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Skilled immigration and the conditions of labour competition in the US: a comparative study of the Indian, the Mexican and the Chinese diasporas

Amba Pande^{a*}, Camelia Tigau^b and Yan Yuan^c

^a*Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India;* ^b*Center for Research on North America, National Autonomous University of Mexico, piso 10, Mexico City CP 04510, Mexico;* ^c*Institute of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Southwest University of Science and Technology, No. 59, Qinglong Road, Fucheng District, Mianyang, Sichuan, People's Republic of China*

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The US has always been the epicentre of international skilled migration. This has led to the formation of various diaspora groups which have played a critical role not only in America's emergence as a global power but also in the development of their home countries. This paper is a comparative case study of three major diaspora groups in the US – the Indian, the Mexican and the Chinese – in which an attempt has been made to analyse their objective determinants such as education level, language ability, skills and experiences. The authors conclude that there exists a considerable difference in the levels of labour integration among the three so analysed diasporas: while skilled Indians and Chinese earn as much as or more than the US natives, Mexicans tend to earn less and work in occupations not necessarily linked to their skills and expertise. There is also a considerable difference in the level of engagement with their respective homelands between the Indians, Mexicans and the Chinese.

Keywords: skilled migration; diaspora; the US; India; China; Mexico

Introduction

The US is the main destination country for international migration receiving 42.8% of all the international migrants in 2010 (MPI, 2015). In terms of international skilled migration too, the US is the highest recipient, with 800,000 skilled immigrants in 2010. The US is also the most preferred destination for international students attracting around 661,000 of these in 2009, thereby accounting for almost 60.5% of the total outbound international students (Chanda & Mukherjee, 2012, p. 11). The Global Education Digest (UNESCO 2012) points out at a similar pattern in the ratio over the years.

People from India, Mexico and China are among the largest diaspora and immigrant groups in the US. All three groups have over one million foreign-born members or, in other words, first generation migrants. According to data from the Pew Research Center (PRC, 2012), 35% of the Mexicans, 87% of the Indians and 76% of the Chinese in the US were foreign born. It is relevant, as Groves (2013) shows, that these first-generation immigrants are more likely to be actively engaged with their countries of origin, than

*Corresponding author. Email: amba@mail.jnu.ac.in

the second or third generation immigrants. Many have close family members in their countries of origin, they own property, and also follow social and political events closely (Table 1).

From the perspective of the level of education, the most educated migrants in the US come from Asia, with as many as 48.7% having undergraduate or postgraduate degrees according to data for 2005. Compared to that, the share of such degree holders is only 17.8% for migrants from the European Union and Canada, 13.5% for South America and the Caribbean and 2.6% for Central America (PRC, 2013, p. 1). Migrants from these countries in general and from Mexico in particular tend to improve their levels of education during their stay in the US: while only 5.2% of the Mexican migrants had professional studies in 2005, this figure rose to 10% in 2010. The main receivers of doctoral degrees are the Chinese immigrants (5384), followed by the Indians (2230) and South Koreans (1237). The Mexicans are ranked tenth with 194 doctorates (NSF, 2015; Table 2).

This paper offers a comparative case study of Mexican, Indian and Chinese immigrants in the US and is structured as follows: (a) Method and key concepts; (b) Historical background of migration; (c) Cross-case Statistical data; (d) Public Policies in the countries of origin.

Method and key concepts

In the US records and data, the terms diaspora,¹ immigrant,² foreign born³ are used in almost overlapping senses with marginal differences. Although the definition of labour migration goes much beyond ‘body migration’ (Aneesh, 2000, p. 13), and human capital does not necessarily require physical migration (Werner, 2010), this paper focuses on physical migration only, namely the movement of humans who join new nations permanently or temporarily and demand certain human rights – what we call the diasporas. The paper also treats immigrants and foreign born as diasporas.

The concept of diaspora is transnational in orientation; they can thus be simultaneously involved in two or more societies (Pande, 2013; Vertovec, 1999). The initial concepts of migrant assimilation and their undivided loyalty to the host country have increasingly given way to their ‘circulation and simultaneous commitment to two or more societies’ (De Haas, 2005). The more successful – in terms of attitudes, know-how, and financial capacity – and well integrated the diaspora are in their host countries, the more capable are they to participate in the process of development in their countries of origin (De Haas, 2005; Sutherland, 2013). Countries around the world are adopting different strategies for roping in their diasporas by introducing suitable policy changes

Table 1. Top six countries of origin of college-educated immigrants (2014).

Rank	Country	Percentage
1	India	14
2	Philippines	8
3	China	8
4	Mexico	6
5	Korea	5
6	Canada	3

Source: Zong and Batalova (2016).

Table 2. Top ten countries of temporary visa holders earning doctorates in the U.S. ranked by number of doctorate recipients: 2015.

	Country/region	Number of PHDs
1	China (Including Hong Kong)	5384
2	India	2230
3	South Korea	1237
4	Iran	632
5	Taiwan	615
6	Turkey	469
7	Canada	452
8	Thailand	221
9	Germany	195
10	Mexico	194

Source: NSF (2015).

to facilitate the involvement of the diaspora in development. They are not only a source of funds; they are also a rich source of human capital, of technology, and of political support. The diasporas too – owing to the increased transnational connectivity – keenly look forward to credible opportunities to become a part of this developmental process. As a result complex and intricate transnational knowledge networks or what has been termed as the ‘Brain Chains’ (Friesen & Collins, 2016) are created between individuals, communities and nations.

The representative samples, we have chosen for comparison – the Mexicans, the Indians and Chinese – all the three diaspora groups have a dynamic and vibrant presence in the US. They are playing important roles in the US labour market, as well as in their respective countries of origin. In all the three cases, the countries of origin also have dynamic diaspora policies and are engaging with their diasporas actively. We therefore have designed a diverse case study where two countries of origin are relevant in terms of the flow of skilled migrants (India and China), while the third one (Mexico) effectively illustrates contemporary regional movements of human capital (under NAFTA⁴). Mexico – US is the main migration corridor in the world (OIM, 2013). Our research has an exploratory value. Based on previous research (Alarcón et al., 2009; Delgado Wise & Márquez Covarrubias, 2007; Levine, 2012; Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002; PRC, 2013) we start with the hypothesis that Mexican skilled migrants are integrated to the US labour market in worse conditions than the Indian and Chinese, mainly due to lower recognition of skills, lower levels of education and less efficient professional networks. To prove this we have used a mixed methodology of historical – descriptive techniques, and descriptive statistics analysis.

The historical background of migration

The Indians

Indians abroad are a diverse group consisting of a variety of people and different migration streams and this applies to those in the US also. The US has the distinction of having the highest number of Indians as a single country (MOIA, 2012⁵). The first important flow of Indians to the US occurred between 1904 and 1911, when six thousand Indians arrived to work mainly as farmhands. Classified as Caucasians between 1910 and 1913, they could become US citizens and inter-marry U.S. born whites.

However four years later, in 1917, immigration from India was prohibited. By 1923, the situation of the Indians already in the US worsened as they were again classified as non-whites and therefore ineligible for citizenship, as a result of a ruling of the Supreme Court.

The situation changed radically in 1965, with the introduction of the Immigration and Nationality Act.⁶ Doors now opened for Indian migrants, especially those highly skilled. Apart from direct migrations, people with Indian ancestry from countries like the Caribbean, East Africa, Canada, and the United Kingdom also immigrated to the US. The growth of the IT industry in India further gave a boost to the migration of these highly skilled professionals to the US and particularly to the circulation of professionals which is quite high between India and the US. India ranks second in terms of temporary work visas in the US. It may be noted that the US is also the most preferred destination for students from India receiving almost 73.4% of its students till the year 2000, which came down to 53.6% in 2009 (UNESCO, 2010). In 2013–14, close to 103,000 India-born students were enrolled in educational institutions of the US (Zong & Batalova, 2015).

By 2012, the number of Indians in the US had reached 3.4 million. The MOIA gives a rough estimation of 2,245,239 of which about 927,283 are Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and 1,317,956 are People of Indian Origin in the US.⁷ Indians are the third-largest group among Asian Americans and represent about 17% of the US adult Asian population. In the present Indian citizens are the top recipients of H-1B visas, accounting for 70 percent of the 316,000 H-1B approved in fiscal year 2014. In 2013, 47% of the two million Indian immigrants residing in the United States were naturalized U.S. citizens (Zong & Batalova, 2015). In the context of their homeland as well, Indian-Americans are the most important diaspora group and exercise considerable influence in India as compared to the Indians settled in other countries.

The Mexicans

The history of Mexican migration to the US starts in 1848, when almost a 100,000 Mexicans became American citizens after the annexation of ten states that used to be a part of Mexico. For more than a hundred years afterwards, the border between Mexico and the US was kept open. However, in 1965, a skilled preference system was introduced, so that low skilled workers were almost excluded. Numerical restrictions on visas were set at only 170,000 per year, with the same quota for Mexicans as for other immigrants.

At present 96% of Mexicans who leave Mexico, migrate to the U.S. (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013 based on Connor et al. 2012). According to the same sources, 9% of people who were born in Mexico live in the U.S. In addition, the U.S. has more immigrants from Mexico alone than any other country (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013, p. 7). However, Terrazas (2010) shows that immigration from Mexico has come down due to the deep recession that had started earlier in some regions and sectors which employed large number of immigrants.

The profile of immigrants from Mexico has changed over the decades. Compared to 1990, in 2011 there were fewer males (53 vs. 55%), considerably older (median age of 38 vs. 29), better educated (41% with high school or more vs. 25%), and have been in the U.S. for a longer duration (71% had been in the U.S. for more than 10 years, compared with only 50%) (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013). Data on the education of the Mexican migrants from 1996 and 2012 show that more educated migrants are now

migrating to the US. We see that migrants with 9 years of schooling or below have reduced from 60.2 to 47%, while the population with 10–12 years of schooling rose from 27.5 to 37% (PRC, 2012). Migrants with undergraduate studies rose from 8.9 to 9.9, but the number of skilled migrants with graduate studies rose from 3.5% in 1996 to 6.1% in 2012. Thus, the Mexican migration to the US is growing from a less to a more educated one, even though it continues to be less educated than the Asian migrants. The estimated number of Mexican professionals abroad is to the tune of 1,357,000 (Tuirán & Ávila, 2013) out of which 90% live in the US.

The Chinese

The Chinese were among the first Asian immigrants to the United States. The California gold rush that began in 1848 attracted Chinese merchants and sailors. By 1852 Chinese laborers made up 90% of the workforce for the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad (PRC, 2013). As early as 1870, Chinese represented 9% of California's population and 25% of its workforce. Most were young single men who intended to work a few years and then return to China. Those who stayed seldom married because of laws severely prohibiting intermarriage with white women. As gold became harder to find and railroad construction was completed, Chinese went to work into factories where they were accused for depressing the wages. Similar to the Indian case, the migration of the Chinese was prohibited in 1917 and re-accepted in 1965.

After 1965, many Chinese came as students and later obtained permanent resident visas. In contrast to earlier waves of immigrants, the latter ones were more educated professionals. As a consequence of the Tiananmen Square incident (4 June 1989) the American government favoured Chinese students and professionals to stay in the US, and J-1 student visas were allowed to convert to more flexible F-1 visas and Chinese were allowed to apply for permanent residence. Further restrictions were however imposed after 2001, with the US Patriot Act (Werner, 2012).

The Chinese diaspora in the US is now estimated at 4.3 million. Chinese Americans are the largest group among Asian Americans and represent about 24% of the adult Asian population. A significant proportion of these are well-educated professionals. A report of Xinhua News estimates that almost 600,000 overseas Chinese qualified technical professionals allocated worldwide and 450,000 served in the US (Zhao, 2005). In 2007, there were 32,000 Chinese scientists in the United States or 22.5% of the total number of overseas students who achieved a doctorate degree (Chareonwongsak, 2012). According to the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE 2013), since the 'reform and opening' in 1978 till 2013, more than 3,058,600 have studied abroad. Of these, more than 1,460,000 went to the US, including 101,000 financially supported by Chinese government or institutions (Shi & Liu, 2014).

Chinese students have been the largest group of overseas students in the US since 2011. Between 2012 and 2013, 235,597 students came from China, accounting for 28.7% of the total number of overseas students in the US, an increase of 21.4% when compared with the previous year. In 2013, of the 6434 applicants for EB-5, 3696 were approved, of which 80% were Chinese. If the family members were added, a total of 6895 Chinese received EB-5 visa and immigrated to the US. In 2012, 23,787 Chinese H-1B visas, increasing by 3937 in number and by 19.8% compared to the year before (Wang, 2014).

Cross-case statistical data

The Comparative table of Mexican, Indian and Chinese Immigrants in the US (Table 3) shows different conditions of the arrival and integration of the three populations (Table 4):

Comparative description

Size: According to the Migration Policy Institute Data Hub (MPI, 2011), the Mexican diaspora ranked third in the US numbering 34,824,000, almost eight times more than the Chinese and ten times more than the Indians. It also has more US citizens (74%) compared to slightly more than half i.e. 56% in the case of the Indians and 69% in the case of the Chinese.

Origins: The migration from Mexico is also less recent than the Indian and Chinese, as 35% of the Mexican immigrants were born abroad, compared to 87 and 76% in the case of the Indians and the Chinese respectively, a fact explained by the individual historical conditions of immigration.

Age: The Mexican migrants are younger than the Indian and Chinese, as their median age is 25 years old, compared to 37 and 43, respectively. The Mexicans offers more adults of working age (78.4%), as most of the migration is connected to labour conditions, whereas the Chinese arrive due to family reunification also. The percentage of working age population among the Indians immigrants too is higher (73.5%) than that of the Chinese (62.5%).

Table 3. Comparison of Mexican, Indian and Chinese immigrants in the US.

Parameters or determinants	Indian	Mexican	Chinese	Sources
Total population (diaspora in million)	3.4	34	4.3	Groves
Residents in the US (in million)	1.6	11.4	1.6	MPI
U.S. citizens	56%	74%	69%	Pew
Foreign born	87%	35%	76%	Pew
Main states of residence	California, New Jersey, NY and Texas	California, Texas, Illinois, Arizona	California, NY	MPI
Arrived after 2000 or later	43.4%	31.3%	32.8%	MPI
Adults of working age	73.5%	78.4%	62.5%	MPI
Median age in years	37	25	43	Pew
Sex distribution	54.8% men, 45.2% women	55.8% men, 44.2% women	46% men, 54% women	MPI
Married	71%	58%	59%	Pew
Median annual household income	\$88,000	\$38,000	\$65,050	Pew
Homeowners	57%	49%	62%	Pew
Health insurance	88%	67%	84%	Pew
Living in poverty	16%	28%	14%	Pew
Bachelor's degree or more (as a %)	70%	10%	51%	Pew
English proficient	76%	66%	52%	Pew

Source: MPI (2011), Pew Research Center (2012), Groves (2013).

Table 4. Main occupations of Indian, Mexican and Chinese immigrants in the US.

Sector	Indian		Mexican		Chinese	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Construction, extraction, and transportation			38.8			
Services			22.8	38.6		
Manufacturing, installation, and repair			17.9	4.9		
Administrative support		11.8		12	19.2	18.3
Information technology	27	13.6			14.8	16.5
Management, business, finance	20.2	15.7				
Other sciences and engineering	10.7				14.8	
Social services and legal						13.1

Source: MPI (2011).

Gender: Male migration from Mexico (55.8%) and India (54.8%) to the US is predominant, whereas Chinese women tend to migrate more than men to the US (54%). One of the studies conducted by Khadria (1999, p. 1792) points out that female workers with the same qualifications are paid less in the US than their male counterparts.

Family conditions: Family conditions are similar between the Mexican and Chinese migrants as 59% and 58% are married respectively, much less than the Indian migrants of whom almost three quarters (71%) tend to be married.

Wages: The median annual wages for Indian immigrants is 2.3 times higher than the one of Mexicans (\$88,000 against \$38,000). The Chinese are between the two, with \$65,000. The ranking is similar in the case of persons with health insurance: Indians are ahead with 88% of those in the US being insured, followed by the Chinese (84%) and the Mexicans (67%). By contrast, when we compare the wage divide between the respective countries of origin and the US, the figures are lower for Mexico (7.6%) compared to the Asians (12%), which indicates that Mexicans are less underpaid in Mexico than the Indian or Chinese are in their individual countries.

Homeownership: However, almost three quarters of the Chinese immigrants (67%) are homeowners, more than the Indians (57%) and the Mexicans (49%).

Residence areas: Terrazas and Batalova (2010) show that nearly half of the Chinese immigrants resided in three metropolitan areas. New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island has the largest number of Chinese born, followed by San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont, CA, and Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA. These three metropolitan areas accounted for 47.5% of the 1.6 million Chinese immigrants in the United States. The largest populations of Indian immigrants have settled in California (19%), New Jersey (11%), and Texas (9%). They are now moving to other areas such as Georgia and North Carolina, as well as the Midwestern states. (Zong & Batalova, 2015) About half of the Mexican immigrants tend to settle in ‘traditional’ destination states such as California and Texas. But over the last two decades, they have begun moving to ‘non-traditional’ settlement areas such as states in the South, like Georgia and North Carolina, and Midwestern states like Nebraska and Ohio.

Poverty conditions: The percentage of Mexicans living in poverty (28%) is double compared to the number of Chinese (14%) and Indians in the middle with 16%. We therefore have a paradox that may deserve a future explanation: even though Indians tend to

earn more than the Chinese, more Indians than Chinese are in poverty and less Indians are homeowners. This situation may be explained by the gaps in wages, a hypothesis to be explained by further studies. The Mexican skilled migrants to the US seem to earn less than other similar populations, as they show higher poverty (12.2%) than the Asians (7.3%), EU and Canadian migrants (4.5%) and 3.6% in the case of the native born. As a matter of fact, 30.1% of all the Mexican migrants live in poverty and 62.9%, in or near poverty, which is much higher than the Indians where only 6.7% live in poverty. Levine (2012) appreciates that if current tendencies are to be maintained, the Latinos will become the poorest group of the US population. In particular, she shows, Mexican migrants and some other low skilled Latin Americans, are a source of fast and disposable labour. They may be attracted during times of economic boom and be repelled or even expelled, during times of economic recession, without any commitment or disadvantage for the employers.

Education levels: Earnings are directly linked to education: almost three quarters (70%) of the Indian immigrants and half of the Chinese (51%) are graduates or have higher degrees, much higher than the Mexicans (10%).

English proficiency: With respect to English proficiency, Indians are again the best English speakers (76%) but they are followed this time by the Mexicans (66%). The Chinese seem to be less English proficient, as only half of them (52%) report speaking good English.

Types of jobs: According to data from MPI (CAMELIA PL PUT THE YEAR), while 72% of the migrants from Asia worked in professional jobs, only 47% of the Mexicans had a job according to their level of education, therefore Mexicans tend to be more under-employed than Asians. The Asians were also more employed (85.7%) than Mexicans (66.5%). About one-quarter of Indian-born men in the labour force work in the information technology industry. (Terrazas & Batog, 2010)

Conclusion

This paper has tried to investigate how the Indian, Mexican and Chinese skilled migrants are integrated in the US labour market on the basis of a cross section of factors like age, education level, gender, English proficiency etc. Determining the level of the integration is a very complex issue but the paper has tried to include the maximum number of determinants based on several comprehensive nation-wide governmental and non-governmental surveys. Such a study also indicates how well the US has managed to take advantage of the skilled Indian, Mexican and the Chinese diasporas. Also can the good practices or the model of one country be adopted by others?

Mexican, Indian and Chinese are among the largest diaspora groups in the US. Studies show that in 1965, the Asian-American share of the U.S. population stood at less than 1%, mainly due to exclusionary policies. However, as a result of the Immigration and Nationality Act passed in 1965, the Asian Americans are now 6% of the U.S. population and are the best-educated, highest-income and fastest-growing race group in the country. They are also overall more satisfied than the general public with their lives, finances and the direction of the country, and they place more value than other Americans do on marriage, parenthood, hard work and career success. Asians recently overtook the Hispanics as the largest group of new immigrants to the United States. 61% of the adults who have come from Asia in recent years have at least a bachelor's degree, which is double the share among the recent non-Asian arrivals.

With regard to the position of Indian, Mexican and the Chinese diasporas vis-à-vis each other in the US, our study shows that while Mexicans are much more in terms of numbers, the Indians are best placed in terms of skills and pay in comparison with the Chinese who in turn are yet better than the Mexicans. The Mexican diaspora also participates less in governmental and professional networks, compared to the Indian and Chinese. The Mexican diaspora in general and in the US in particular is poorer, less educated and less employed than the Asians, particularly Indians and Chinese. Mexicans are underpaid or less valued on the job market than Asian professionals. However, the comparison of these three diasporas also brings forth the question on the feasibility of networking for the diaspora participation in the developmental process of the homeland as often the diasporas are reluctant to collaborate with the homeland governments and rely more on personalised engagement. Nevertheless, one underlining feature is that all the three groups are diverse and most importantly vibrant and hold the key to the socio-economic and political future of the US as well as their homelands.

According to a US Census Bureau estimate, by 2022, countries like the US, the UK and China will fall short of skilled labour by 17 million, 2 million and 10 million respectively while India will have a surplus of almost 47 million in the age group of 19–59 years (MOIA, 2012, p. 1–2). By 2050, India will have only 19% of population above the age of 60 years as compared to 39% for US and 30% in case of China. By 2025, 25% of the world's workers will be Indians. Therefore, out migration would be a natural outlet for India in the future which will also fulfil the demand of other countries. In case of Mexico the population growth is 0.7%, the same as the US, while the fertility rate is 2.1. That shows a significant slowdown and that Mexico is rather growing older than younger. Young people under the age of 15 years now represent 27% of the population, compared to 19.5% in the US, and only 17.4% have access to a university education. That means in the future, Mexico cannot afford to lose many of its young educated people, since they are few at present and will be scarcer in the future.

As far as the diaspora policies of the home countries are concerned all the three countries have an active diaspora policy. China is far ahead of the others as it started to engage with its diaspora as early as 1978 and has managed to accrue concrete benefits in terms of the latest in science, technology, knowledge and information through its overseas talent. In the case of India which started engaging with its diaspora as late as the 1990s, the association is still being redefined and evolving. There are some concrete policy initiatives resulting in successes like the IT industry, in remittances and also in philanthropy. But India has a long way to go in this direction before it can emerge as an attractive destination for diaspora investment and attract back the talent which is desperately needed in the health and education sectors. As for Mexico, it is the newest, and still at the nascent stage of its diaspora engagement policy especially to attract back the skilled diaspora. Due to a national context of violence and limited financial resources for research and development, incentives for the return of Mexicans abroad are few, not only at the personal level, but also on the part of the government. Therefore engaging with the diaspora seems to be a cheaper and more realistic option for the country and for its citizens abroad.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. The term ‘diaspora’ includes individuals born in the country as well as those who cited origin as their ancestry/ race or ethnicity regardless of where they were born. Ancestry refers to a person’s ethnic origin or descent; or the place of birth of the person, the person’s parents, or ancestors before their arrival in United States (MPI).
2. As per the U.S. Census Bureau, and quoted by Terrazas and Batalova (2010), the ‘immigrants’ are the foreign-born population which includes naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees and asylum seekers, legal non-immigrants (including those on student, work, or certain other temporary visas), and persons residing in the country without authorization.
3. The term ‘foreign born’ refers to people residing in the United States at the time of the ACS who were not US citizens by birth. The foreign-born population includes naturalized citizens, lawful permanent immigrants, refugees and asylees, legal non-immigrants (including those on student, work, or other temporary visas), and persons residing in the country without authorization (MPI).
4. North American Free Trade Agreement: It is an agreement designed to remove tariff barriers between the United States, Canada and Mexico.
5. Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, Government of India, works under the Ministry of External Affairs under the new regime in India.
6. According to a comprehensive nationwide survey by the Pew Research Center (PRC, 2013), in 1965, the Asian-American share of the U.S. population stood at less than 1%, mainly due to exclusionary policies. As a consequence of the Immigration and Nationality Act 1965, the Asian Americans are now 6% of the U.S. population.
7. The Government of India classifies the Indian diaspora into Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) – those who are still Indian citizens and holding an Indian Passport; and People of Indian Origin (PIOs) – those who have become citizens of another country. According to Government statistics their number is around 21,909,875 of which 10,037,761 are NRIs and 11,872,114 PIOs. These numbers are however based on rough estimates.

Notes on contributors

Amba Pande is associated with centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, JNU. Her research interest is Indian diaspora and transnational migration and she has many national and international publications to her credit.

Camelia Tigau is a researcher at the Center for Research on North America at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. She is an expert in skilled migration and Mexican diaspora. She is the author of the book “Riesgos de la fuga de cerebros en México: construcción mediática, posturas gubernamentales y expectativas de los migrantes” (“Risks of Brain Drain in Mexico: Media Construction, Governmental Positions and Migrants’ Expectations”, México: CISAN-UNAM, 2013), among other publications. <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4537-2855>

Yan Yuan is associated with the Institute of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Southwest University of Science and Technology, Sichuan, China. She is interested in comparative studies on migration issues and has been a visiting scholar at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in 2013.

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