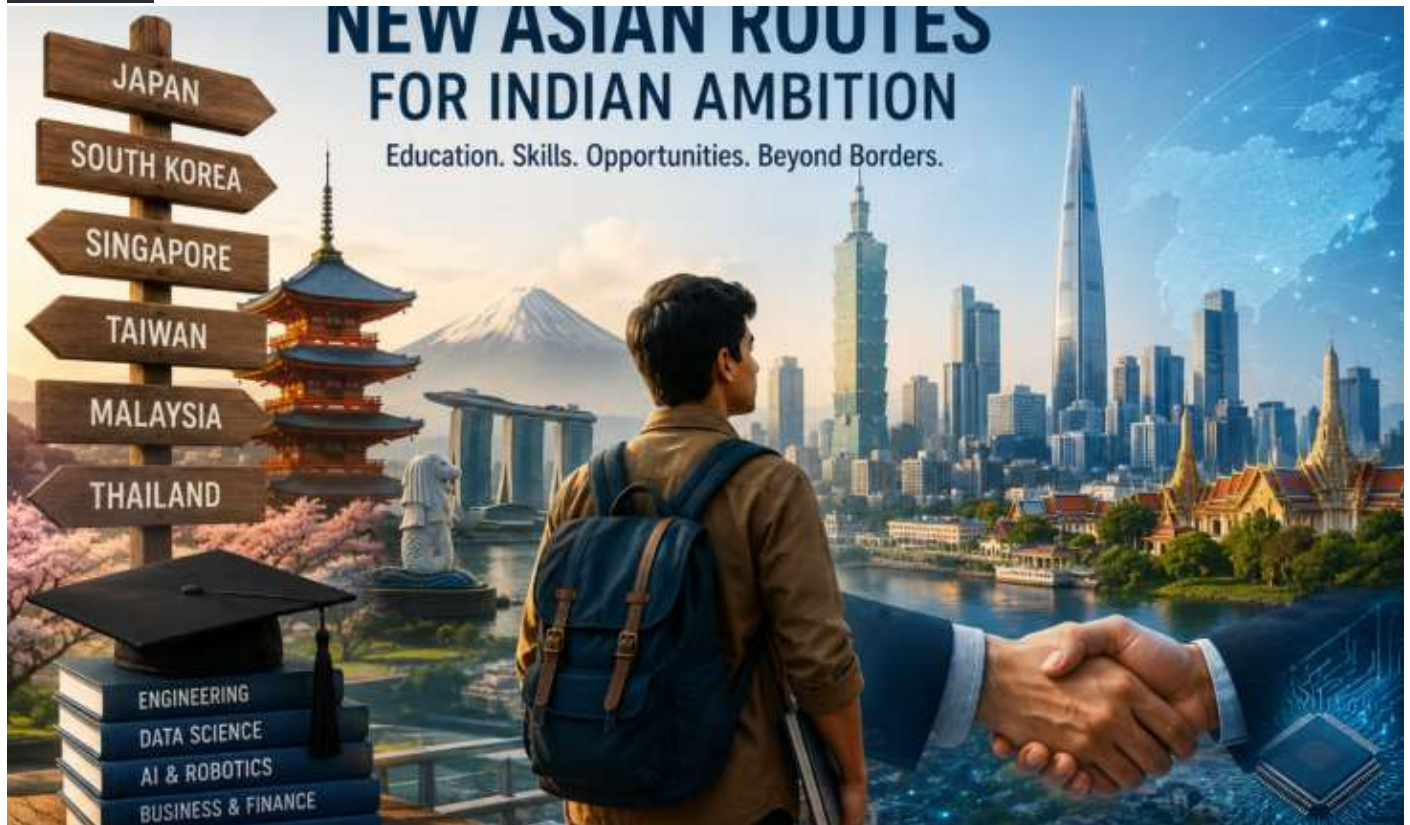


New Asian routes for Indian ambition

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Tridivesh Singh Maini explores how students and professionals are finding alternatives beyond West

For decades, Indian students and professionals seeking opportunities abroad have looked chiefly to the United States, Britain, Canada and Australia. Those countries will remain important destinations. But tighter immigration policies, high tuition fees and uncertainty over post-study work rights are prompting many Indians to consider alternatives.

East and South-East Asia deserve closer attention.

India's economic links with the region have grown steadily since the introduction of the Look East Policy after the reforms of 1991. Over the past decade, the Act East Policy and the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific have added strategic weight to these ties. Relations with Japan, South Korea, Singapore and the Association of South-East Asian Nations now extend across trade, infrastructure, technology, defence and education.

The pattern of investment is also changing. Companies from Taiwan and Vietnam are showing greater interest in India, alongside established investors from Japan, South Korea and Singapore. Taiwan is particularly important because of its strength in semiconductor manufacturing.

In 2024, Tata Electronics signed an agreement with Taiwan's Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation to provide technology for a semiconductor fabrication plant at Dholera

in Gujarat. The project, estimated to cost Rs91,000 crore, illustrates how economic co-operation can create opportunities not only for investors but also for engineers, researchers and students.

These ties should encourage Indians to think of the region as more than a source of capital. It can also be a destination for education, research and work.

New destinations for Indian students

The United States, Britain, Canada and Australia have traditionally attracted most Indians studying abroad. Yet visa restrictions, rising costs and changes to post-study work rules have made planning more difficult.

Asian universities offer a possible alternative. Singapore is home to institutions such as the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University. Malaysia, too, offers relatively affordable English-medium courses and hosts campuses linked to overseas universities.

Japan has made a concerted effort to attract students from abroad as its population shrinks and its demand for skilled workers grows. An official survey recorded 408,069 international students in the country in May 2025, a rise of more than 21% in a year. Japan has also introduced programmes aimed at drawing more Indian students and researchers.

Taiwan is seeking overseas talent for its semiconductor industry. Its universities have created courses in chip design and manufacturing for international students, while companies and institutions are trying to build a larger pool of engineers. Taiwan's shortage of skilled workers and strength in advanced manufacturing make it especially relevant to Indian students interested in electronics, artificial intelligence and engineering.

South Korea is another emerging option. The number of Indian students there remains modest—1,095 in 2024—but it has more than doubled since 2020. Its universities offer programmes in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and other technical fields. The country also provides a route through which graduates may seek work after completing their studies, though employment is not automatic and language remains a significant barrier.

Thailand has established universities in engineering, public policy, management and technology, some of which offer scholarships to international students. Its lower living costs and proximity to India may make it attractive to those who cannot afford education in Western countries.

Skills must match opportunities

Geography alone will not make these destinations suitable. Students must examine the quality of each course, the language of instruction, recognition of qualifications, living expenses and employment prospects.

Language is especially important. English may be enough for a degree programme, but finding work in Japan, South Korea or Taiwan often requires knowledge of the local language. Indian governments, universities and training institutions should therefore treat language instruction as part of professional preparation rather than as an optional cultural exercise.

Japan has already supported language and skills centres in India's north-east. Such programmes can prepare young people for work in sectors facing labour shortages, including care services,

manufacturing and hospitality. Other states could form similar partnerships, provided that recruitment is transparent and workers receive fair wages and legal protection.

Higher-education links could also be strengthened within India. During a visit to Singapore, Andhra Pradesh's chief minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu, invited the National University of Singapore to consider a campus or deeper research partnership in Amaravati. Such ventures could bring Asian academic institutions closer to Indian students while supporting joint research in technology, urban development and public policy.

Options for experienced professionals

The region may also offer opportunities to professionals who do not intend to enrol at a university. Japan, South Korea and Singapore need workers in several specialised sectors, while Malaysia and Thailand have programmes intended to attract skilled foreigners and remote workers.

Digital-nomad visas deserve some attention, but they should not be confused with ordinary work permits. Such visas generally allow eligible foreigners earning income from overseas employers or clients to reside in a country for a fixed period. They do not necessarily permit employment with local companies.

Indian freelancers, entrepreneurs and remote employees may find such schemes useful. But they should examine income requirements, tax rules, insurance obligations and restrictions on local work before applying. The label "digital nomad" often makes these programmes sound simpler than they are.

Widening, not replacing, choices

Looking East should not mean turning away from the West. American, British, Canadian and Australian institutions will continue to attract Indian students because of their academic strength, established Indian communities and relatively clear routes into the labour market.

The case for East and South-East Asia is instead about widening choices. India's growing economic links with the region, combined with demand for skills in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, research, manufacturing and care services, are creating new paths.

Governments must help make those paths credible. Indian states can work with Asian countries on language instruction, skill certification, student exchanges and ethical recruitment. Universities can develop joint degrees and research partnerships. Employers can provide internships and clearer routes from study to work.

Students and professionals, meanwhile, must look beyond promotional claims. A scholarship does not guarantee a job, and a liberalised visa does not remove cultural or linguistic barriers. Each opportunity must be judged by its cost, quality and long-term value.

Even so, the direction is clear. As India's links with Asia deepen and traditional migration routes become less certain, Indian students and workers should no longer treat the region as a secondary option. It may increasingly become one of their most promising ones.

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