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The College Economy

This is not the best time to be in America. A bone-chilling cold is sweeping across the country. Temperatures are sub-zero in many places. The warm tropical blood of many a desi is congealing. Judging by the forlorn phone calls from the desi brat pack in universities across the country, I can sense they are longing for mom's hot pakoras and warm friends from back home. Doing shots or downing bourbon is a poor substitute to home and hearth.

So I draw their attention to news that an education network has just been launched between India and the U.S that will bring classes from 15 American universities, including Harvard, Yale and Princeton, to India over satellite. Maybe not as good as being in the sylvan precincts of Stanford on a spring day, but it's a start. And a good one at that looking from the University of Nebraska on a Thursday night, when the temperature is minus two degrees. In Fahrenheit. That's minus 18 degrees centigrade, friends.

Last year, 80,466 Indian students came to the U.S, according to the report Open Doors. Since the UGC estimates that India's college going population is about 9.2 million, that means slightly less than one per cent of college going Indians headed to the U.S. More Indian students came to the U.S than from any other country (14 per cent of all foreign students) even though the overall number declined from 586,323 in 2003 to 565,039 in 2004.

The Indian numbers have been rising consistently, although they are decelerating in the case of China, Japan and Korea, which also send a large number of students. It appears a lot more students from these countries are staying back because the education system there is getting better. We might get there a few years from now.

Where do foreign students go in the U.S and what do they study? California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts and Florida are the top five destinations

statewise. I can't help notice three are of them are warm weather states. The top three universities for foreign students are the University of South Asia and Chinese (USC), University of Indiana and University of Chicago (UIUC) and University of Texas at Austin (UTA). Oops, those acronyms actually stand for University of Southern California, University of Illinois in Urbana Champaign and University of Texas in Austin.

Each has around 5000 foreign students, as do the fourth-placed Columbia University in New York and fifth-placed New York University. Broadly extrapolating the numbers, one can surmise that there about 1000 Indians in each of these universities.

Since 2001, more and more Indian students are coming for undergrad studies (last year's undergrad:grad break-up was around 25:75). That means Indian parents are sending their children to U.S much earlier and paying for their education because typically undergrads don't get the kind of fee breaks that grads can.

At the undergrad level, about 25 per cent come to study business and management while 12 per cent come for engineering. The percentages are reversed at the graduate level. The gender break up has also improved significantly over the years with the female-male ratio narrowing from 30:70 in the 1970s to 45:55 last year.

So much for students coming to America. But the Open Doors report has an important footnote. Last year, 1157 American students went to India for studies. This was a 65 per cent increase over the previous year. Expect more with the growing academic ties between the two countries and the death of distance. And wish them well when our summer temperatures touch 45 deg C.
