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Indian Nurses Sought to Staff U.S. Hospitals

By SARITHA RAI

BANGALORE, India, Feb. 9 — Annamma George has not taken an examination in 15 years, since she began her career as a nurse in a leading Bangalore hospital. But these days she pores over books alongside her 10-year old son, often studying late into the night. In a few weeks, Ms. George will take special exams that could qualify her for a nursing job in the United States.

Ms. George, 38, has attended monthlong classes and taken several practice licensing exams with questions that test not only medical education, but an applicant's knowledge of America's multiethnic society. In whose culture, for example, is a combination of milk and meat prohibited in the same meal? Catholics? Orthodox Jews? Seventh-day Adventists? Jehovah's Witnesses?

"Orthodox Jews," she says as she drills herself. "I want to give it my everything."

Across India, thousands of nurses are studying for these licensing exams and dreaming of better-paying jobs in the United States, where an acute shortage of American nurses has sent hospitals scrambling to recruit in an ever wider network abroad.

Previously, many American hospital recruiters had gone to the Philippines, Ireland and Canada to find English-speaking nurses — but even those sources of supply are drying up. Now the recruiters are focusing on India, opening the first major migration route to the United States for skilled professionals since the collapse of the Internet boom cooled demand for India's technology workers.

"It is the next revolution," said Sujana Chakravarty, secretary general of the Trained Nurses Association of India, a trade group in New Delhi. "And nurses are already outwitting software programmers by getting paid a lot better."

Until recently, jobs outside India had been hard to come by for the 30,000 nurses graduating each year. Some enterprising ones have headed to lucrative jobs in the oil sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf and some others to Europe, but opportunities in the United States had been limited.

Now, training and recruiting companies are springing up across India to prepare nurses for American jobs. Last summer, Vijay Madala, an entrepreneurial doctor who lives in Dallas, started a training company called Nurses Anytime and opened a center here in a refurbished colonial-style bungalow. Dr. Madala tells each class of about 30 nurses, "Work hard and your life will change." More than 70 of his graduates are now ready for the exams, Dr. Madala said, and by July, he expects to have 200 trained nurses a month "ready to go."

Since Indian nurses typically take home monthly salaries of about 4,000 rupees, or about $84, compared with American salaries of more than $4,000 a month, it is no wonder that many Indian nurses are eager to work in the United States.
Training centers are able to pick the best of the applicants. Nurses Anytime, for example, chooses those with a graduate nursing degree, fluency in English and at least three years' experience.

"With the supply of nurses in Canada, Ireland and Philippines drying up, India is the world's No. 1 source of trained nurses today," Dr. Madala said.

In Cochin, in the southern state of Kerala, Anisha Cherian, a former trainer of computer software programmers, has switched to training nurses, calling it "a better business in these times of software gloom."

In the central Indian city of Nagpur, Dhanananjay Gawande, a trained engineer, has also diversified from training software experts into training nurses. "This business is hot," he said.

Nurses Anytime has joined with Nursefinders Inc., a company based in Arlington, Tex., that recruits nurses for thousands of hospitals. Nursefinders pays Dr. Madala a fee for delivering trained nurses who have passed the nursing and English language exams.

Nurses Anytime has contracts with other American hospitals and nursing agencies. Representatives of Iasis Healthcare Corporation, a hospital company based in Franklin, Tenn., traveled here recently to interview a dozen nurses from Dr. Madala's training center, and they want 30 a month for the next 12 months, he said.

With a smile, he said he could not live up to the promise conveyed by his company's name.

Payment for the training varies. Mr. Gawande charges each nurse a fee of 10,000 rupees, or $210, for training. Dr. Madala said he did not charge his trainees because his American clients pay the cost. He did not specify how much they pay him but said American recruiters generally spend about $10,000 per nurse.

While demand for Indian nurses in the United States is strong, experts do not expect the exodus to reach the feverish levels as that of Indian software programmers in the 1990's during the Internet boom.

Difficulty getting work visas is one reason. Nurses can apply for an H1C work visa, but only 500 are granted each year.

Still, many Indian nurses are undaunted because American employers are pressing to hire more of them. Sheela Murthy, a Washington immigration lawyer who advises nurse recruiters and hospitals, said her firm normally dealt with a dozen immigration cases a month involving Indian nurses, but she said she had recently started receiving inquiries about bringing in nurses by the hundreds.

Ms. Murthy, a member of the American Immigration Lawyers' Association, said the group was lobbying in Washington for eased immigration rules covering nurses. She cited the projections of the government's own Health Resources and Services Administration that vacant nursing positions, which now total more than 110,000, will exceed 700,000 by 2020.

"The U.S. Congress is preoccupied with terrorist threats," she said. "But, to my mind, the nursing shortage is a colossal flaw in the American health care system, a life-and-death issue."