

THE MIRROR WE'D RATHER NOT LOOK INTO



Clockwise from the left: Amit Kapoor
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HERE IS A PARTICULAR kind of insult that arrives not as a wound but as a weather event. Loud, briefly disruptive, and ultimately irrelevant to the ground it passes over. When a radio host called India a hellhole and the American President shared it approvingly, the storm followed its usual course with outrage and hashtags. It wasn't worth much, but what is worth considerably more and has been quietly accumulating long before any of this is the question the noise accidentally drowned out: why are so many Indians, in growing numbers, voting with their feet? Great nations don't look inward because their critics demand it. They do it because they are serious about the distance between what they are and what they intend to become.

Either a Triumph or a Quiet Indictment

The data on Indian emigration is, depending on how you read it, either a triumph of ambition or a quiet indictment of opportunity. According to research from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, in 2020 roughly 1,000 Indian nationals were apprehended at the US border without documentation. By 2023 that number had reached 43,000, the kind of growth rate that in any other context would attract venture capital. The geography complicates the easy

narrative. These are not people fleeing starvation.

The Parallel Story

Most come from Punjab, Haryana, and Gujarat, states doing reasonably well. Of the first 104 Indians deported on a US military aircraft in February 2025, thirty-three each were from Haryana and Gujarat, thirty from Punjab. They paid agents a decent sum for the crossing through Latin America, the Darién Gap, past armed gangs, into a country that greeted them with handcuffs and a military flight home. The question is not about the people making that calculation. It is about the conditions that make it rational.

The legal stream tells a parallel story. India sent 13.36 lakh students abroad in 2024 while hosting fewer than 47,000 foreign students, roughly 28 leaving for every one arriving. Outward remittances for overseas education reached \$2.9 billion in 2024-25. Meanwhile, higher education receives just 4.1 per cent of GDP against the

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National Education Policy's (NEP's) recommended six per cent, the gross enrolment ratio stands at 28 per cent against a 2030 target of 50 per cent, and only 47 per cent of funds allocated for research and innovation were actually utilised between 2017 and 2025. The numbers make us wonder if India is, in effect, subsidising other countries' talent pipelines while underinvesting in its own.

India's Brain Drain

The workforce data completes the picture. Two in three Indian emigrants are highly educated which is the highest proportion of any country, per the OECD. The Institute for Competitiveness' report on *Skills for the Future*

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India's brain drain has, over time, quietly become a wealth drain as well. According to the Henley Private Wealth Migration Report 2025, around 3,500 Indian millionaires are expected to leave the country this year, taking an estimated \$26.2 billion in wealth with

them. Between 2014 and 2024, the number of millionaires in India grew by 72 per cent. The country is producing wealth faster than it is retaining it.

Air Pollution

Then there is the daily arithmetic that doesn't appear in GDP: air pollution alone reduces the average Indian's life expectancy by 3.5 years, and in the Delhi-NCR, residents are losing 8.2 years of life to toxic air. Most people living inside it have simply adjusted their expectations downward, which is a different thing from being satisfied.

None of this makes India a hellhole, but it makes us a country running a persistent gap between what it is capable of and what its most ambitious citizens



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South Korea and Taiwan did not ask their people to return out of obligation. They built research institutions, reformed their regulatory environments, empowered returning talent with autonomy and made returning make sense. India already holds what those countries had to construct from scratch: a diaspora still oriented homeward, scientists routing knowledge back into frontier sectors, entrepreneurs who built abroad and increasingly want to build here



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find available at home. The urge to leave is worth taking seriously because it so often originates in ambition rather than despair.

A Credible Invitation

These are not people fleeing a broken country, but they are people with enough ability to be wanted elsewhere and enough honesty to follow the arithmetic where it leads. A country that produces such people at this scale is doing something profoundly right.

The question is whether it can build conditions to hold them or draw them back. The political economist Albert Hirschman observed that when people are dissatisfied with an institution, they choose between exit and voice; leave or stay and push for change. What matters is whether those who left remain oriented toward home. Survey after survey of the diaspora finds the desire

to contribute to India among the most genuine motivations for return.

The loyalty has not dissolved but it is perhaps waiting for a credible invitation. The countries that made this transition offer an unsentimental lesson. South Korea and Taiwan did not ask their people to return out of obligation. They built research institutions, reformed their regulatory environments, empowered returning talent with autonomy and made returning make sense.

India already holds what those countries had to construct from scratch: a diaspora still oriented homeward, scientists routing knowledge back into frontier sectors, entrepreneurs who built abroad and increasingly want to build here. The work ahead is not remedial. It is the work of a country serious enough about its own promise to close the distance between what it produces

in its people and what it offers them in return.

The 2047 Ambition

Perhaps that is the most revealing measure of the 2047 ambition and not just the GDP milestone or the infrastructure erected to announce arrival, but whether, by then, the calculus that once made leaving feel rational has quietly reversed itself.

Viksit Bharat will mean different things to different people, but one reading of it is simply this: a country that has finally closed the distance between the life it makes possible for its people and the life it asks them to build within it. **BW**

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