SOUTH ASIAN DIAPOSA CONVENTION

Migrants heading east as West loses steam

Eduated professionals attracted by higher pay to vibrant cities in Asia

BY ELGIN TOH

A new “Go East” wave of migration is hitting members of the South Asian diaspora living in the West. Mindful that western economies are “losing steam”, educated professionals from among them are moving in throngs to small but vibrant cities in Asia, including Singapore, Hong Kong and Abu Dhabi.

Pakistan politician-turned-academic Shahid Javed Burki says that migration saw Indians and Pakistanis, among others, leave their region for greener pastures in the developed world.

But Mr Burki, a former Pakistan finance minister and World Bank vice-president, notes there is now a shift in trends and says it is “the first time since the period of European colonisation that migrants from developed countries have come to the developing world in search of jobs”.

“There is enormous arbitrage for this group in moving to Asia. Their salaries are higher here,” said Mr Burki, a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS).

He was among scholars, businessmen and government officials who spoke on the opening day of the South Asian Diaspora convention at Resorts World Sentosa organised by ISAS.

Tracing the history of South Asian migration, he said this was the sixth major wave since the late 1800s, when Britain first moved Indians to parts of its empire to work in plantations. The second wave was after World War II, when labour-starved Britain again roped in Indians to reconstruct English cities.

The next mass population shift took place during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Some 14 million crossed the new borders to become part of the two religious majorities – Muslims in Pakistan or Hindus in India.

Economics drove the fourth and fifth waves in the 1970s to the 1990s, which involved skilled and unskilled South Asians moving to the West as IT professionals, among other jobs, and to the Middle East as construction workers respectively.

As part of the sixth wave, which is “happening at this moment”, South Asians tend to pick Asian cities that are stable and well-governed, he said. This is partly why some have not chosen to go back to South Asia.

Being highly skilled, they are likely to contribute significantly to their adopted homes. But some residents of small city-states may also feel threatened by their numbers, he noted, citing immigration concerns in Singapore as an example.

These latest migration trends have not escaped the attention of Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in his opening address to the more than 600 convention participants, also spoke of a “new wave of a South Asian diaspora” which has come to Singapore in the last 10 to 15 years.

He was confident the new arrivals would integrate into society, both with Indian Singaporeans and other ethnic groups, and would “strengthen our society and enhance our cultural diversity”.

“Singapore welcomes members of the South Asian diaspora. We are a very open society. We have welcomed people not just from South Asia, but also from South-east Asia and North-east Asia, and indeed the world,” he said.

Those who make up the diaspora have made and continue to provide important connections between their adopted homes and their homelands, in areas as wide as finance and trade, and governance and culture.

But it was important to balance the connections lest they impact on their effectiveness as links between their homelands and their adopted homes.

Those who focus only on links to the homeland may not be welcome by their local community, while those who become too localised risk losing touch with their original culture and heritage, he said.

Mr Lee also pitched Singapore as a springboard from which members of the South Asian diaspora can engage the rest of Asia, especially China.

But even as opportunities abound abroad for those with roots in South Asia, speakers urged them to offer a helping hand to their home nations, whether through remittances, investments or technology transfer.

For this to happen, South Asian governments also need to work harder and build bridges to these diasporic communities, said Mr Tarun Das of the Confederation of Indian Industry.

“The diaspora is a brain bank. In the old days, we used to call the diaspora the ‘brain drain’. This is a huge change in perception. The diaspora is an asset, not people who have run away,” he said.