades,' he said.

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