

## FROM THE RINGSIDE

The dynamics of managing migration

**Posted online: Sunday, December 24,  
2006 at 0000 hrs**  Print  Email



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A recent seminar on globalisation organised by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) once again reopened the controversies surrounding this subject. Needless to say that while globalisation means different things to different people, a much closer economic interdependence of countries is a historical reality. Optimising its multiple opportunities even while mitigating the risks is in everybody's interest. There is no fixed policy paradigm that addresses the concerns fully.

The Prime Minister, however, while dealing with the various aspects of globalisation referred to Fukuyama's evocative concept of a borderless world, even while the focus of globalisation has so far been on the movement of goods, capital and, largely, financial and logistical services. There is no framework for dealing with movement of people. He lamented that "little attention has been paid to the economics and politics of managing migration in the uncertain world that we live in."

The Prime Minister has, correctly, spotted a grave weakness in the area of international policy. Inability to evolve a coherent framework for managing migration has received international attention but eluded consensus.

I served as a Member of the Global Commission on International Migration, whose report inter alia formed the basis of the recently concluded United Nations high-level dialogue on international migration. Regrettably, while all the right things were said, the conclusion of that dialogue is colourless and fails to mainstream the key policy issues. This is another area where Jagdish Bhagwati has done some pioneering work.

In a holistic sense there are at least five core issues. First, the need for a national cohesive policy. A country like India, which is a recipient of the largest number of irregular migrants (legality of migration is always a debatable issue), is also the origin country for vast number of men and women of varied skills seeking a better quality of life elsewhere.

This duality of challenge is not easy to harmonise. Migration issues in India are still scattered across a number of ministries. The Home Ministry and the intelligence organisations are primarily concerned with enforcement and management of the border. The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs now also has the office of the Protectors of the Immigrants. The Ministry of External Affairs is concerned with compliance to international conventions and treaties.

But who is concerned with skill inculcation, training and harmonising demand and supply of talent, which enables global needs to be met without the adverse consequences of brain-drain?

Those seeking immigration represent a broad spectrum — from unskilled labour to sophisticated software engineers, paramedics or even merchant bankers. Illustratively, looking at the huge shortage of paramedics in United States is it adequate to leave to market forces to create adequate nursing training institutes, which can combine a mutuality of benefits of meeting our needs and mitigating shortages experienced by others?

The fact remains that India does not have a migration policy. We need one. We also need a nodal entity (say a Ministry of Migration and Overseas Indians), which can co-ordinate a more cohesive approach.

Second, international migration is riddled with prejudices. The Europeans, burdened with high rates of unemployment, dread the prospects of a huge immigrant influx, which exacerbates existing social tensions and religious divides. Everyone knows that the process of European integration has been stalled due to fears on migration.

Perhaps not all countries in Europe have managed their policies as sensibly as the United Kingdom. The United States, traditionally being a more open society, and notwithstanding the Mexican migrant pressure, has reinvigorated its social and economic ethos by constantly inducting talent from the rest of the world. Perhaps, as European economy gathers momentum and employment rates, particularly in France, significantly decline, a more rational view on migration might emerge.

Third, migration is a classic case of promoting sensible public-private partnership. Corporates do plan for their manpower and skill requirements, but fragmented action misses the big picture. There is no integrated plan, based on inter-corporate needs on projected skill requirements.

Only this can enable investment in human resource development to be made in a manner which can optimise the benefits of immigration. Mainstreaming emerging corporate needs into the national planning process is central to managing immigration in a non-contentious way. A global action plan on skill requirement and skill inculcation in which corporates are important player is an inescapable need of our time.

Finally, fragmentation of responsibilities on treaties and conventions, with many governments and international bodies, creates serious co-ordination problems.

The high-level human dialogue held in September was designed to address these concerns. But even while recognising the problem, it has finally decided to create a 'Global Forum' as a voluntary body, whose first meeting is to be hosted by Belgium in 2007.

I guess they will only repeat what has been repeated many times. Even while political will may be shy in accepting a "borderless world", the logic of economic international dependence compels us to view migration far more innovatively than in the past.

Given the Prime Ministers concern, India can play a leadership role. The present international dialogue needs to be invigorated. Managing the dynamics of migration remains both complex and contentious. However, not doing so will prove very costly.

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