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"Take Me With You to the U.S.A."

By George Immerwahr

My 10 or more years in what were then called "Third World" countries — in Africa, Asia, Latin America — were enriched by many contacts with young people. These were mostly men and women in their 20s. Some were students at the graduate-school level, to whom I either taught demography or helped write research papers, as what they often needed was one-to-one help in writing English. Others were lower-level administrative employees with whom I worked when I wanted to get things done, since I soon learned that it was far more time-consuming to have to deal with senior management.

My contacts with my young friends were not limited to school or office. I ate with them, played tennis with them, visited their homes, and often, when my wife Jean was present, invited them to our place. They became very informal with me, letting their hair down at times, telling me their problems in school and on the job and even in their home lives, and explaining what was wrong with their country and with its government. And at some time or other, there would come the question:

"Won't you take me with you to the USA?"

It wasn't usually quite that plain, though sometimes it was. The question was more often: could I find them jobs in America or scholarships in American universities?

When the world's annual population growth rate jumped from 1 percent to almost 2 percent (about 1950) the world market for demographers to study that growth rate jumped at an even greater speed. The International Institute for Population Studies (IIPS) in Bombay, India, became known as a staging ground for international demography students, and some of successful students there would go on to universities elsewhere — mostly in the U.S. — to get PhD degrees. After this, long-term employment in the U.S. or UN agencies concerned with the world population problem, or on the faculties of American universities, was virtually assured. Even today, Indians who received their first lessons in demography at the IIPS still occupy posts in the U.S. or in UN agencies.

By the time I arrived at the IIPS in 1968, the demand for Indian demographers had slowed down. Among other things, the English-language skills of Indian college graduates were poorer, reflecting the continuing downplay of English-medium education which had begun with the country's independence.

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Yet it was clear that what attracted young people to IIPS was the prospect of finding U.S. or UN jobs. Since getting such a job was not automatic, every Indian student I taught at IIPS begged for my help in finding an American job or scholarship. Some were still asking for help long after I left IIPS. Some time later I was at an African population study center in Ghana, and the calls for help from the students there continued for several years. One of my former African students is now in a PhD program at Cornell.

Engineers, Medical Doctors: Potential for Migration Dictates Field of Study

Demography was only one of several fields of study whose attraction lay in its prospects for foreign jobs. In India, a great number of young people were attracted to studies in engineering. Even though only a small proportion of graduates could expect to find good engineering jobs in India at that time, the prospects for U.S. jobs were believed to be very good. Medicine was and still is the preferred field of study at the University of Sri Lanka, because for years medical graduates found jobs in Britain and Australia, and sometimes in the U.S. Until recently, Sri Lankan graduates were generally allowed to practice in Britain, even without taking the British examination, though graduates are now required to serve five years in Sri Lanka before leaving.

The U.S. government often funded education in the U.S. for persons employed by Third World governments in areas relevant to our foreign assistance efforts. A number of the young people I knew were brought to the U.S. for periods of months or years, on the condition that employment in their home country on their return was guaranteed. But our government didn't compel their return. Many of those who came here for study tried to remain, and some were successful in getting jobs here, cashing in on the training which was provided at our government's expense.

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Other young people are awarded university scholarships here in a variety of fields which have no relation to our government or theirs. Getting such a scholarship is the way so many young foreigners manage to come to the U.S. What is important is not the scholarship or the education that comes with it. The main thing is getting into our country — or rather, getting out of their own countries, where employment opportunities depend so much on political connections. Those who get here and who do well in their studies and are able to sell their services to a U.S. organization manage to stay legally. Others simply stay illegally even without having found a job. In fact, some who get student visas on the strength of a university admission and a scholarship promise arrive here and never even report to the university that admitted them.

Managing to Stay in the U.S.

I mentioned that our government has funded foreigners to come to the U.S. to study, but only if the person was assured of a job in his home country for which the U.S. study was relevant. The purpose of the funding has been not to help the individual, but to help the organization — and in fact the country — to which the individual would return. But we usually have not tried to compel the individual to return to that job. The Immigration and Naturalization Service, in theory, but often not in fact, could compel him to leave the U.S. on completion of his studies. But, as I mentioned, many of those who complete their studies do manage to stay, either legally or illegally. I suspect that those who do stay may even be the majority. After all, to stay here was the reason many of them initially came, and for others the prospects for a life here became far brighter the longer they stayed.

I might add that in other advanced countries there is a somewhat similar scenario. At some Australian universities, a foreign student will be granted a post-graduate scholarship only if he signs an agreement to leave Australia at the completion of his studies. He is told that the only reason for granting him a scholarship was to help his country rather than himself. I have known students from Asia and Africa who on completion of their studies angrily protested the requirement of departure. When reminded of his agreement, one student said, "Sure, I signed the agreement, but I would have signed anything in order

to leave Sri Lanka for Australia."

Look through the pages of the three-volume National Faculty Directory and note the great number of Asian names in American academia. Those with Chinese and Japanese family names are probably U.S.-born unless they also have Chinese or Japanese first names, but those with Indian or Vietnamese names are mostly immigrants. Professors with Indian names — like Supta, Desai, Rao, Chandra, Narayan — total in the hundreds, if not in the thousands. And, as you might expect, the majority of Asians are in mathematics or in the physical or health sciences, but there are no fields without at least a few Indian names. When you consider that it is barely twenty years since the first Vietnamese arrived in this country, isn't it remarkable that a number of them are now teaching English literature to American college students?

Those Who Do Return

My observation has been that those who return to their home countries following education or specialized training in the U.S. or other developed countries are disappointed that they chose to return. Shortly before I arrived at IIPS, two young Indians who had themselves studied at IIPS years before and then got PhDs in the U.S. had returned to take up IIPS faculty jobs. Each of them told me that there were posts in U.S. universities which had been offered them, but they turned them down in the feeling that they owed it to their own country and to IIPS to return there.

But their dissatisfaction developed very quickly. Some of it arose from friction with the IIPS director, who had returned from the U.S. over a decade earlier and was equally disappointed that he had returned to India. (He, too, asked for my help in finding a U.S. job. He eventually got a World Bank appointment but was posted in India, rather than abroad.) But my two younger friends were particularly irritated by the lack of academic freedom, as opposed to what they had known in the U.S. They were also disappointed by the government red tape they encountered. The director himself was at odds with the government cabinet minister to whom he reported, and that friction sent sparks flying everywhere.

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My two young friends were both able eventually to get UN posts in Africa, but they are back in India today. The IIPS director died suddenly after returning to IIPS on completion of his World Bank assignment. Interestingly, it was the cabinet minister who gained the permanent U.S. residence the other three men had hoped for — when he left Indian politics, he settled in California with his American wife.

This disappointment over having left the U.S. is quite widespread among those who returned to their home countries. One man whom I knew committed suicide after returning to an Indian agricultural research institute. He was believed to have become frustrated by inability to carry on the research which he had started in the U.S. and about which he was very enthused.

Nurses from India and Sri Lanka, with whom I was acquainted, were brought to the U.S or U.K. for advanced family planning training, but could not use their new skills when they returned home. One nurse from Sri Lanka inserted IUDs in American women while here but on returning home found that only doctors were permitted to do this procedure. Another nurse who received specialized training in England (and could have stayed there) returned with the feeling that she should use her new skills to benefit women in Sri Lanka. But, according to her brother, she was put back to "square one" and assigned such tasks as emptying bedpans.

What Is the Answer?

Should we compel skilled people to remain in their own less-developed countries and insist that they work for the betterment of their countries? We say that inducing skilled people to come here, or teaching people skills here and not requiring them to go home to use these skills, is a "brain drain." We may also say that such people should have the patriotism to help solve the problems of their own countries. Even the governments of those countries themselves accuse us of promoting a brain drain and robbing them of their best talent.

Outstanding scientific researchers have preferred to stay here because they find the adequate material, technical and monetary support that is lacking in their home countries. The Indian physicist Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar performed the research here that led to his Nobel prize, which he might not have received had he returned to India. The equally famous physicist Homi Bhabha, who might also have received a Nobel prize but for his untimely death, did return to India, but his return was fortuitous. He left Cambridge University for vacation in Bombay in 1939 and couldn't return to England because of the war. The Indian government, with the aid of both Indian and international donors, did eventually keep Bhabha in India by establishing an excellent research institute for his work and support. There is nothing approaching that institute elsewhere in India.

A much earlier Nobel scientist, Chandrasekhara V. Raman, did stay in India, and there were, of course, other great scientists who returned to their home countries or who had never left. Many of them were successful because they were politically favored or because they had enough perseverance to overcome the political obstacles and cultural rigidities which hindered so many others. But I must say that the

obstacles can be overwhelming. Putting myself in the shoes of the Indians, Sri Lankans, Guatemalans and Africans I have worked with — and who sought to leave their countries — I must admit that I, too, would have sought to come here and stay here.

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And I doubt that their countries would greatly miss them, whatever they might say to the contrary, because the main problem is not a shortage of skills but a great excess of people. There is such an ocean of unemployment, especially among those who finish their education, that every departure of a skilled Indian or African or Vietnamese to come here is viewed back home, not only as the source of remittances, but also as one less person blocking the employment or advancement of others.

Distant countries like India or China are more likely to lose their skilled people than their unskilled, because it is the former who are most able to afford the long journey. Mexico, on the other hand, probably manages to keep its skilled people while it eagerly sheds its unskilled.

The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) reports that, among recent legal immigrants, only 5.6 percent were selected on the basis of their skills. Most of the others are relatives of previous immigrants. Skilled immigrants certainly have smaller families than the unskilled; the latter are more likely to bear even more children here than they would have borne had they stayed home. But the presence here of the skilled is not an unmixed blessing, since their presence affects the U.S. job market. Recent American-born PhDs in the sciences are having to compete for jobs against skilled immigrants from countries such as India and from the former Soviet Union.

This is unfortunate for those Americans who do not compete successfully or who may have to accept lower compensation when they are hired, though it may also be that the competition stimulates better effort.

Our immigration problem is indeed horrendous and begs for drastic and immediate solution. At least part of the solution must lie in helping to bring about changes that will keep people in their own countries. Certainly one such change is the reduction of fertility down to the level of mortality. That change alone would go far in creating the conditions in which the skilled and talented would be content to remain at home instead of seeking greener pastures. ■