

# Racism or Cognitive Warfare: Speed Breakers in India-Taiwan Relations

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The op-ed delves into an agreement between India and Taiwan for 100,000 Indian workers to join Taiwan's labor force. It highlights a local article in Taiwan discussing Indian workers, seen as racist and harmful to bilateral relations.

Recently, several reports came out in the public that both India and Taiwan have agreed that about 100,000 Indian workers will be joining the Taiwanese labour forces. Though an exact timeline has not been shared, it is hopeful that it will materialize sooner or later.

One can argue that if the agreement comes into force, it will assist in the more extensive India-Taiwan ties. With such a large number of Indian workers staying in Taiwan, it will help to create a greater understanding of Indian culture in Taiwan and vice versa when the workers share their experiences working in Taiwan with their relatives or family. It will lead to a more significant movement of people, which will and can play a crucial role in the resumption of direct flights between the two capitals, which saw its closure during the

beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and possibly more cities. It will also enhance and become another critical pillar of President Tsai Ing-wen's administration's much-touted New Southbound Policy (NSP).

Second, with the decline in the workforce in Taiwan due to the low birth rate, the presence of Indian workers and their Southeast counterparts who have been in Taiwan for more than a decade in different roles will play a key role in contributing to the Taiwanese economy. In certain cases, workers have brought their children and family to live with them in Taiwan. Such immigrant children and population has been designated in several forms, most recently as “New Immigrants”. As per the recent statistics by the Ministry of Education of Taiwan, such “New Immigrants” constitute more than 2.5% of Taiwan’s total population. This number showcases the importance of a more favourable approach towards new citizens.

With such positivity of having foreign workers, a pretty distasteful article surfaced in the local Taiwanese media concerning having Indian workers in Taiwan. The report's headline addressed 'Presence of Indian Workers in Taiwan' and concerns about sexual offenses. The article content was not only myopic and racist but also had the potential of creating a speed breaker in shaping India-Taiwan ties. With Indian scholar Dr. Sriparna Pathak in her column and the Indian community in Taiwan challenging and showing displeasure on such racist calls against potential Indian workers in their opinion pieces.

Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded with a statement in their official social media account in X (former Twitter) saying, “As a pluralistic country, Taiwan...has long embraced migrant workers without prejudice, including those from India...”. Additionally, MOFA blamed China for launching a “cognitive warfare” against Taiwan, putting India-Taiwan on the back foot.

However, one cannot turn a blind eye to some of the significant challenges migrant workers face in Taiwan.

For instance, on 30th August 2016, a Vietnamese worker in Taiwan was shot dead by the police. Upon being asked by the judge, the officer who shot the worker, the reason why he continued firing, the response was, “Because his skin was black, I could not see that he was bleeding, and how many shots I fired, I don’t know either”. In another case, female migrant workers in Taiwan, primarily from Southeast Asian countries, have regularly raised their voices against the sexual misconduct and unfairness faced by them. Former Kaohsiung City mayor Han Kuo-yu had referred to Filipino women as “Marias”.

Such shallow perspectives towards migrant workers not only limit the attractiveness of Taiwan for workers but also go against the values of democracy, human rights and equal opportunities, which it stands for. Such racist narratives in Taiwan are not limited to the

workers, but it has extended to the other foreign community as well. Instances such as foreign students being told not to cook their food as their food “smells” or not getting equal opportunity in finding jobs due to their skin colour have created a bad experience for them.

In such negativity, Dr Fang Tien-sze from Taiwan’s National Tsing Hua University, who also presides over the Taiwan Association for India Studies, has rightly pointed out several of the fundamental questions of having Indian workers in Taiwan, such as their food and religious habits, working culture, etc. Unless such questions are answered at first, bringing Indian workers to Taiwan will only create more issues.

Another challenge that Indian workers will face is the instability of the cross-strait relations. As other countries send their workers to Taiwan, India will also face the challenge of repatriating those workers who will be employed in Taiwan in the advent of a militarized cross-strait crisis.

India-Taiwan ties have steadily progressed with time, even though direct diplomatic relations are absent. However, representative offices have been operating in each other’s capitals and Taiwan has been expanding its offices across major cities of India, with Mumbai being the latest city, reflecting growing trade ties between the two. With the upcoming Presidential and central elections in Taiwan in January 2024 and in India in May 2024, it is likely that the new government on both sides will try to increase the non-political ties between the two further.

The leaders and the public need to understand that both sides need each other for further growth on mutual respect and cooperation. With India’s Act East and Taiwan’s NSP being touted as complementary to each other, such racist narratives are counterproductive and serve the interests of those who do not want to see the two sides coming close. Therefore, both sides need to sit back, have a more open and accessible talk, and try to find solutions to any issues coming up.

*(This piece reflects the author’s opinion, and does not represent the opinion of CommonWealth Magazine.)*

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