Migrants return to India

To the boom tune of a strong Indian economy and cries of a global recession, a growing number of Indians are returning home to pursue promising careers.
12/01/2011
migrants_india

To the boom tune of a strong Indian economy and cries of a global recession, a growing number of Indians are returning home to pursue promising careers. They benefit from the win-win environment of the reverse brain drain trend. Qurratul-Ain Haider, a Geneva-based journalist, reports from India.

As global attention turns the spotlight on recession and unemployment ratios, a growing number of Indians are packing their international experience and degrees into their suitcases and heading home to a new, greener pasture. In what is a turnaround of the sapping brain drain phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s, India stands to gain with the ambitious and educated seeking a better tomorrow through their “r2i” or return-to-India decision.

According to Kelly Services India, a global workforce solutions provider, around 300,000 Indian professionals are expected to migrate home over the next four years. Interestingly, it is not just the private sector that is attracting Indian returnees. The Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) has hundreds of Non Resident Indian (NRI) scientists keen to be part of India’s defence projects, with the Government also eager to attract Indian scientists currently abroad, as stated in recent media reports.

Armed with a postgraduate degree in International Business Management, Arif Durrani, 42, left India around 17 years ago to pursue a successful career in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). With a rewarding career, enviable quality of life, and great international ambience for the children, it seemed unlikely that Durrani would want to give it all up and return to his roots.

And yet he has. Responding from his office in India’s commercial capital, Mumbai, where he is AVP operations with a Supply Chain company – with the largest cold chain network pan-India and for leading multinational companies (MNCs) across the globe – Durrani’s reasons to return reflect his confidence in the Indian economy.

A growth rate of 9 per cent

“The average annual growth rate of 9 per cent is very healthy compared to the developed economies after the recent recession. Most MNCs are looking at the Indian markets to support their growth/sustainability. My field – Supply Chain – that is in a very nascent stage, offers good career prospects. Salaries in India have also become much better compared to the past,” elaborates Durrani.

Contrary to an outsider view, nostalgia or global recession are not the sole homecoming reasons. Says one senior management executive in his early fifties who has, after a decade, returned from Canada to Pune last year, “The economy in India is healthier than that of North America and more growth focused for the next 10–20 years.”

Of course, it doesn’t take years of experience to recognize the economic potential. Young Hemant Shetty, 27, has packed in three years of experience in the hospitality industry in the United Kingdom. Using his international expertise, he now works in sales in a 5-star hotel in Mumbai. His excitement about the future of the hospitality industry in India is like a convincing sales pitch: “Foreign arrivals are growing at a steady rate of 11–15 per cent per annum and are expected to grow further with increased investment in the tourism sector.”

Approximately 30,000 rooms in the premium segment – entailing an investment around INR 428 billion – are expected to come up in the top 10 cities of India. Mid-end and budget hotels are also presenting a potential growth opportunity and there is an increased interest by foreign hotel brands and investors, adds Shetty.

Dharmakirti Joshi, Chief Economist, CRISIL Ltd, elaborates: “Over the last few years India’s growth rate has gone up significantly. Between 2004 and 2011, average annual GDP growth has been 8.5 per cent. Additionally, India’s growth potential was not dented by the global financial crisis of 2008 and it quickly returned to the 8 per cent growth path within a year.”

According to Joshi, this is in contrast to the economic developments in the West. GDP growth not only came down sharply following the crisis, in both Europe and the United States, where recovery and growth prospects have been weak, and employment has taken a big hit.

A win-win situation

Since India suffers from skill shortages, particularly at the high end of the job market, those returning can easily get absorbed. “The push factor has been shrinking job opportunities in the West and the pull factor has been opportunities for these professions in the fast-growing Indian economy. India has seen finance, information technology and medical professionals returning. This is a win-win situation for both. India stands to gain from the return of these professionals due do to fast-emerging skill shortages in India,” explains Joshi.

So what do professionals find attractive in the Indian job market?

Mumbai-based Anis Uttanwala, Managing Director of Character Sketches, a recruiting agency that specializes in mid and senior level mandates across industries, says: “A lot of people in the marketing space are interested in the wide demographics, psychographics, etc. that India has to offer. For IT professionals, the attraction is the opportunity to start their own venture. For a CEO it could be the biggest challenge to move the market share up in a cluster of products…”

On the other hand, while hiring is across industries such as automobiles, financial services, retail, IT, ITeS, infrastructure, banking, Uttanwala clarifies that it is the well-qualified and experienced professional who stands a good chance… the economy is at a stage where “just being an NRI does not qualify for a job in a firm of repute”.

In order to reap the benefits of a foreign stint and do well back home, informed choices and sensible investments are also essential, more so for those in the less-skilled job sectors.

Return Migrant Entrepreneurs in India is a 2010 ILO report (ILO-EU Asia Migration Project and ILO Subregional Office in New Delhi) that focuses on blue-collar workers returning from the Middle East. The report states that while “a significant proportion of skilled workers tend to migrate to countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, it is the less skilled migrant workers that comprise a higher proportion of the total number of out-migrants from India”.

Paul Nevin, a successful returnee from Abu Dhabi, whose case study is illustrated in the report, actually sums up the prospects of the reverse brain drain scenario across the board: Nevin believes that his young son will not have to migrate when he is older as there are more opportunities in India now.

Return also comes with challenges

Yet homecoming does come with its challenges, often more complex for the single woman. Mumbai-based psychologist Gopa Khan, who is a postgraduate from Temple University, Philadelphia and has worked in New Jersey, explains: “As a single woman, adjusting back into the Indian society is not easy as there are strong pressures to get married and have a family.”

“Independent women often miss the freedom and openness of the multicultural work environment and equal growth opportunities that they left behind abroad.” Khan cautions that looking for jobs in certain sectors, such as counselling, can be challenging and one should be “prepared to reinvent the wheel”.

Admittedly, the transition does require resolve and could lead to disappointment and helplessness in the face of alleged corruption and inefficiency within the system. “For us, coming back was all about the roots calling, family and business and wanting our son to have an Indian vision. But I think I glorified the vision a bit in my head. I am so disappointed with how we have turned out as a people and a nation,” says one entrepreneur from Florida, who returned to India last year to start a business.

However, for those toying with the idea, Durrani recommends a return age of around 40 or post-retirement and also offers a check-list: “Ensure you are comfortably placed on the family front; have at least a year’s back-up to support your living; have worked out a job or recurring income (rent) prior to the move; and are partnering only with a person already in business and one who understands the workings in India.”

Durrani probably speaks for many when he suggests that the Indian Government should “encourage the reverse brain drain by forming a body to facilitate the homecoming as a one-stop shop; and should give a tax holiday for a period of at least 3 to 5 years”