Opinion *by S Irudaya Rajan, Arindam Banerjee*

Four things India needs to do to ensure safe migration

Migration is not just a labour mobility issue—it is a national economic and human rights imperative. India must focus on legislative reforms, institutional strengthening, migrant empowerment through awareness and data.

The recent Parliamentary report has identified key migration hotspots, based on emigration clearance data. (Express Archive Photo)

S IRUDAYA RAJAN

ARINDAM BANERJEE

Feb 25, 2025 18:11 IST ⌄

First published on: Feb 25, 2025 at 18:11 IST

Share | Comments | Print

Earlier this month, around the time when the first batch of 104 Indian immigrants deported from the US landed in Amritsar, this newspaper reported on a Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs report highlighting the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) plan to introduce the Overseas Mobility (Facilitation and Welfare) Bill, 2024. This proposed piece of legislation aims to overhaul the outdated Emigration Act of 1983 and establish a comprehensive policy framework to enable safe, regular and responsible migration for overseas employment.

Global migration dynamics have evolved and with India's unique opportunity to leverage its high demographic dividend and positioning as a global skill capital, it is imperative that just beyond a new legislation, concerted efforts are undertaken by the Union Government, particularly the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Ministry of Labour and Employment and Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) in collaboration with state governments, to institutionalise a structured and transparent migration governance system.

Protecting emigrants

India is home to the world's largest diaspora, with 18 million migrants abroad. In 2024, according to the reports of the World Bank, India received $129.1 billion in remittances, the highest ever for a country in any year. However, international migration pathways remain fraught with challenges, including human trafficking,

exploitation by recruitment agents, and information asymmetry regarding migrants' rights and entitlements.

The recent Parliamentary report has identified key migration hotspots, based on emigration clearance data — Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Kerala, [Tamil Nadu](), Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana. However, migration governance remains fragmented. The Committee has recommended the expansion of the Protector of Emigrants (PoE) offices beyond the current 14 locations, especially to high out-migration states like Punjab and Uttar Pradesh to ensure better outreach and support for emigrants. Without such institutions at the state-level and adequate collaborations involving concerned state departments, district administration, civil society organisations and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI), prospective migrants will remain vulnerable to exploitative middlemen, misinformation, and illegal channels of migration.

Irregular migration, particularly to Southeast Asian and African countries, is a growing concern. Reports have shown how human traffickers have used digital and video platforms to lure Indian youth to Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia with false job promises, often trapping them as bonded labour. The deportation of illegal Indian migrants from the US further highlights the vulnerabilities faced by undocumented workers, the unregulated growth of unregistered recruitment agencies and middlemen, and the pressing need for hyper-local awareness campaigns by state governments on legal migration pathways.

An aware immigrant

Unauthorised and unregulated recruitment agencies remain a major challenge. A 2023 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report found that nearly 60 per cent of low-skilled Indian workers migrating to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries paid exorbitant recruitment fees, leading to debt bondage. While the Government of India introduced the eMigrate system to streamline ethical overseas recruitment, its effectiveness depends on accessibility and awareness.

Union and state governments must invest in localised awareness campaigns through civil society organisations and local media. Existing welfare programmes like the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) and Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBBY) should be strengthened, while Pre-departure Orientation Training (PDOT) should be institutionalised at the district level. States with high international migration must develop legal assistance cells to educate prospective migrants on their rights and grievance redressal mechanisms.

Lessons can be drawn from Kerala and Telangana, which have pioneered successful multi-institutional partnerships on international migration. Kerala recently announced a state legal framework for emigrant safety, while Odisha has

announced a survey to map its blue-collar workers abroad to align skilling programs with employer demands. High out-migration states have the potential to collaborate with UN agencies like the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and ILO, alongside research institutions and experts to develop informed migration policies and initiatives, focused on migrant workers' welfare and ethical recruitment.

Leveraging bilateral agreements

Since 2015, the Government of India has signed 17 Labour Mobility Agreements (LMAs), Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreements (MMPAs) and Declaration of Intent (DOIs) aiming to facilitate skilled labour mobility. These agreements also include provisions to ensure portability of social security and welfare benefits which migrants are entitled to at the countries of destination.

For instance, India's agreement with Germany allows for streamlined work and visa permits for Indian IT and healthcare professionals, in sync with the growing labour market demands in Germany for such occupations. However, despite these signed established agreements, their benefits remain largely untapped by state governments. This could be expedited through enhanced consultative mechanisms, business visits and piloting of ethical and fair recruitment processes between institutions/businesses between both countries. If properly utilised, such frameworks could be expanded to other high-demand sectors, ensuring Indian workers receive fair wages, social security benefits, and protection from exploitation.

In 2024, Maharashtra signed a MoU with Burden-Wurrtenberg State in Germany on

cooperation in skilled migration and skilling. While commendable, evaluations and assessments of the impact of such partnerships should be shared to enable other state governments to adopt similar evidence-based strategies to ensure skilled mobility and safe migration pathways.

More robust data governance

Effective policymaking requires robust migration data governance. While MEA's PoE offices track Emigration Clearance Required (ECR) data, and migration estimates exist from Census 2011 and the National Sample Survey 2020-21, a centralised, real-time migration database remains absent.

Under the proposed new legislation, the Union Government must make provision for establishing a national migration database or social registry, to track outgoing and returnee migrants, their skills, employment sectors, and remittance patterns. Integrating passport, visa, and emigration data portals would aid policy formulation and social welfare provisioning.

Migration is not just a labour mobility issue—it is a national economic and human rights imperative. India must focus on legislative reforms, institutional strengthening, migrant empowerment through awareness and data, curbing exploitative practices, leveraging bilateral agreements, and fostering evidence-based initiatives. A structured migration governance system will not only safeguard Indian migrant workers but also harness migration as a catalyst for

national growth and global integration.

Rajan is Chair, International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD), Kerala and Banerjee is Co-founder and Partner at Policy and Development Advisory Group (PDAG), New Delhi.

NewsGuard

Illegal Immigrants

Share   Comments   Print