

India's Most Valuable Export: Tens of Millions of Workers

India plans to send its vast work force abroad to countries with labor shortages, like Germany and Japan.



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By Alex Travelli

Alex Travelli, the South Asia business and economics correspondent, reported from New Delhi and the surrounding region.

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India has a teeming population of able-bodied workers, tens of millions more than its employers can accommodate. Many other countries have the opposite problem: more jobs than workers.

Today, across the Indian government and business sector, a movement is gaining steam to begin exporting more workers. The idea, which economists call labor mobility, is to connect young Indians to companies in places with shrinking populations where labor shortages are holding back growth.

The challenge for India and its partners overseas is a growing opposition to immigration in many countries. Officials are trying to craft policies to make it easier to move Indian workers abroad swiftly, while ensuring they have viable paths home.

On Oct. 9, India's foreign ministry announced draft legislation for an Overseas Mobility Bill to replace the Emigration Act of 1983. The text proposes to help Indian citizens connect with the "global workplace," paying special attention to ensuring workers' "safe and orderly return, and reintegration of returnees."

New Delhi has quietly signed labor mobility agreements with at least 20 countries over the past half-dozen years — in Europe and Asia, including the Persian Gulf — all with developed economies and most without much history of hiring Indian workers.

"My dream is to go to Japan," said Vanlal Peka, the son of a pig farmer in Mizoram, a hilly region on India's border with Myanmar. The dream took him to a warren of glass-walled rooms in a New Delhi basement, where he studies Japanese at the Furusawa Academy. Mr. Peka, 21, wants to win a new visa for semiskilled foreign workers and become an auto mechanic in Japan by April.



Vanlal Peka wants to become an auto mechanic in Japan. He is studying Japanese at the Furusawa Academy. Atul Loke for The New York Times



The Larnet Institute of Skills is a joint venture with India's National Skill Development Corporation. It offers classes in hospitality, business management and multiple languages. Atul Loke for The New York Times

The movement to find new labor markets for Indians like Mr. Peka is gathering pace as the United States, long a favored destination for skilled workers, clamps down on all kinds of migration. President Trump has taken aim at the H-1B visa program, which was supposed to be for temporary assignments, making it harder for students and less-skilled workers to gain entry to the American work force.

At the Larnet Institute of Skills, a joint venture with India's National Skill Development Corporation about 20 miles from Furusawa, classrooms buzz with young adults learning to work in hospitality, business management and more. Many are taking classes in Japanese and German.

Aradhana David, 18, initially became interested in Japan via anime and YouTube influencers. Now studying Japanese at Larnet, she thinks she could earn enough in Japan to live on her own, without her family's support. Ms. David hopes to go as a health care worker, on a technical intern training program.

Like her classmates, Ms. David intends to apply for a temporary visa. But, like many of them, she doesn't like to think about her stay in Japan as temporary. Beside health care work, she said, "I wanted to make a YouTube channel there and post video, as a side hustle."

The greatest challenge for the movement will be assuring the host countries that the migration really is temporary.

In most host countries, it is politically risky to suggest that foreigners like Indians could replace native-born workers. The alternative to permanent immigration, called return and reintegration, is untested. Young migrant workers, having invested in a big move and earning well in their new lives, often fall in love, start businesses and want to settle in the places where their careers take off.



Aradhana David, studying Japanese, became interested in Japan via anime and YouTube influencers. Atul Loke for The New York Times



Students train in hospitality and business, with many learning Japanese and German for overseas jobs. Atul Loke for The New York Times

The demographics of developed economies, however, make a blunt case in favor of attracting India's millions of workers. National populations are shrinking, and retired people are living longer. With deaths exceeding births everywhere from Italy to Russia to South Korea, worries about overpopulation are obsolete. Last month a study prepared by the Boston Consulting Group estimated a global shortfall of 45 million to 50 million workers by 2030, up from five million in 2023.

Picture 50 million people on a march across borders, filling those holes in the global work force — more than the entire working-age population of Britain. That is the vision of the Global Access to Talent From India Foundation, a think tank established in New Delhi this year.

Arnab Bhattacharya, the chief executive of the foundation, estimated that India could double its current export of 700,000 workers a year to 1.5 million by 2030. His country, he said, "has a work force that should be servicing the world and not just India."

Across swaths of India there are too many hopeful young workers. A research paper by Chetan Ahya, the chief Asia economist at Morgan Stanley, argued that India's economy, while growing so swiftly that it is now a rival to Germany's and Japan's, will not create jobs fast enough to solve the crisis of its underemployment.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, about 50 million Indians working in services or manufacturing have had to return to agricultural work, a hard step backward for those who want to enter the skilled, internationalized work force.



Arnab Bhattacharya, the chief executive of the Global Access to Talent From India Foundation, at his office in New Delhi. Atul Loke for The New York Times



If the labor mobility plan works as intended, migrants work three- or five-year stints without changing citizenship. For India, the temporarily expatriated workers will bring back capital and know-how. Atul Loke for The New York Times

Germany and Japan are attracting the most attention within India — Germany as a corridor to the rest of Europe and Japan as another into East Asia. Finland and Taiwan have recently signed agreements with India, too.

The big English-speaking countries already have well-trodden paths to entry for Indian workers, especially in highly skilled fields. Canada, the United States, Australia and Britain don't need help from the Indian government to encourage mobility, in the view of the GATI Foundation.

If it works as intended, migrants work three- or five-year stints without changing citizenship. The host countries stave off economic stagnation. For India, the temporarily expatriated workers will keep sending home remittances — they already send \$135 billion a year — and bring back the capital and know-how it takes to spur enterprise in their own country.

At an annual India-Japan forum held in New Delhi last December, India's foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, started the summit by calling for "labor-mobility exchanges." It topped his list, ahead of defense cooperation, supply chains and chips. In August, the countries started a program that could send 50,000 workers a year from India to Japan.

But leaders in the labor mobility movement are wary of a backlash brewing overseas. Mr. Trump has made deportations a top priority of his administration. The H-1B visa, which millions of highly skilled Indians have used to settle in the United States, will now come with a \$100,000 fee.

Similar political currents are upending democracies in Europe and Japan, where the need for migrant labor is the greatest. It has not stopped governments from recruiting workers from India.



Philipp Ackermann, the German ambassador to India. Atul Loke for The New York Times



Ritesh Jagra, a nursing student. Atul Loke for The New York Times

Germany's ambassador to New Delhi, Philipp Ackermann, said his government would have to step up its messaging on bringing in more workers.

"We have to make sure that the population understands that legal migration is needed and at the same time to combat illegal immigration," Mr. Ackermann said. He also said Germany needed to make an "extra effort" to win over Indian workers, most of whom speak English and Hindi, not German.

Ritesh Jagra, 20, is studying operating room procedures at Learnet. Seated at the back of a classroom, he watched a classmate prep a training dummy for surgery.

Mr. Jagra has not yet begun to study German. But he has gleaned from social media that, with more work, "Germany might give me a chance to go."

Suhasini Raj contributed reporting.

Alex Travelli is a correspondent based in New Delhi, writing about business and economic developments in India and the rest of South Asia.

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