

Mobility of Scholars between India and the US – Some Changes, Challenges and Opportunities

By

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Introduction

I have studied the mobility of scholars between India and the US for more than four decades. It started, as an aspiring student wanting to get a PhD. from an American university and, in the process, see the world. I was fortunate to get a Fulbright travel grant and a research assistantship at the university, resulting in no financial obligations to my parents. My employer, a well-known research institute in India granted me study leave – a luxury today! It was because of this action of the employer that I returned to my job in India immediately after getting a PhD degree. But my association with the American education and research scene has continued in one form or other. After four decades of this Indo-US academic foray, I am presently associated with the apex body for higher education in India viz. the University Grants Commission (UGC) through its plan for internationalizing the higher education in India. UGC has started a program entitled “Promotion of Indian Higher Education Abroad (PIHEAD)”, which includes, among other activities, attracting students to India from developing as well as developed countries like the US. I am also the “country partner” in India for the US based Institute of International Education (IIE) that is administering a large number of exchange programs between US and a large number of countries in the world. In this capacity, one has seen how multinational companies in the US are offering scholarships to support the studies of students in India. These multinational companies are keen to attract Indian talent, in India, to contribute to global technology development programs being undertaken by these companies in India. The annual document of “Open Doors” brought out by IIE is an eye opener to the mobility of scholars between US and the world.

Over these years, the common feature of the Indo-US education scene has continued to be the keen desire of the Indian students to study in the United States and for the academics and professionals to look at the US for new areas of research and knowledge generation in advanced areas of technology. Presence in the US is looked at as an opportunity to professional and economic advancement of the academia. For Indian students, the US has always opened up new opportunities for education and research in frontline areas, with an increasing access to the growing global employment market. In the present decade of economic liberalization in India, attractive job offers in the Indian corporate sector have given a new dimension to the mobility of Indian scholars who are now considering returning to India to take up challenging and lucrative assignments in the growing multinational sector in India. I am interacting with two major R&D centres of multinational companies, offering scholarships to students studying in India, to get familiar with the global research trends as being carried out now on Indian soil through the excellent research centres established by these companies in India.

With this background, the present article is written with the intention of tracing some of these changes in the mobility of students, scholars and other professionals between India and the US. New challenges and opportunities that are available to our students and scholars, in the US as well as in India, will also be briefly discussed. The analysis is not restricted to students of Physics but to a general scene as it applies to professional education in India and in the US.

Changing Educational and Employment Trends

The attraction for education in the US continues to grow but the nature of mobility and its diversity is changing. During the early sixties, US universities attracted postgraduate students from India (known as graduate students in the American parlance), mainly in areas of natural sciences of Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Mathematics. These educational visits were primarily for getting a PhD. degree of a quality not easily acquired in India. The American education system could easily absorb this category of students, since the US academic community depended a lot on graduate students, needed for research projects sponsored by funding agencies. The US universities were not looking for students as a source of revenue generation as the trend seems to be today, with focus now on undergraduate recruitment.

The Indian student going to the US in the past did his post-doc as part of his “training” experience, permitted by the immigration rules. The situation today is very different. The Indian student plans to go to the US with a long-term plan. The student and the parents are often keen that the stay in the US is prolonged so as to improve their professional careers and also earn lot of money through lucrative job offers made by industry. The industry would justify the continued stay of the student in that country by sponsoring their potential employee for a US visa – a requirement under the immigration rules. This has led to increased seekers of green card holders in the US and perhaps leading to a US citizenship.

Students preparing to go to the US are now aware of various options available to them in the US education system. Organizations like the United States Education Foundation in India (USEFI), with its branches in major cities are providing authentic information and guidance for entering the US educational institutions. Under the auspices of the Institute of International Education (IIE) in the US, several American universities are participating in “education fairs” being organized in various Indian cities to recruit Indian students. The IIT students have established a network that helps the junior students to plan their admission process in a much more systematic way. The Internet explosion has further enabled easy access to information about the American education system. Competition from countries like UK, Australia, Canada is growing and now even countries in Europe and South East Asia are trying to attract Indian students to campuses in their countries. The American education had never used marketing strategies for promoting their education in India, but the competition from other countries in the world has forced them to participate in activities like the “education fairs” mentioned above.

Proceeding to US for undergraduate education is now becoming popular in India and this implies greater contribution of Indian financial resources to the American economy. Estimates provided by the Department of Commerce in the US indicate that today the American economy is enriched by roughly \$ 14 billion dollars annually as a result of the presence of International students in that country. India certainly contributes substantially to this dollar inflow. The range of educational institutions where Indian students are studying now has also diversified and not just restricted to the Ivy League institutions as in the past. Presence of Indian students on American college campuses further attracts more Indian students since the word of mouth is perhaps still the most reliable source of information that improves the chances of getting admitted to the American education system. The fields of studies have also diversified, though the preference is still related to professional courses that would lead to a job in the corporate world. No doubt the number of Indian professionals in the American university system has also increased. These changes in the profiles of the mobility of scholars has certainly depleted the availability of good teachers in the Indian education market – a concern that may have a much more long term impact on the growth and quality of Indian higher education system. One hears of shortage of faculty and unfilled vacancies even in the IIT system. Efforts are being made by some research institutions to bring back professionals to work in the national laboratories. Indian scholars, who have studied in the US, prefer to work in the academic and corporate institutions there rather than to come back and teach in an Indian education institution or work in an Indian industry. However a new trend is seen in the corporate job market. Many more Indians are likely to return to India to work in the growing globalised corporate sector

rather than to return to their alma mater, where the salaries are not attractive and facilities for high quality research are lacking.

India is emerging as a global R&D destination for several Multinational companies. General Electric (GE) has set up a major R&D centre in Bangalore, claimed to be even larger than its research centre in the US! Companies like Lucent, Phillips, Suzuki, Siemens, Hindustan Levers, IBM, Microsoft, Oracle, Dell, and many more such R&D centres are vying for recruiting Indian talent in their centers in India. Indian group leaders who have been working in their R&D centres abroad for a number of years are being moved to India - a win-win situation for both the parties. Several Indian companies have also started setting up R&D centres, particularly in the medical and the healthcare area, attracting global researchers for frontline work in modern areas of science. The academic sector has unfortunately not been able to attract Indian talent abroad, to the same extent as the corporate world has been doing. The reason for this has primarily been the fact that by and large the education sector in India is still under the government control with salaries laid down uniformly for all with no provision for “market driven” salary packages. Even if one wants to sacrifice on the pay packet, the research facilities and the work environment are not yet attractive. In a small way this is changing with the emergence of the private higher education sector in India. Unfortunately, today this sector is however primarily geared towards teaching and that too at an undergraduate level and hence not very attractive for research oriented Indian scholars abroad.

After a Degree What?

Let us examine how this changing scene for education and employment affects the student community. An Indian student coming from a middle class well to do family, starts looking at the possibility of studying abroad, right from the day he enters the college – sometime even as he is completing his high school studies. He already has some of his cousins, brothers or a distant relative who is studying abroad and they start exchanging notes on studying abroad. Parents in the earlier times used to be worried about losing their children to countries abroad. Today many of them, particularly the urban affluent community, is in fact encouraging their children to travel abroad. In many cases they even offer to support them during the early years of their studies, hoping that once they complete their studies, they would start earning abroad and make up for the initial expenses required for their studies abroad. In the past, completing a Masters or a Ph.D. degree in the US was the first and perhaps the final goal of an Indian student going to the US. But certainly, today it forms only a minor part of the road map to the US. In the first step of their journey to the US, the students have to convince the US visa authorities that when applying for a US student visa, they have no intentions of migrating and settling down in the US. One really does not know how many students today can and do answer this question with a clear conscience when they apply for the visa. The need for greater Indian professional manpower in the US also perhaps tends to soften the attitude of the visa officer. The central issue is that many Indian students today already have thought of a long-term career plan in the US. Further, the employment market in the US has also helped them to continue to stay in the US even long after they have completed their education. From a personal point of view, perhaps the decision to stay on in the US is professionally and financially more attractive and one cannot blame the student if he takes this option. The Indian education system back home has certainly not made the return to this stream an attractive option. Research jobs in the large number of national laboratories of the governmental agencies, are also no longer attractive as the salaries, and more importantly the work culture in these laboratories, does not attract a young and enthusiastic research oriented freshly returned graduate or a PhD student from abroad. It is true that there are premier institutions like the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore and the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Mumbai that are recognized for very good research environment, but the opportunities available in these institutions are still small and financially still not very attractive. Does it mean that after you get an American professional degree you have no place back home? The answer is certainly not a firm yes or no. As they always say “it depends” on what you are expecting back home. Let us examine this option in a little more detail.

Careers in India and in the US

Not having looked at the employment market carefully in the US, it is perhaps not appropriate for me to comment on this in detail, but only to make some general remarks based on reports available in India. The main choice that an Indian student has to make after completing his studies in the US is to decide whether he wants to go for an academic career or a career in the corporate world. The choice in the academic career necessarily has to start after acquiring a PhD degree in a specialized discipline. Getting a permanent or tenured position in a well-established university is obviously a long process that invariably starts by getting a post-doctoral position and embarking on a full time research activity. Perhaps there may be teaching positions available in small colleges in the US, but these normally end up in having to give up a bright research career. Further, this choice also probably closes your options of returning to India.

For students wanting to join the corporate world, the PhD degree may not be necessary in the US, but once you make that choice, coming back to an academic career becomes very difficult, unlike that for a PhD degree holder having worked in a corporate world. The post-doctoral position is quite attractive for a fresh PhD degree holder Indian in the US. It gives you an opportunity to fully immerse yourself in the research areas of your choice. If the research contributions made over the years get recognition in the academic world, chances of getting a regular and perhaps a permanent position in the Academic community of the US education system would be enhanced. But this is a very dicey situation and depends quite a bit on the competitive academic situation in a particular university. However if you do not get a regular position in the university system for a few years, it will be difficult, if not dangerous for one to remain employed as a post-doc for more than a few years. It is at this stage of having acquired some independent research experience and with some good publications that an Indian scholar could plan to come to India, either in an Indian university of repute or a national research laboratory that has been doing good research work in India. Opportunities in corporate world would be attractive only if a placement is available in a multinational R&D laboratory like the one mentioned earlier. Salaries in the government run universities or national laboratories would be nowhere comparable to the ones available in these corporate laboratories. However jobs in these private laboratories would be subject to hire-fire policies and not like the tenured positions in the government institutions.

I have not touched on the possibilities of entrepreneurial careers in India or in the US, partly because it is not a well-established career path either in India or in the US, as it depends upon several non-academic parameters as well. In the area of information technology, there have been a large number of starters and perhaps an equally large number of those who gave up. An estimate of less than ten percent of successes is a gut feeling in this area.

Some “Soft” Issues

Having broadly described the education and the job market in India and the US let me touch on some softer issues of decision making – issues that perhaps come up when one is in the late thirties and forties. “Should I go back to India or stay in the US?” is a million dollar question that can only be answered by the individual. No advice, career guidance, financial opportunities etc. can decide your final response to this perennial age-old question. People have been happy after returning home and there are those who have constantly complained about their country after return. As their frustration in India grows, sometime they go back to US.....and continue to complain about their country – preaching, advising and finding faults with the government, the politicians and in general about life in India. This could provide them with a justification for leaving their country, but I know there is something deep below that always makes them wanting to come back. I have not yet been able to fully analyse this unfulfilled desire for coming back. Only they would know! On the other hand I have known of number of professionals,

including some in my own family, who have come back after a long stay in the US and on return got themselves involved deeply in the Indian life and society. Sometime they have lived an elitist life enjoying the affluence in India. But I have also known a few American educated individuals that have returned to the life of the larger section of the Indian society, working in rural areas in the fields of education and social development. India does offer these opportunities. But then these people have also given up several comforts of an American life and struggled in India with joy and certain kind of satisfaction in their chosen area of work. Perhaps one day someone should write the saga on the “Return of the Prodigals” – their frustrations, their joys and their satisfaction with life in India.

Conclusion

I know I have rambled and perhaps confused you with this complex question of mobility of scholars between India and the US. I have tried to give you a realistic scenario in the country as students continue to go to the US in large numbers for higher education – a scenario that has remained the same for the last four decades or more. As India moves into the globalized world, the mobility has taken different routes and avenues. Opportunities are increasing for a meaningful return to India. Perhaps India has not changed as fast as China (as the two countries are always compared from the US perspective) but both these countries have been influenced by this mobility between their countries and the US. The American economy has definitely benefited from this mobility. India and China have also both gained in the process – each with its own brand of politics. Society has seen some superficial changes in terms of “McDonaldization” and commercialization. But in this process of change, the challenges and opportunities have also increased and it is up to individual professionals to make best of these opportunities. My thoughts expressed in this article cannot be generalized and be acceptable to all who are caught up in this Indo-US mobility stream. Let us continue to share these in the future so that our young students and professionals could be helped in making their own decisions on their own personal mobility.

I am sure some of you vigorously disagree with me about some of my observations and suggestions. If so let us exchange our views and let me know how the young are viewing their country. And tell me how the old should change.

About the Author



Dr. P.J.Lavakare obtained his Ph.D. degree from the University of Rochester, N.Y. (USA), in 1963 during a Fulbright fellowship to USA. After two decades of Research at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Bombay, he secured a Diploma in Systems Management from the Bombay University and joined the Ministry of Science and Technology, as an Advisor to Government of India and served, during 1986-90, as the Secretary of the Science Advisory Council to the Prime Minister. He was also Adviser to the Planning Commission. On his retirement from Government service, he served as the Executive Director of the U.S. Educational Foundation in India until 1999. He is presently the India Country Partner of the Institute of International Education, N.Y.(USA) and a Member of the Planning and Development Board of the Symbiosis Society and also the Member of the Board of Management of the Symbiosis International Education Center(Deemed University) . He is a member of the UGC standing committee on Promotion of Indian Higher Education Abroad (PIHEAD). He has published over 100 papers, edited four books and authored two popular science books. He is a member of the Education Committee set up by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry.(FICCI). He presently specializes in International Education.