



# Indians in Southeast Asia: Sojourners, Settlers, Diaspora

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## Abstract

The Indian presence in Southeast Asia is set deep down in history. There are innumerable accounts of traders, preachers and adventurers who ventured into the high seas and influenced the eastern part of the world, to the extent of ‘Indianizing’ it socially, culturally, religiously and in many other ways. However, it was during the colonial period that government sponsored migrations in the form of labourers, officials and service providers started, which later resulted into permanent settlements. The diasporic consciousness emerged as the settlers became integral part of economic and political lives of the receiving societies, while continuing to be connected with the motherland. This article aims to trace the presence of Indians in Southeast Asia from the early to the present times. The article also makes an attempt to critically analyze the impact of India’s diaspora and the Look East policies on ethnic Indians in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

India, Indian Diaspora, Southeast Asia, Subhas Chandra Bose, Look East Policy

Indian links with Southeast Asia can be traced back to the prehistoric times. However, the early centuries of Common Era witnessed definite forms of interaction and an overwhelming Indian civilizational influence on the region. The early references about Southeast Asia in terms of ‘trans-Gangetic India’ (Ptolemy 1–2 century AD), ‘Indian Countries beyond the Ganges’ (Raffel, as quoted in Kulke, 1990, p. 28), ‘Farther India’ (Coedes, 1968, p. xv), are symptomatic that for centuries together the large parts of the present Southeast Asia remained under intensive Indian influence in terms of political, social and cultural value systems, trade and agriculture, rise and growth of urban centres and imperial kingdoms. Such a tremendous influence could not have been possible without the migration and

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settlement of people from the Indian subcontinent. This is also corroborated by hectic trading activities across the two regions with all the major port cities strewn with large Indian settlements. According to George Coedes (1968, p. 11), the region did witness waves of migration from India, but instead of annihilating or evicting the local populations, the newcomers ‘spread and overlapped’ through intermarriages and adaptations. However, Hugh Tinker (1977, pp. 1–2) emphasizes that ‘none of these contacts led to a distinctive Indian population overseas’. Milton Osborne (1979, p. 90), another noted historian on Southeast Asia, observes that ‘a limited but highly important number of Indians (priests, traders and ones with specialised knowledge) settled in the area and played important role in the emerging kingdoms’. Whatever may be the case, the absence of sizable distinctive Indian population of the early period in the region pinpoint that either these movements were rotational or that racial, linguistic and cultural intermixing or blending with the locals left the Indian populations indistinguishable and gave rise to a remarkable cultural synthesis whose dominant note was certainly Indian. In the contemporary international relations terminology it can be said that India had a huge ‘soft power’ presence in the pre-modern Southeast Asia.

## The Modern Period: Sojourners to Diasporas

As it appears, the contacts between India and Southeast Asia since the early times were dominantly characterized by circular migrations, which prevailed almost till the mid-twentieth century. The *Encyclopaedia of Indian Diaspora* records that the change in the world economy after the sixteenth century further propelled this process. The large Indian trading settlements strewed along the arc of coasts around the Bay of Bengal witnessed a much more intensive and widespread circulation of people, goods, ideas, cultures and texts from coast to coast, rendering the boundaries fluid. As Sunil S. Amrit (2009, p. 556) points out, ‘the sheer scale of movement evoked a sense of continuity between the two coasts of the Bay of Bengal turning it into a cross road rather than a barrier’. The traffic of over-crowded vessels, loaded with traders, boatmen, labourers, syces, watermen, hawkers and domestic servants, voyaging across the Bay of Bengal, were so brisk that it invoked official concerns and regulatory measures by the British Government (British Library IOR, 1974). Despite the fact that circular movement was the dominant trend, permanent settlements too were not unknown as Tamil and Oriya traders merged with local communities while ‘continuing to maintain oceanic connections’ (Amrit, 2009, p. 555; Yamin, 2004, p. 92).

With the beginning of the colonial age in the nineteenth century, a completely new dimension was added to the existing migration patterns from India. It was the government sponsored contractual labour migrations that penetrated deep beyond the port cities and, later, resulted into permanent settlements. During the colonial era, the process of blending/intermixing also slowed down and clear-cut segregations emerged between various groups, mainly because of the government policies of maintaining economic and political divisions (Hirschman & Bonaparte, 2012, p. 4). But the most significant change came after the immigration controls,

induced by the global economic depression during the 1930s, which curtailed the freedom of movement across the seas to a large extent. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the increasing assertion on national sovereignty and citizenship in both the regions further closed down the space for free movement of people, changing the very nature of the connectivity and association between India and Southeast Asia.

These developments led to three interrelated consequences as has been pointed out by various scholars (Amrit, 2009, p. 565; IOR). First, it tore away the interconnected economy of the two regions; second, it saw large number of Indians returning to India; and third, it led to large-scale permanent settlement of Indians in Southeast Asia. Scholars (Amrit, 2009; Lal, 2007) also point out that during the 1930s, for the first time, significant number of women began to migrate to Southeast Asia, which facilitated the process of permanent settlements. Demographic records of Southeast Asian countries show significant increase in the number of women and youngsters among the Indian populations during these years. According to S.D. Muni (2013, p. 1), ‘The British Empire in India eroded most of the hitherto-prevailing commercial links between the two Asian regions. Instead, strong components of Indian diasporas and security initiatives, for the protection of imperial stakes, were added, extending as far as Hong Kong.’

The emergence of permanently settled Indian populations in Southeast Asia gave rise to specific issues of citizenship, space, cultural purity, assertion for rights etc., vis-à-vis the natives and other settlers (Hefner, 2001). The subsequent activism induced a sense of communal belongingness and gave what Demmers calls the ‘diasporic turn’ (2007, p. 8) to the Indians. By the early twentieth century, associations of traders, professionals and civil servants started to come up. The first labour strikes began around 1924 in Malaya. Nevertheless, even as the Indian communities became settled citizens in Southeast Asia, they continued to be largely oriented towards their homelands—village/region/community—with strong economic, cultural and emotional links. According to Amrit (2009, p. 549), ‘the high mobility across the Bay of Bengal had forestalled the sense of separation between home and abroad [...] but a sharper sense of diasporic consciousness emerged as a consequence of immobilisation’. The political developments and freedom struggle in India helped re-inventing motherland connections and redefining community-based identities into an overarching ‘Indianness’.

## **The Role of INA for Indian Communities in Southeast Asia**

The discourse on Indians in Southeast Asia would be incomplete without reference to the Indian National Army (INA) and the overtures of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. The advent of Subhash Chandra Bose in 1943 and the formation of INA completely galvanized all the sections of Indians, including women, youth and the marginalized, drastically boosting the Indian consciousness and identity.

Bose crisscrossed the region and recruited Indians of all castes, religions, regions and classes. There was a tremendous upsurge in the nationalist feelings and unity among Indians and men and money poured in for INA at an unparalleled scale (Government of India [GOI], 2002, p. 252). Bose not only managed to give a united face to the diverse and segregated Indian communities but his presence brought an unprecedented goodwill between the Indians and the local communities/regional governments. When Bose arrived in the region, Indian communities were caught up in problematic issues like citizenship, vernacular education and remittances with the locals and the governments (Sengupta, 2012). In spite of this, Bose was not only able to build extremely successful relations with the local governments (who stood by him till the end), and create goodwill for the Indians among the locals but also managed to help Indian communities significantly in terms of their social status and basic rights (Pande, 2015).

## **Indians in Southeast Asia: An Overview**

The term ‘Indian’ in present-day Southeast Asia has a generic application that includes present migrants from India, descendants of earlier migrants and also migrants from other South Asian countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. However, in this article the term ‘Indian’ has been used for the ‘People of Indian origin’ (PIO) and the non-resident Indians (NRI), who are part of the Indian diaspora. As far as the population of Indians in the various Southeast Asian countries is concerned, the exact numbers are highly contested. Except for Myanmar, Malaysia and Singapore, where Indians constitute 5.0 per cent, 8.0 per cent and 7.0 per cent, respectively, they are too minuscule numerically in the rest of the countries to figure separately in the demographic data. One has to depend on the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) figures, which are based largely on rough estimates and assumptions. Moreover, circulatory migration still appears to be very high, which largely goes unrecorded. Nevertheless, Table 1 presents a sketch of Indian population in different countries of the region and tries to make a comparison between the data of 2001 given by High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora, GOI and the MOIA.

A close look at the data reveals that eight out of the 10 countries have witnessed a substantial increase in the number of Indians. In terms of percentage, the growth during 2001–2013 ranged from 4 per cent to as high as 400 per cent in these eight countries. However, in absolute number, there has been a decline of about 1.7 million Indians in the ASEAN region. While Myanmar witnessed a major decline, Indonesia also saw some reduction. The broad reasons for this could be both the internal politics in these countries as well as the quality of data given by MOIA. In case of Myanmar, the absence of data for stateless Indians could also have made some difference. Nevertheless, the overall trend is positive across the region. Large numbers of the Indians who have migrated in the recent years remain non-citizens and are recorded under the category of non-resident populations in some countries. The demographic profile of Singapore reflects that while the share of Indians in the resident population of Singapore has increased

**Table I.** Indian Populations in Southeast Asia

Country	NRIs		PIOs		Stateless		Total	Percentage change
	2001	2013	2001	2013	2001	2013		
Brunei	7,000	10,000	500	68	100	7,600	10,068	32.47
Cambodia	150	1,500	150	0	—	300	1,500	400.00
Indonesia	500	1,050	50,000	35,000	—	50,500	36,050	-28.61
Laos	107	80	18	50	—	125	130	4.00
Malaysia	15,000	150,000	1,600,000	1,900,000	50,000	1,615,000	2,050,000	26.93
Myanmar	2,000	3,160	2,500,000	353,400	400,000	2,902,000	356,560	-87.71
Philippines	2,000	47,000	24,000	3,000	12,000	38,000	50,000	31.58
Singapore	90,000	350,000	217,000	320,000	—	307,000	670,000	118.24
Thailand	15,000	90,000	70,000	60,000	—	85,000	150,000	76.47
Vietnam	320	750	—	30	10	330	780	136.36
Total						5,005,555	3,325,088	

**Source:** MOIA, High Level Committee Report.

from 7.9 per cent in the year 2000 to 9.2 per cent in 2012, the non-resident population (of which Indians are the largest group) has increased several folds in the same time period (Zafar, 2005).

A continuous flow of Indians to Southeast Asia has resulted into a mosaic of Indian communities with huge variations. However, some common strands can be underlined about them which are worth discussing.

### **A Heterogeneous Community**

The Indians settled in different countries around the world are regarded as one of the most diverse communities, almost like a microcosm of the diverse Indian social set-up (Pande, 2013). In case of Southeast Asia, the geographical proximity resulted in the migration of even a larger variety of people and communities (in terms of languages, culture, region, caste, religion and occupation) from the Indian sub-continent. The heterogeneity also emerges out of the phases and patterns of migration and host country variations. The *Encyclopaedia of Indian Diaspora* gives a detailed picture of various categories of Indians and Indian communities in Southeast Asia. The South Indians by far outnumber the North Indians, forming 81 per cent of Indian population in Malaysia and 64 per cent in Singapore. The pre-colonial migrant groups largely constituted of Gujarati, Marwari, Tamil and Sindhi traders and businesses, and were largely rotational. With the beginning of colonialism and plantation economy, government sponsored migrations under the systems like ‘Kangani’ and ‘Maistry’ started along with subordinate officers and clerks, mostly constituting Parsis and Bengalis who arrived to help the colonial administration. There were also semi-skilled and skilled service providers like watchman, policemen and drivers who were mostly Pathans and Sikhs. Along with these, ‘free migration’ of traders, artisans, Baniyas, Marwaris and Chettiar continued as before. Another form of colonial migration, specific to Singapore, is convict labour which played a major role in building the city state as it exists today (Lal, 2007). Even within specific communities, such as Sikhs, variations existed on the basis of region, caste, sub-sect affiliations and country-specific differences (Jain, 2011).

There are also people of mixed lineage, especially Muslims, like Indo-Vietnamese, Indo-Khmer or Javi-Pekan (numbering around 200,000–1,000,000), who are the offspring of Muslims merchants from India and local women in Malaysia. They are hardly distinguishable in the local societies and mostly do not see themselves as Indians any more (GOI, 2002, p. 255). In the post-independence era, migrations from India to Southeast Asia continued but in lesser numbers. Some of the significant sections of migrants were blue collar workers from the Gorakhpur region, construction workers, either from Jaunpur and Azamgarh from Uttar Pradesh or Malayalis and Tamils from South India. There were also skilled migrations which included employees of various business ventures (GOI, 2002, p. 252). Since the late twentieth century, a new wave of highly skilled professionals, entrepreneurs, managers and investors significantly altered the composition of the Indian population in the region and led to a major upsurge in the Indian consciousness, which was almost lost in several of Indian communities.

This was further given a fillip by the growing India–Southeast Asia relations. The recent migrants are closely connected to India, making frequent visits and often sending their children to study in India.

A. Mani, a fifth-generation Singaporean, suggests that Indians in the region can be broadly divided into three categories: the mixed races, which are almost completely integrated; the earlier settlers, who still maintain the ‘Indianess’ through their cultural roots; and the new arrivals.<sup>2</sup> However, even within these three categories there exists a vast diversity among Indians in terms of economic status and political participation. Indians range from unskilled workers belonging to the lowest rung of the society and small service providers to the founders of some of the biggest companies of the region. While a large section of Indians have made significant progress and has managed to carve out a niche for themselves, a substantial number of them, particularly in Malaysia and Myanmar, lag behind economically and educationally. In terms of political participation, while in Singapore Indians have generally been well represented, if not over-represented, in Malaysia and Myanmar, they are politically active, but in rest of the countries they keep a low profile.

### *The Segregations*

The existence of various kinds of diversities among the Indian communities in Southeast Asia often results in divisions, and contesting identities and interests. A range of scholars have pointed out the ‘fragile sense of national identity’ among Indian communities around the world as ‘the idea of homeland creates a myth of a region, locality or community rather than India as a whole’ (Oonk, 2013, p. 4). The Indian communities in Southeast Asia too reflect a similar pattern, largely keeping distance from each other with little interaction. Marred by class, caste, linguistic, urban–rural and regional cleavages, they have failed to emerge as a united force in the Southeast Asian political landscape. Often these divisions have been exploited by the political class. Amit Mishra (2011, p. 89) points out in case of Malaysia, ‘The diversity of Indian Diaspora in Malaysia has always been played around by the state to serve its need and keep the subaltern section of the diaspora on the fringes.’

One of the most prominent divides that can be witnessed among the Indians is between the earlier settlers and the new arrivals. Although the arrival of the ‘new’ migrants revived and reasserted the Indian identity and ties with India, the two groups largely keep away from each other. Even among specific communities, like the Tamils, A. Mani points out that ‘the new and the old groups seldom come on a single platform’. According to Rajesh Rai, a third-generation Indian Singaporean who teaches at the National University of Singapore,

There was an excitement in the Indian community here about this new arrival of Indians. But when the new immigrants actually came, two things happened. Indians of the new diaspora were professionals and because of their arrival the image of the Indian community went up in a multi-racial Singapore. However, the old diaspora also felt that there was little oneness between the new and the old. (as quoted in Zafar, 2005)

Nevertheless, the Indian communities, new and old, going through various vicissitudes, continue to have the ‘Indian’ stamp and a civilizational consciousness that bind them and help maintain the links with the motherland. This is irrespective of New Delhi’s rather fractured policy approach towards its diaspora as well as the region as a whole. As a matter of fact, New Delhi failed to build upon the goodwill created by Subhash Chandra Bose in the region and the strong ‘Indian’ consciousness which he had nurtured among the Indian communities (Pande, 2015).

## **The Indian Approach towards the Indians in Southeast Asia**

India’s approach towards Indian communities in Southeast Asia appears to be closely linked to its larger policy framework towards the overseas Indian communities (the diaspora) as well as its policy priorities vis-à-vis Southeast Asia. On the whole, in the years after independence, India slowly lost touch both with the region as well as its people living in the region that could have helped India economically and forge its foreign relations. India maintained a ‘hands-off’ approach even in cases where Indians were denied their basic rights as in Myanmar and Malaysia. In the name of larger interest of India–Burma relations (after Burmese independence), Nehru preferred not to push for the compensation and citizenship issues for Indians, and also rejected the idea of dual citizenship for Malayan and Singapore Indians (Sudhamani, 1982). Often termed as a ‘missed opportunity’ (Lall, 2001), this policy approach more or less continued until 1990s when a seismic shift occurred as New Delhi’s adopted a ‘multi-pronged approach’ to mend the long-lost ties and engage with its diaspora (Pande, 2011, p. 131) and also embarked upon the ‘Look East policy’ (LEP). The Indian diaspora too had begun to realize the enormous economic potential of India and its emergence as an important global power, making for a mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship (Pande, 2011, p. 131).

Nevertheless, even after the policy shift, India still appears to have taken a very myopic and tapered approach towards diaspora engagement, concentrating on selected sections, in particular, on those that have registered spectacular success in the countries of their adoption. In fact, the sections of the diaspora which are facing adverse conditions and surviving on the fringes of the host societies are also the ones which remain at the peripheries of India’s diaspora policy. Since most of these communities have a problematic relationship with the host governments, India sees them more of an obstacle than an asset in its diplomatic relations. New Delhi is yet to show a genuine concern by addressing the aspirations of these sections of its diaspora whether in Myanmar, Malaysia or Fiji. As Vinay Lal (2013) says,

We need a civilisational view that makes us aware not merely of the accumulated narratives of our Silicon Valley miracles and the annual triumph of Indian American children at the National Spelling Bee, but also of the histories of those Indians who, braving conditions of extreme adversity, nurtured new forms of music, literature, religious worship, and even conviviality.

At the expense of appearing hypothetical, one can visualize a China-like situation for India in Southeast Asia, had it not been for the restrictions on the movement of people and the period of interlude in India's relations with the region and its overseas population in post-independence years.

## Diaspora as a Factor in the Look East Policy

The 1990s marked the watershed period, as India embarked on liberalizing its economy, started its eastward engagement under the LEP, and opened its door for the diaspora. These interrelated and seismic shifts in policy brought New Delhi closer to the region and also revived its long-lost ties with the Indian communities living in the region. The pertinent question here is whether India has been able to synchronize its two major policy interests, that is, the LEP and the engagement with the diaspora, successfully? Or, has India been able to develop camaraderie with its diaspora in furthering the LEP like that of the USA and the UK, where a successful convergence of foreign policy interests with the diaspora has produced fruitful dividend. To my mind, it appears doubtful and India falls much short of it.

Since the importance of the diaspora in furthering foreign policy goals has been reiterated in government statements time to time, the presence of diaspora in the region could have been in the minds of policymakers when the LEP was conceived. Moreover, the larger trajectories of the LEP have itself opened numerous avenues for engagement and interaction for the Indian communities of the region. India's growing presence helped Indian communities to revive and strengthen their social, religious and cultural bonds with the motherland. Relaxed visa regime for Indian professionals, under the newly signed trading arrangement, has opened further avenues for circulation of people, especially the skilled and highly skilled categories. The establishment of Indian heritage centres contains the potential to prove valuable in reviving the ties. According to one of the Indian scholars in Southeast Asia, Amarjit Kaur (2009, p. 87), 'The declining importance of Southeast Asia's Indian minorities since the mid-1950s appears to have been arrested by the current demand for the Indian professional migrant and contract workers.' K.S. Nathan, another Indian Scholar, states that 'Since India has developed a dynamic relation with the ASEAN and has become an important factor in the Balance of power in Southeast Asia; position of Indians in the region has been strengthened.'<sup>3</sup> The growing economic and strategic partnership and free trade in services will further propel the circulation of people between the two regions as it covers the movement of people under Mode 4.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, India's calibrated approach to make the diaspora partners in the LEP is rare to find in foreign policy discourse. The policymakers too appear to be uncomfortable in recognizing the role of diaspora in furthering India's engagement with Southeast Asia. The issue also remains rather underrated in the academic discourses on the LEP. Moreover, the privileged sections have been the focus of India's policy priorities and have taken the maximum advantage out of the new found openness and engagement with the homeland, in turn facilitating Indian interests in the region. But the earlier or colonial period settlers—large sections of whom are less

privileged—are yet to find their due in India's policy priorities. In post-1990s phase too, New Delhi appears to carry the Nehruvien overhang and continues to show ambivalence towards the plight of the ethnic Indians in Myanmar and Malaysia. This has alienated the Indians of the region to a large extent. A. Mani puts it candidly, 'India only cares for its rich Diaspora, so why we should care whether India has become powerful or has done nuclear tests [...] of course if China bullies India, we will feel bad'. Nevertheless, India is bound by jurisdiction and has its limitations in this regard. Such interventions can be seen as interference into the internal affairs because most of the earlier settlers are citizens of their adopted countries.

It is understandable that if the interests of the diasporic populations conflicts with India's strategic and economic interests, then the larger national interests will prevail. However, if the diasporic populations are considered as an integral part of the larger policy priority, then their interests and concerns will always find place in broad deliberations on bilateral relations. The focus should be on harmonizing the foreign policy priorities with the genuine concerns and expectations of the diaspora. Bose's overtures in Southeast Asia are an apt example of the fine balance which is needed to effectively synchronize foreign policy goals with interest of diaspora populations. Another extremely important factor for an effective diaspora engagement brought about by Netaji and also pointed out by the modern scholars of diaspora studies was 'community cohesiveness and motivation' (Shain, 2007). It was the united strength and the sense of belongingness with India, as the free India was the answer to their perils, which galvanized the Indian communities together during the INA days. Of course, the context is different today but, the Indian identity and the sense of belongingness among the various Indian communities would be crucial for future engagements, which India needs to highlight and inculcate through networks and programmes.

India needs to develop an inclusive policy to address the interests of various diaspora groups to fully utilize their potential in furthering its interests in the region and, at the same time, also fulfilling their expectations and aspirations. The issue of stateless Indians does come up during India–Myanmar official discussions but, definite measures are needed to push for the verification and granting of Myanmarese citizenship to the stateless Indians in Myanmar, engaging with PIOs from Myanmar and Malaysia by allowing them easy travel to India, and providing educational facilities and scholarships to the younger generations that will help them re-discover and strengthen links with India. These measures will build their trust and result in a win-win gain for India as well as its diaspora.

## **Conclusion**

Indian migrations to Southeast Asia till the early parts of the twentieth century were mostly of ephemeral character. However, Indians established important networks throughout the region and played an extremely important role in the commercial and economic life of Southeast Asia. Various developments during the colonial period lead to permanent settlement, giving rise to diasporic modes of consciousness and identity formations among the Indians. In Southeast Asia,

Indians have been one of the most diverse communities, highly segmented and segregated on the basis of caste, creed, region, economic status and period and history of migration, barring the INA days. Although large sections of the Indian diaspora in the region have managed to carve out a niche for them, some are still deprived and continue living hard lives. With the growing number of new migration from India, there has been a significant upsurge in the Indian consciousness among the people of Indian origin in Southeast Asia.

India's approach towards the Indian communities in the Southeast Asia has been guided largely by its overall policy towards the region as well the diaspora. The shift in policy approach during the 1990s and increased engagement with the East as well as the diaspora has resulted in some significant gains for India. However, from the point of view of the diaspora New Delhi still seems to be, concentrating on specific sections and shying away from overtly engaging with its diaspora. Although India's increased presence in the region has made a difference to the Indian communities present there but New Delhi's ambivalence to address the genuine aspirations of the diaspora and stand by them in the time of need has alienated the many of them. But from New Delhi's perspective, it is a complex matter as India is bound by jurisdiction. Most of the diaspora groups are citizens of their adopted countries and India's involvement can be seen as interference in the internal matters of other countries. Having said this there can be no doubt that New Delhi needs an inclusive policy approach that develops community cohesiveness among its people in the region and blend larger foreign policy interests with their interests to make the diaspora partners in furthering LEP goals and results in a win-win gain for both.

## Notes

1. The article is based on an unpublished research undertaken by the author for Indian Council for Social Science and Research (ICSSR).
2. Personal interview was conducted with Prof. A. Mani, noted scholar on the Indian communities in Southeast Asia in March 2014 in New Delhi.
3. A personal interview was conducted with Prof. K.S. Nathan, a Malaysian Indian and a noted scholar, October 2013, New Delhi.
4. Movement of Natural Persons under Mode 4 came into force in 1995 under 'General Agreement on Trade in Services' (GATS) and aims at liberalization of labour migration.

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