Chapter 6
Determinants of Migration–Related Decision Making among the Asian Indian Community in the United States

Babu P. George
SMC University, Switzerland & NITTE University, India

ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the complex dynamics underlying Indian immigrants’ decision to continue to stay in the United States or to counter migrate back to India. In a reversal of fortunes, the specific set of conditions that once triggered a massive inflow of economic migrants from India to the US has been causing a counter migration to India. Based on a review of literature and an exploratory study involving focus groups, the authors identify some of the major migration-/counter migration-related factors. Then, employing a survey, the relative importance of each of these factors is gauged for migrant individuals associated with different professions.

INTRODUCTION
India’s massive investment in higher education, particularly technology, during the past decades has resulted in large numbers of the highly trained personnel willing and seeking to work abroad. The US has emerged far and above its competitors as the number one choice for immigration, although there exists a great deal of competition amongst developed nations for India’s highly trained workforce. In addition to technical competence, cultural openness, willingness to learn, and mastery over the English language make the Indian labor pool a superior class compared with the other seekers of migrant labor to the US. Another reason for the Indian labor presence in the US is the existence of large numbers of Indian owned or managed MNCs in the US. Also, Indian students represent a significant chunk of overseas students being enrolled in the US higher education system every year; most of these students get an H1-B work permit or a green card after their graduation and continue to work in the US. Some commentators note that the Indian migration to the US

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7328-1.ch006
Determinants of Migration-Related Decision Making among the Asian Indian Community

will continue unabated even in the event of a US policy shift against migration (Reichl, 2005). This is because Indians in the US constitute a highly collective society just like they are at home and the social networks and ties will sustain migration even without policy support. Extant literature has listed out a number of generic causes for migration Extant literature has listed out a number of generic causes for migration (Castles & Miller, 1998; Skeldon, 1997).

The attractions in the destination countries include higher levels of income, low poverty level or at least social support for the poor, low level of crime, opportunities for self-expression, opportunities for courtship, avenues for career growth, tolerance for religious practices, higher standard of living, family ties and cultural proximity, colonial ties, escape from wars and other calamities, escape from environmental degradation, escape from political oppression, prospects for entrepreneurial activities, escape from overcrowding, among others. Some studies show that it is the educated middle class that is most likely to migrate (Kritz, et al. 1992). Once someone migrates successfully, the same leads to a chain reaction: the migrant’s colleagues, friends, relatives, and so on are more likely to migrate in that event, with the snowballing effect increasing exponentially with the passage of time. Thus, although mass migration is almost always through the same paths treaded by a few pioneers, over a period of time, it becomes a self-sustaining social mechanism (Castles, 2000). Most temporary workers in wealthy destination countries seek permanent residency, too, as the case with H1-B visa holders in the United States (Meissner et al., 2006). A study by OECD (2001) found that, of the 33.5 million foreign born residing in the US, approximately 38 percent have obtained US citizenship through naturalization.

The current phase of transnational migration is one in which immigrants forge and maintain concurrent multi-stranded relations between home and host societies (Glick Schiller et al., 1995). Literature has segregated the traditional ‘political’ migrants to the more recent ‘economic’ migrants (Pedraza-Bailey, 1995). While the United States has historically received millions of political migrants in the past, the nature of migration has fundamentally changed in the recent decades (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2005). While issues like persecution, war, famine, and calamities motivated political migrants, economic migrants are a totally different class: they leave their country of origin motivated by the economic advancement opportunities and the associated enhancements in the quality of life offered by the host countries. Generally, they do not have socio-political or cultural deprivations that drive them out of their home countries and even while at the host country they ardently practice the cultural practices of their home (Iredale, 2001). This factor plays a very important role in the counter-migration of Indian and Chinese economic migrants from the United States.

As a result of the recent economic surges in the emerging economies across the world, the very same conditions that triggered migration in the past have begun to appear in these countries. This is a significant motivator for many economic migrants who want to take the mantle of the new wave. The US experience is a big advantage for them in getting lucrative offers from the neo-multinationals in these countries who want the US corporate history from the mid 1950’s replicated in their corporations. Likewise, many senior executives have begun to go back home to launch start-ups, often with the wealth they have accumulated while being in US or with venture capital funds that are widely available for start-ups. If immigration has shaped the United States over the past century, counter migration has become a formidable force in shaping the destiny of countries like India in the twenty first century. During the 1970s and 1980s, there existed serious concern that India was losing its educated workforce to the West, particularly to the United States (Bhagwati, 1976).