



THEIR VIEW

# The non-returning Indian: Cause for celebration or deep concern?

Sanjaya Baru's new book cracks open a debate on whether the latest wave of out-migration is doing the country any good



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**B**efore and after 1991, the way we think about certain phenomena has dramatically changed. 'Household consumption' is a phenomenon that went from being whipping boy to valued driver of economic growth and foreign direct investment. Out-migration by Indians is another. It has gone from the despair of 'brain drain' to the delight of 'diaspora,' and those who migrated have gone from being seen as deserters of the motherland to global ambassadors of brand India.

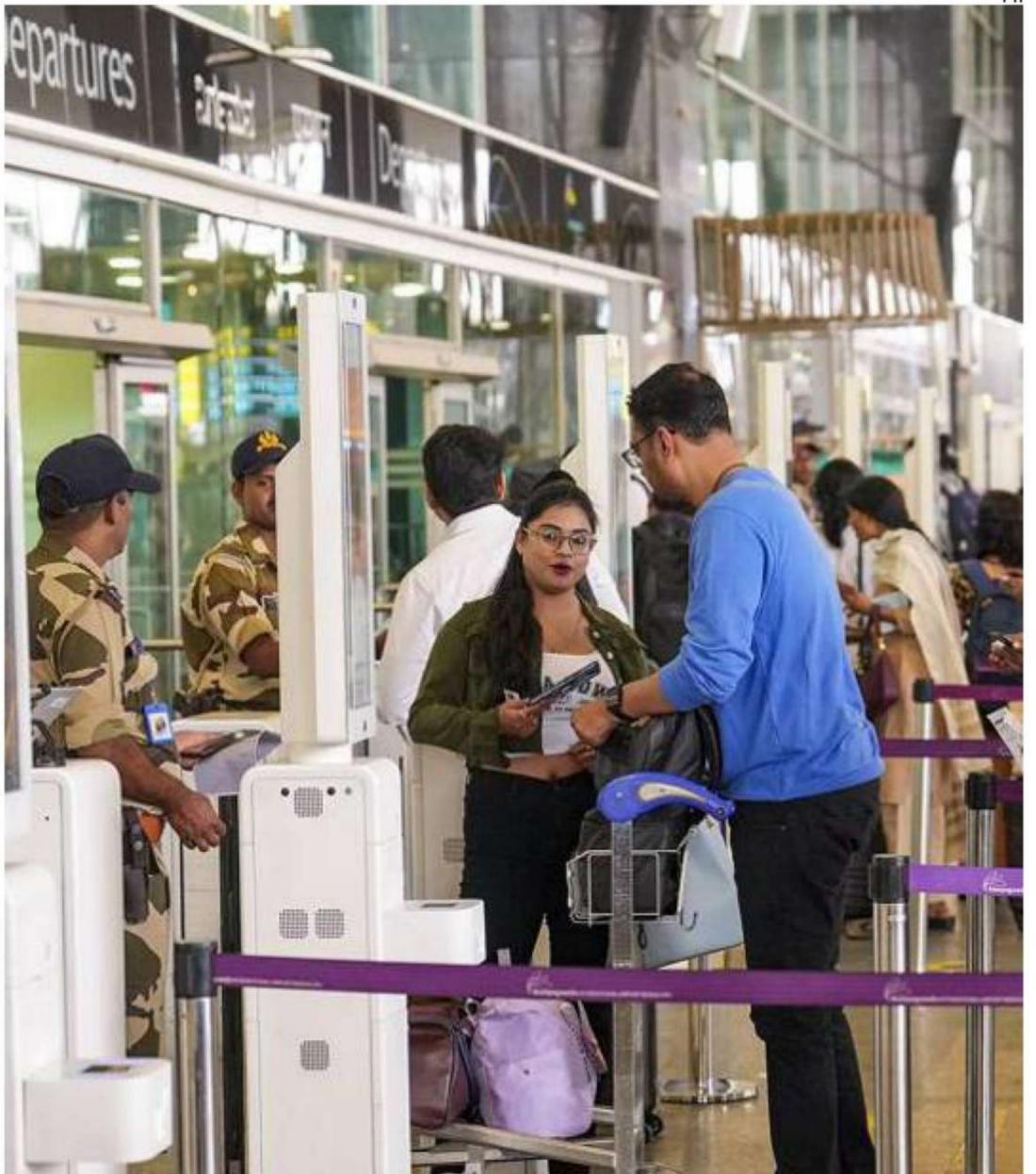
'Diaspora,' a word that is infused with positive meaning, represents our pride and joy at our visible presence in the world, especially the developed world. The fact that Indians get more H-1B visas than almost everyone else in the world is seen as a badge of honour, a testimonial to how sought-after our talent is. Post the infotech boom, when our educated, tech-savvy youngsters fanned out to live all over the world, the oft-repeated sentiment of Indians was one of relief that the image of India in the eyes of the world has zoomed upwards.

India's biggest export, it is often said, is middle management talent to large global corporations. Products of top Indian colleges, they proved their mettle, stayed on in the international circuit and have risen to top jobs around the world. One does not need to name the many poster boys and girls of this phenomenon. They are well known and well celebrated in India.

The arts and all branches of academia also have had their fair share of Indian exported glitterati and we have also embraced the likes of Rishi Sunak and Kamala Harris as our own—'of Indian origin' being the expanded definition of our diaspora.

Against this backdrop comes a new book by the astute thinker and writer Sanjaya Baru, arguing that our celebration needs a reality check and harder questions need to be asked. Provocatively titled *Secession of the Successful: The Flight out of New India*, it reframes the issues of migration, global citizenship and our image-enhancing, money-remitting diaspora.

Baru discusses the four phases of migration that India has had, the present phase being the one that he feels we should worry about the most. The first phase he describes as enforced migration of indentured labour from interior India to scattered remote locations around the world from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. Amitava Ghosh fans will know this story well. The second wave of out-migration, he says, mimicked the first in many ways, and was of semi-skilled workers to the Gulf and West Asia; both waves being people in search of better living conditions. Although, the popular refrain we have heard from Indian migrants to the Gulf is that they endured worse living conditions in order to make a lot of money so that they could return to a better life back home.



The third phase of the 1990s and early 2000s he describes as the large-scale migration of qualified professionals, doctors and engineers, inspiring new phrases like 'knowledge worker' and 'elite migration.' The fourth and most recent wave, which he dates to 2010 onwards, is the migration of the wealthy and high net worth individuals, the 'country's power elites.'

The debate that the book frames is as follows:

While the first and second waves of migration were benign or positive for the Indian economy, the third and fourth waves are a drain of brain and wealth; and should ring alarm bells. He analyses the implications for India's progress and asserts that the benefit of soft power gained is not a good enough compensation for what is lost.

Why our elites are leaving is an interesting question. Baru says it is taxes and governance. Could it be that they merely have multiple homes around the world, including in India, and shop for the best tax deals? Is this the new world in which home is where the heart is at the moment, as Mira Nair said when an interviewer asked her which of the many countries she lives in does she consider 'home.'

As we speak, in the UK too, there is a vigorous

discussion on what the *Times* calls the "wealth exodus." It says that the "exodus of wealth from Britain has accelerated since the turn of the year, fuelling fears that the abolition of the non-domiciled tax regime will wipe out billions of pounds from the economy." Perhaps it is the nature of the wealthy to choose wealth preservation over home nation

love. The UK is mulling over a 'concierge service' to attract companies and their talent to the UK. William Hague, a politician who is currently Chancellor of Oxford University, writes in response that for the wealthy to give up Dubai or Monaco and stay to pay inheritance tax on their worldwide assets would need "the most extraordinary concierge service the world has ever seen."

Perhaps India should institute a concierge service for startups so that our expanding number of unicorns can be registered here and attract foreign capital,

instead of being registered abroad and creating wealth outside the country by serving the Indian market.

Whatever the argument, Baru's book points to the need for a serious debate on what the consequences of the 'secession of the successful' will be and how we need to mitigate it.

QUICK READ

Why are our elites leaving? Sanjaya Baru ascribes it to taxes and governance. Or is it that they have multiple homes around the world, including in India, and shop for the best tax regime?

Baru's book suggests that we need a national debate on how the 'secession of the successful' will impact India and what could be done about a recent wave of departures from our shores.