Book review: Secession of the successful by Sanjaya Baru

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I realised the significance of migration as an economic phenomenon during the pandemic. Sanjaya Baru's book traces the migration of Indians in four waves from the nineteenth century, although Indians had been a sea faring nation right from the early years of human history.

Consider some of these interesting bits of statistics I came across in the book: In 2025, close to 2 million Indian students would spent $70 billion on education in USA, UK and Australia, up from $ 47 billion in 2022. Between 2011 and 2023, over 18.8 lakh Indians had given up their Indian citizenship; 10 percent of all golden visas in the world have been allotted to Indians. Among foreigners, Indians own the largest number of properties in Dubai at 35,000 properties valued at $17 billion. India, a low to middle income nation, invested $40 billion in the USA since 2008 while total foreign direct investment into India from the USA since 2000 is $64 billion.

I found them so striking it made me want to read more about Baru's thesis in the book.

Four Waves of Migration

The first wave involved Indians migrating to work in British plantations in Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago from the mid-nineteenth century to early twentieth century.

The second wave of Indian labour migrating to work in West Asia and the Gulf started in the 1960s and probably continues today to an extent.

The third phase involved knowledge workers from the 1970s and 1980s.

The fourth phase involves the migration of the wealthy, mostly commencing in the early years of the new millennium. It is on-going and growing in numbers as we speak.

More Differences than Similarities

All four waves had widely differing social, political and economic features. While the first phase seems to have involved largely people of socially disadvantaged sections of the society, the third wave involved largely people from the so-called upper castes, many of them as in the case of Tamil Nadu, fleeing the growing antipathy of the political dispensation in Tamil Nadu.

So also, while the first two phases involved people trying to escape from poverty, in the third and fourth waves, migration seems to have been in search of a life in the first world.

Baru's book, as the title suggests seems to have been motivated more by the fourth wave. However, it provides a reasonably detailed coverage of the first three phases.

The book points out how those who migrated to work on the plantations got themselves absorbed into the social milieu of the host nation so neatly that their subsequent generations went on to occupy positions of political leadership in the host nations as in the case of Mauritius.

Baru discusses the changes in the administrative and legislative regimes that impacted close to a century of migration in the first wave, which was, needless to state, intended entirely to serve the commercial interested of British plantation owners.

Interestingly, notwithstanding the harsh working conditions none of the migrant workers really chose to return to their home country, their connection to India now mainly being through their Persons of India Origin (PIO) status.

Brain Drain, Brain Gain

Baru makes an important distinction between those who sought higher education in the fifties and sixties or even earlier and returned to India to put their knowledge to work in the service of the nation such as VKRV Rao, K N Raj, Vikram Sarabhai and Homi Bhabha, to name a few, who made stellar contributions to India, soon after independence.

He dwells at some length on the issues of brain drain, brain gain and circulation of brain that occupied public policy discourse in the seventies and eighties when India's talent moved to the west in search of career and material progress. Several solutions such as imposing a tax on those who migrated proposed by distinguished economists like Jagdish Bhagwati, emerged but never got implemented.

The Official Policy View of Migration

Baru discusses at some length how, for many decades, political discourse in India has looked upon migration as an unalloyed advantage for the nation. Starting with Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then later on Dr Manmohan Singh who said famously that "…if there is one phenomenon on which the sun cannot set it is the world of the people of Indian origin and more recently Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi exhorting Indians living overseas to be the "rashtradoots of Indian heritage", political leaders have all noted with satisfaction the economic benefit of migration in the form of remittances.

So much so, the government seems to consider it a policy priority not to just recognise the contributions of Indian overseas, but also to actively open doors for migration opportunities, be it as skilled labour in different parts of the world or to press for opening up opportunities for professionals such as software engineers in the form of more H1-B visas.

Baru's Disagreement and Concerns

Baru believes that Indians have contributed to their host countries a lot more than they have to their home nation. Noting that this is an aspect that has not been adequately researched or acknowledged by those in power, he gives an example of how Indians constitute 1.50 percent of the US population, but contribute around 6 percent of federal tax at around US $300 billion and around US $370 billion to US $460 billion in annual spending. He seems to disagree with the implication in the popular narrative that migration is good for India and host nations are doing a service to India by allowing Indians to migrate.

He also notes with concern the growing assertion of the cultural and religious identities of Indians overseas, which contrasts with the quieter tradition of the Indian migrant. The introduction of religion into the process, some of which he says has been the result of the deliberate work of organisations he names in his book, has made the overseas Hindu look increasingly like its Muslim counterpart, the ummah.

Baru's greatest concern seems to be the many collateral implications of wealthy Indians migrating abroad. He seems to lament the fact that they are willing to chant Bharat Mata Ki Jai from the comfortable confines of what he refers to as their first world lifestyle in first world setting, having moved from a first world lifestyle in a third world setting. Yet they have chosen to leave their motherland.

Further, he seems to find it somewhat ironic that Indian businessmen talk about the world of business being borderless to justify their pursuit of residence in a first world country although that wealth had been built on the tariff and non-tariff protection that they had lobbied for their businesses.

His most searing criticism and concern about the migration of the wealthy, which he refers towards the end as the "secession of the successful", a turn of phrase that is loaded with connotations, even if unintended, is captured in these lines:

"What message does a nation send out when the children of those who have occupied high offices…opt to study and be gainfully employed overseas? What stake do political and business leaders who are parents of emigrating children have in this country when their children's future is no longer linked to that of the country?"

A Narrative with a View

Baru's book presents many interesting facets relating to Indians migrating out. It will probably not be considered an academic work as is commonly understood. He probably did not intend it to be one although he does draw on a fair bit of pre-existing work on the subject. But it is a useful addition to the literature for someone who wishes to get a good understanding of the phenomenon and its economic, social, political and cultural dimensions.

One could possibly disagree with him on a few issues. For example, many Indian businessmen may have relocated themselves because it genuinely helps them to run a global business from a central location like London and not just because they wanted away from their many issues with the Indian administrative dispensation. Also, it is easier to access and leverage a global talent from some of those locations than from an Indian metropolis.

That said, it is not easy to ignore his many concerns about the current migration, which though still small in numbers is perhaps much larger in terms of economic and institutional impact, more than it may have been understood. Baru's book brings out the importance of the answer to the question of who is migrating rather than how many are.

When he notes that increasingly many important corporate decisions are made by people of Indian origin, of Indian origin but not necessarily of Indian citizenship, from their offices outside, enabled by changes in India law that allow them to do so, one is left wondering if the locus of control of corporate India is shifting gradually. And what it will look like by 2047.

Views expressed in this article are his own.

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