

ISEAS-IPS Book Launch

The Migration of Indian Human Capital: The Ebb and Flow of Indian Professionals in Southeast Asia

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The Migration of Indian Human Capital: The Ebb and Flow of Indian Professionals in Southeast Asia was officially launched on 26 March 2011 at the Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS). The book, written by IPS Research Fellow Dr Faizal Bin Yahya and ISEAS Research Associate Ms Arunajeet Kaur, is a product of over 120 interviews conducted in main Indian and Southeast Asian cities.

It analyses the current trends in the flow of Indian human capital into Southeast Asia and focuses on the Indian diaspora in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand.

Held in a cosy roundtable room, the book launch brought together close to fifty researchers and members of the public. Ms Arunajeet Kaur was unable to make an appearance as she was away in Australia for doctoral studies. Guest-of-honour Professor Tommy Koh, IPS Special Adviser, however, graced the occasion and launched the book.



In his introductory remarks, Dr Chin Kin Wah, Deputy Director of ISEAS noted that Indian-ASEAN trade was expected to reach US\$70 billion by 2012. Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, the four countries that the authors chose to highlight in their book, were especially relevant as they had extensive trade ties with India, Dr Chin noted. With India's ongoing 'Look East' policy that calls for deeper ties with Asia, and a rising economy that would attract Multi-National Companies (MNCs), more Indian professionals were likely to spend part of their careers in South-East Asia, he said. The book, which analyses integration between migrant and local-born Indians, would be even more notable in this light.

Presenting significant findings of the book, co-author Dr Faizal noted that this piece of research on the migration of Indian human capital joins a bigger global conversation on brain drain, brain gain and brain circulation in the global economy. In this

context, the book examines the Indian transnationals who are Global Indians and part of the Global Elites. Transnationals refer to individuals with transborder ties and linkages. These Global Indians circulate in the global economy and India has become a key source for talent.



Co-author Dr Faizal Bin Yahya speaking at the book launch.

These topics would be even more pertinent in light of the fierce competition for elite talent amongst nations, he said.

In their interviews with university lecturers in India, the authors found that unlike many Indians who desired to migrate to the Silicon Valley (United States of America) in the nineties for better opportunities, fewer Indian graduates were gunning to go overseas at the outset of their careers. India's position as a rising economic powerhouse had attracted many MNCs to set up offices in the country in recent years. With increasing salaries and a cheaper cost of living in India, graduates preferred to remain in India instead. Besides, those who joined MNCs back home were likely to be sent overseas in the course of their careers, Dr Faizal said.

He noted that countries in the West and in the Gulf region were still the most likely destinations for Indian professionals, but Indian human capital was, more

surprisingly, making its way into Africa where remunerations were attractive.

Dr Faizal pointed out several events that had implications on the flow of Indian human capital around the globe. Examples include the Asian Financial Crisis in 1998, the burst of the Information Technology bubble in 2001, the SARS outbreak in 2002 and most recently, the global financial crisis which saw retrenchments in the West.

Highlighting findings on Indian expatriates in individual Southeast Asian countries, Dr Faizal noted that Indian professionals were relatively well-integrated with the local community in Indonesia. While many of the first-generation migrants to India were traders, companies like Birla and Mittal Holdings were bringing a second wave of Indian professionals there. A thriving Indian club in Indonesia and the popularity of Bollywood movies, which were a part of modern Indian culture, helped to bridge the gaps between newer migrants and settled Indians. New migrants were also open to learning the native language, Bahasa Indonesia, unlike the case in Thailand, where language was a strong impediment to the integration of Thai settled Indians and new Indian expatriates.

In Malaysia, the growth of the Multi-media Super Corridor continues to give Indian IT professionals an impetus to relocate there. In the authors' view, this set about a reassessment about the image of Indians in Malaysia. As for Singapore, Dr Faizal noted that foreign talent from India continues to be welcomed not only for purposes of boosting the economy but also for purposes of renewing the nation's ageing population.



Left to Right: Mr Yahya Bin Syed, Mr M.M Jagjeet Singh, Mr R Satyanarayanan, Professor Tommy Koh, Dr Faizal Bin Yahya, Dr Chin Kin Wah, Dr Denis Hew, Ambassador Ong Keng Yong

Notably, when the authors began their research on Singapore, there were only two Global Indian Expatriate schools in Singapore (Delhi Public School and Global Indian International School), GIS has now expanded from then two to six campuses. This highlighted the expanding number of Indian expatriates in the country and pointed to the need to develop suitable services that catered to these new migrants, Dr Faizal added.

Rounding up his findings, Dr Faizal said that given a welcoming environment and business opportunities in Indonesia, the archipelago state was most likely to emerge as a competitor to Singapore for Indian talent in future with regards to services such as consultancies.

Discussion

The first discussant, Mr R Satyanarayanan, Head of Infrastructure and Government at KPMG, found the book to be a vivid recollection of what he experienced as an Indian migrant in Singapore. This wave of migration, he said, was different from the last one which happened half a century ago. Unlike before, Indian professionals could now select which part of the world they wanted to relocate in. Whether an Indian would “anchor” himself in an

overseas country was dependant on the reception and level of comfort he felt there. Mr Satyanarayanan thought that the term “trans-nationals”, which the authors used to describe Indian expatriates in the book, was an apt way of capturing what it means to a global Indian yet closely connected to home.

A second discussant Dr Denis Hew, Director, Policy Support Unit, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Secretariat questioned if the gap between settled Indians in Southeast Asian countries and new expatriates arose from the divide between North and South Indians. As a Malaysian, he said that most settled Indians came from South India whereas new Indian expatriates were likely to come from the North. He asked if this could be the main impediment to integration between the two groups. Besides that, he appreciated the authors’ openness in pointing to issues that Malaysia and Thailand faced in its integration of Indian expatriates. While trends of global migration were traditionally from developing to developed countries, he noted that the world was observing new waves of migration between developing countries which would be interesting to monitor.

Launch by Professor Tommy Koh

In his remarks¹, Prof Koh acknowledged that Dr Faizal's book made an important contribution to the literature on the Indian diaspora and highlighted a fifth wave of mobility of talented Indian professionals and knowledge workers to the world. He noted that unlike the past, not all Indian citizens intended to give up their Indian citizenship to be citizens of their host country.

Professor Koh highlighted that these days, global citizens live in an increasingly borderless world. Several books have pointed out that the world is increasingly being powered by brainpower, rather than manpower. Talented and English-speaking people, like those from India, are very much in demand from countries

around the world, Professor Koh said. As long as opportunities in India were not equal to those outside, talented Indians will continue to work abroad, he added.

In a smaller way, young Singaporeans who complete their studies overseas are increasingly choosing to work in centres of the world, instead of coming home. However, the reassuring news, Professor Koh noted, was that more talented people were choosing to come to Singapore. He agreed with the authors' conclusion, that among the four Southeast Asian countries studied, Singapore was the easiest for foreign talent to relocate in. This is because Singapore was the least conflicted in its policy in dealing with migrants.

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¹ Professor Tommy Koh's Remarks at the book launch:
http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/pub/sp_tk_Book_launch_The_Migration_of_Indian_Human_Capital_230311.pdf