RIS Discussion Paper # 355

Beyond Infrastructure: Digital Nomadism, Brain Circulation and the Future of India–Southeast Asia Connectivity

Joefe B. Santarita

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Beyond Infrastructure: Digital Nomadism, Brain Circulation and the Future of India–Southeast Asia Connectivity

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Abstract: Digital nomads, location independent and highly skilled professionals, are fast becoming a human dimension to the connectivity between India and Southeast Asia, in addition to maritime and physical infrastructure. This paper studies the role of remote workers in facilitating regional cooperation via people-to-people interoperability based on global survey data on their nationalities, occupations, salaries, and preferred destinations in Southeast Asia. This paper highlights the initiatives by ASEAN countries to introduce special visa categories for nomads in the form of Thailand's DTV, Malaysia's DE Rantau, Indonesia's E33G, and the Philippine Digital Nomad Visa, while India promotes financial interoperability through the introduction of UPI-PayNow and UPI-DuitNow. Migration is re-conceptualized as "brain circulation" through knowledge transfer and micro-FDI, but "frictions of success" namely digital gentrification, tax uncertainties, and data sovereignty are identified. A Digital Trust Corridor encompassing a Unified Nomad Pass, portable social safety nets, second-tier satellite cities, and the E-Nomad initiative is accordingly proposed.

Keywords: digital, nomad, connectivity, India, Southeast Asia, migration, integration

Introduction

Regionalism between India and the countries of Southeast Asia goes beyond physical infrastructure. Human participation is an integral part of the process and serves to ensure closer economic and cultural connections in the area, showing that the importance of exchange between people is no less than that of infrastructure itself. A perfect example of this is the recent increase of digital nomads in the region. By freeing themselves

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from rigid corporate office work and complicated visa schemes, these individuals have created a highly collaborative, cross border ecosystem (Hannonen & Pitkanen, 2026).

Digital nomads, according to Muller, are people who do not need offices anymore since they get to decide where and how they conduct their businesses. They need nothing more than a computer and internet access since they can perform their activities from any part of the world. A digital nomad may be working from a co-working space in Delhi or Berlin for a month, then move to Chiang Mai to continue his work (Muller, 2016). They personify the modern convergence of integrated economies and connected oceans. They are normally very educated, very skilled, and technologically astute workers. They have something in common, that is, 'their passion for travel, desire for adventure, and interest in new cultures.' (MBO Partners 2023).

Based on Malaysia's categorization, digital nomads are classified into digital freelancer and independent contractor; as well as remote worker which may include full and part-time employees but does not require physical presence at the workplace such as an employee working for a certain company remotely from home or wherever he or she likes. These types are further categorized into technical and non-technical professions. The first one includes professions like 'software engineer, backend engineer, cloud, cybersecurity, blockchain, artificial intelligence, machine learning (data-related, etc.), digital marketing, digital creative content/development, user experience, user interface, and other related professions'. The second type includes positions like 'CEO/founder/managing director, COO, business development/growth manager, marketing manager, CFO, finance manager/accountant, sales manager, customer success manager, and HR manager'. In addition, 'legal counsel, public relation manager, consultant, customer service manager, communications and public relations, administrative manager, technical writer, tax specialist, tax accountant, production manager, supply chain manager, and other related professions' are also covered in the second category (MDEC 2022).

It should be noted that this flow of talented people is not simply a matter of individual preference. It represents an economic phenomenon that needs to be taken into account. Through their movement from one region to another, whether in Bangalore, Ho Chi Minh, Bali, or Hyderabad, they bring with them cutting-edge technical skills, market behavior, and venture capitalist thinking to nurture the innovative environments that they enter. By 2026 and beyond, the effectiveness of regionalism and regionalization will greatly depend on the "people-to-people" interoperability, where the software engineer in Chennai collaborates seamlessly with the entrepreneur in Manila while sipping on coffee in Da Nang.

Moreover, this human aspect is redefining the concept of 'borders.' While governments may continue managing borders and immigration, the digital nomad exists within an environment where there is a functional integration of the region. He relies on cross-border fin-tech applications, regional membership services for co-working spaces, and digital health insurance that applies to the entirety of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), leading to an economic identity that transcends policies and legislation. The digital nomad is paving the way for a new era of regional identity, one where connectivity is not based on transferring products from point A to B, but on the movement of human talent through a whole hemisphere.

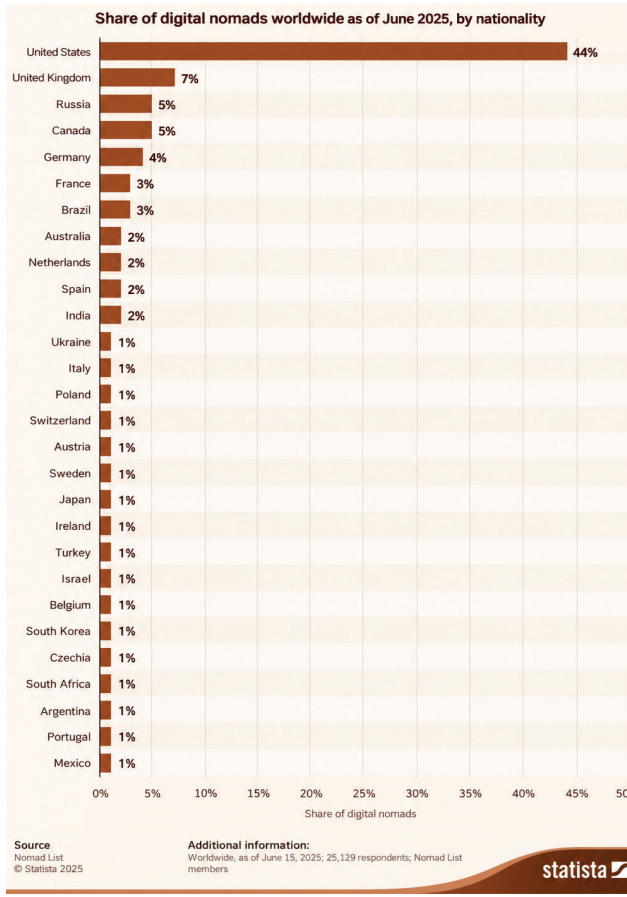
This paper aims to investigate remote working communities' ability to serve as a "human layer," increasing economic and cultural ties between India and Southeast Asia through the expansion of traditional connectivity frameworks based on maritime and physical linkages. Moreover, the study analyzes "Brain Circulation," which includes informal information transfer and micro-FDI by means of IT specialists from India and ASEAN businessmen, while also paying attention to such issues as digital gentrification and taxation. This paper also provides a strategic roadmap on how to maximize the presence of digital nomads in India and Southeast Asia. Given the limited academic research on digital nomadism, this paper incorporates online reports and practitioner blogs alongside available scholarly literature.

2. The Scale of the Movement: World's Data-Driven Growth

The idea of digital nomads has transformed from a unique and tech-savvy culture into a fully-fledged global economic engine that has redefined notions such as work, location, and lifestyle. Its history dates back to the end of the last century with the futuristic ideas of a book called "Digital Nomad" by Japanese futurist Tsugio Makimoto. The author foresaw that fast internet connections would allow employees to break away from the office routine in the future (Makimoto and Manners, 1997). During the first two decades of the new century, the predictions started coming true. Thanks to various freelance platforms, travel blogs, and primitive cloud computing technologies that gave some freedom to freelance writers, programmers, and other entrepreneurs who could earn money while working out of tropical cafes. But the golden age for digital nomads had yet to come, as these people still needed to live in poverty and endure unstable connections to enjoy their lifestyle, which could be afforded only by freelancers. It all changed in 2020 due to a pandemic outbreak. This formalization turned digital nomadism into a legitimate way for high-salary, full-time corporate employees to escape the traditional work environment (Ehn, Jorge & Marques-Pita, 2022). Acknowledging the flood of wealthy individuals without a fixed location willing to spend money, countries globally responded by offering digital nomad visas, setting up co-working facilities, and building dedicated accommodations for digital nomads.

Five years after, the data of 2025 as shown in Figure 1 demonstrate the current global distribution of digital nomads, broken down into the country of origin of each individual. Clearly dominating this chart and taking a striking lead are those individuals originating from the United States, who make up about 44 per cent of the total population of digital nomads around the world. This overwhelming majority beats the next best competitor, the United Kingdom, with its mere seven per cent share of the pie. For the remainder, however, this global share becomes increasingly fragmented across an array of different countries. Russia

Figure 1. Share of Digital Nomads Worldwide by Nationality, 2025



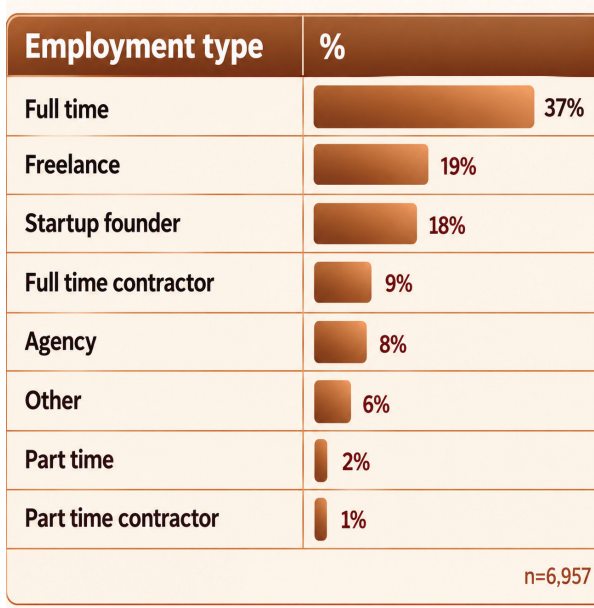
Source: Statista

and Canada come third and fourth at five per cent, while Germany trails right behind at four per cent, with France and Brazil rounding out the group at three per cent. Then comes a collection of several countries, including Australia, the Netherlands, Spain, and India, all holding a two per cent share of the population (Statista, 2025).

As illustrated in Figure 2, the largest portion of digital nomads adhere to conventional and steady employment arrangements, dispelling the myth that the large percentage of nomads function as freelancers. The greatest percentage of respondents, which totals to 37 per cent, belongs to the group of full-time employees. It is also noteworthy that full-time contractors accounted for nine per cent of total respondents and 19 per cent for startup founder respectively (Nomads.com, 2026).

In the independent sector, freelancers make up 19 per cent of the market while startup owners contribute an additional 18 per cent. The implication of this is that there exists a thriving sub-culture of entrepreneurship and independence within the traveling community. There are also individuals working in agencies who constitute eight per cent of the market while "Others" make up 6 per cent (Ibid).

Figure 2. Nomads by Employment, 2025

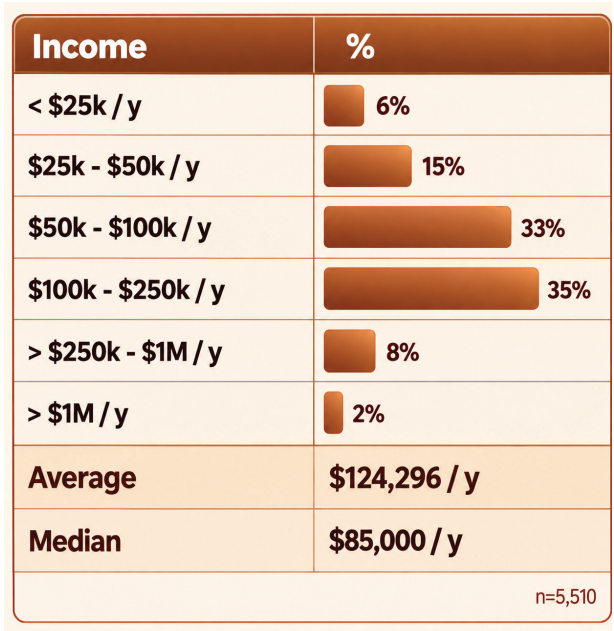


Source: Nomads.com

Lastly, part-time jobs among digital nomads are extremely uncommon. Only 2 per cent of the participants work in part-time jobs, while one per cent work as part-time contractors (Ibid). It seems that earning sufficient money as a part of the nomad lifestyle requires having a good flow of money that can be achieved only through a full-time job or business venture. In general, this dataset shows a mature system of remote work, which relies on full-time participants.

As evident from Figure 3, the digital nomad demographic tends to be quite rich, considering that most people make mid- to high-level salaries. The biggest chunk comprises people who earn between US$100,000 and US$250,000 annually, making up 35 per cent of the total demographic. Next on the list are those who earn between US$50,000 and US$100,000

Figure 3. Nomads by Income, 2025



Source: Nomads.com

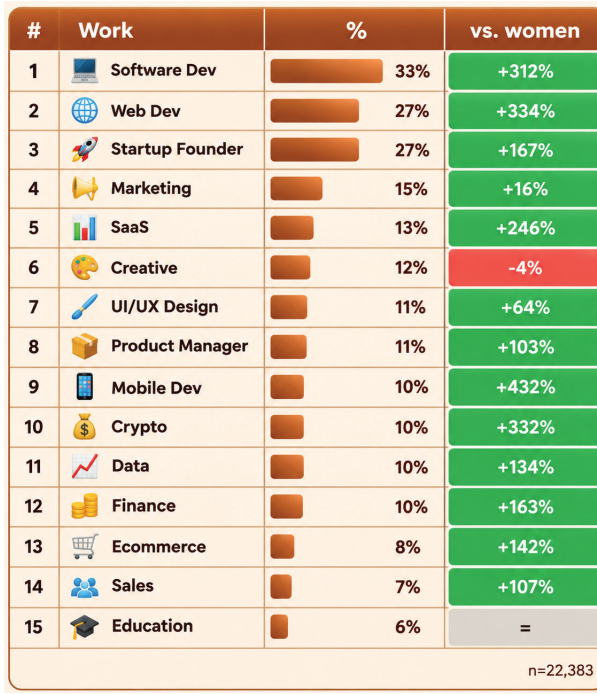
yearly, representing 33 per cent of the demographic. Overall, these two groups show that almost 68 per cent of all digital nomads earn an upper middle-class or upper-class salary (Ibid).

It should be pointed out that the category of high and ultra-high earners represents yet another significant social layer among these people. As the survey has shown, 8 per cent of nomads have an annual income in the range of US$250,000-US$1M, whereas just 2 per cent earn more than US$1M per year. The presence of the highest earning people in statistical data leads to the fact that the average annual income reaches rather impressive figure of US$124,296. However, the median annual income is equal to US$85,000 (Ibid).

On the other hand, the lower income category could be considered a real minority in the nomadic group. There are only 15 per cent of individuals who receive an annual income between US$25,000 and US$50,000, while there are 6 per cent of people who earn less than US$25,000 per year. It shows that some financial stability is required for living a nomadic life of permanent travels, having technological devices and staying in hotels abroad (Ibid).

In addition to that, there is also an indication in the survey about the occupations taken up by these nomads, categorized by gender. Figure 4 highlights a detailed breakdown of the main career paths chosen by male digital nomads, using the information from a large sample size of 22,183 individuals. Some of the notable observations that can be drawn from the collected information is the number of male nomads that have been attracted to technology-based and entrepreneurial professions, where software development and web development lead the way at 33 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively. The high number of males engaged in tech-related occupations is further emphasized by the “vs. women” statistics, which show that there is significantly higher participation of males in such industries than females, with software development having +312 per cent, web development having +334 per cent, and mobile development having an outstanding +432 per cent (Ibid).

Figure 4. Nomad Men Work in Different Positions



#	Work	%	vs. women
1	Software Dev	33%	+312%
2	Web Dev	27%	+334%
3	Startup Founder	27%	+167%
4	Marketing	15%	+16%
5	SaaS	13%	+246%
6	Creative	12%	-4%
7	UI/UX Design	11%	+64%
8	Product Manager	11%	+103%
9	Mobile Dev	10%	+432%
10	Crypto	10%	+332%
11	Data	10%	+134%
12	Finance	10%	+163%
13	Ecommerce	8%	+142%
14	Sales	7%	+107%
15	Education	6%	=

n=22,383

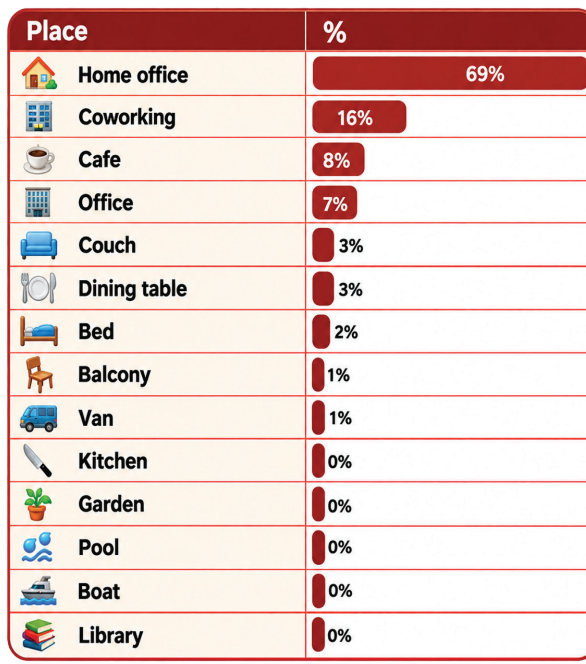
Source: Nomads.com

Apart from technology and software jobs, males are present in corporate positions, financial jobs, and marketing quite prominently. Specifically, marketing has a substantial 15 per cent representation amongst men, a moderate 16 per cent boost in comparison to women. Furthermore, UI/UX design (11 per cent), product management (11 per cent), crypto, data, and finance (10 per cent respectively) have strong positions. In each and every one of these technical or analytical spheres, there is a massive disparity when it comes to male vs. female representation, with the exception being that of crypto (+332 per cent) and finance (+163 per cent). However, in terms of more visually-driven design, communication, and human services in general, an opposite pattern is vividly observed. “Creative” sphere, for instance, which

accounts for 12 per cent of male nomads, is the only one that demonstrates a deficit (-4 per cent) in terms of males' presence in comparison to females'. Finally, education stands at the very end of this chart, having exactly 6 per cent of representation, and featuring equal number of men (=) vs. women (Ibid).

Figure 5 presents information about the location of the workplace preferred by digital nomads, presenting an enormous difference between the popular perception of the digital nomad lifestyle and reality. While the romanticized image of the digital nomad working from the beach, poolside, or even in a moving van has been portrayed by the media, the data suggests that most digital nomads prefer a stable and comfortable workplace. The data shows that more than half of remote workers (59

Figure 5. Locations where Nomads Work



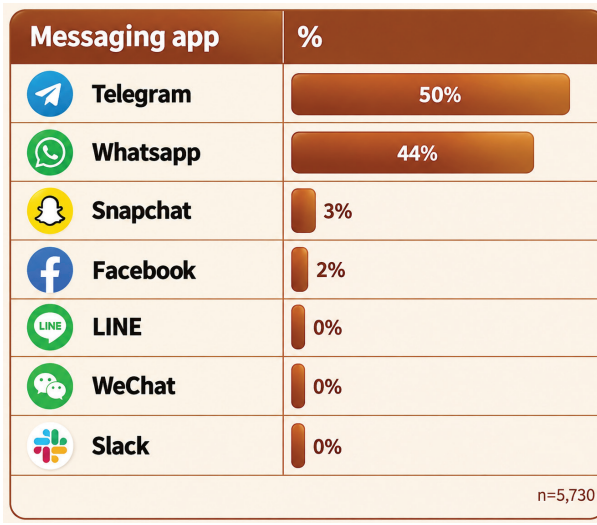
Source: Nomads.com

per cent) opt to work from their homes' traditional office space as the place to work. Other popular locations for working include shared professional spaces like coworking offices (15 per cent), cafés (8 per cent), and conventional corporate offices (7 per cent). Domestic areas like the couch, dining room table, and bed are used much less often, each comprising three per cent and two per cent, respectively (Ibid).

It is interesting that the places traditionally linked to the nomadic lifestyle, including balconies, vans, kitchens, gardens, swimming pools, boats, and libraries, altogether account for only one per cent. In studying a pool of 5,800 people, it becomes clear that despite the freedom offered by the digital nomadism, the reality behind this trend involves quite traditional and immovable working spaces.

Figure 6 shows the communication channels preferred by 5,730 digital nomads, two major players dominate the remote working community. First, Telegram emerges as the top messaging app utilized by

Figure 6. Messaging Apps Used by Nomads, 2025



Source: Nomads.com

exactly half of the targeted audience at 50 per cent. Second, WhatsApp becomes one of the top competitors that attracts 44 per cent of the users. In total, these two highly secure cloud-based apps claim 94 per cent of the nomads' communication needs. On the other hand, other social media applications remain underutilized within this particular group; Snapchat has a meager share of 3 per cent, and Facebook accounts for 2 per cent. Also, regional or corporate-oriented apps such as LINE, WeChat, and Slack have no presence among users in this data sample; their shares amount to zero per cent (Ibid).

Table 1 shows the seven most visited Southeast Asian cities by nomads in 2026 based on a very large Nomad List database of 415,168 people. Thailand becomes the definitive gateway destination for Southeast Asia in terms of remote work with three entries to its name, with Bangkok being crowned as the ultimate champion. Bangkok takes up the first spot overall with a visitation rate of 2.22 per cent, whereas Chiang Mai is at tenth place (1.07 per cent) and the vacation paradise island of Phuket occupies thirty spot (0.53 per cent). Apart from Thailand, there are other destinations in Indonesia and mega city states which are quite popular among the nomads, as seen by the beach destination town of Canggu in Bali, which comes at thirteenth place with 0.91 per

Table 1. Most Visited Cities/Destinations in Asia, 2026

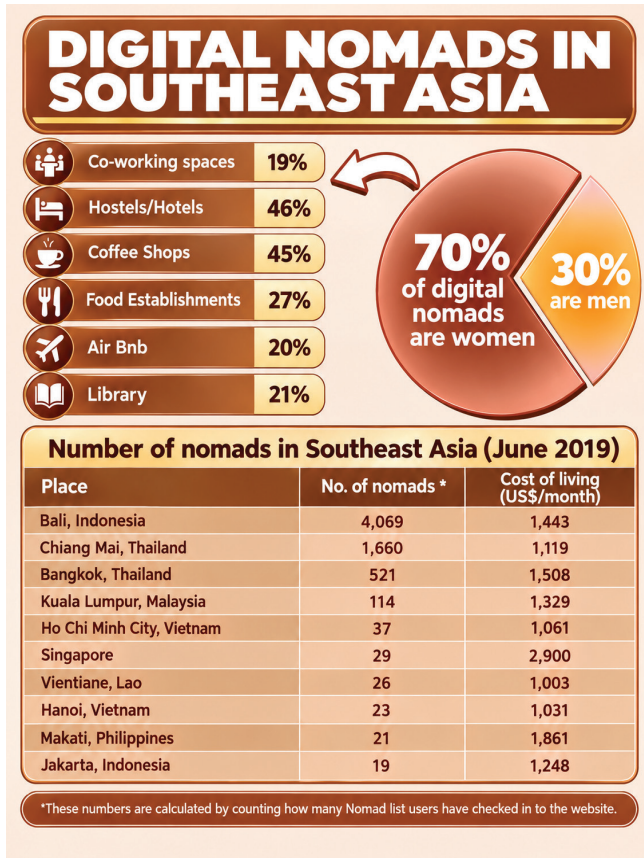
Rank	City	Visited share (%)
1	Bangkok	2.22
10	Chiang Mai	1.07
13	Canggu	0.91
14	Singapore	0.9
17	Kuala Lumpur	0.82
28	Ho Chi Minh	0.55
30	Phuket	0.53

Source: Generated from Nomad List, 2026. n= 415,168

cent visitation, giving tough competition to the infrastructure rich city of Singapore at fourteenth place (0.90 per cent) and Kuala Lumpur at seventeenth place (0.82 per cent). The Vietnamese mega-city of Ho Chi Minh takes up 28th place (0.55 per cent) (Ibid).

Figure 7 offers a captivating image of the state of affairs of the digital nomad industry in Southeast Asia before the coronavirus pandemic, featuring the distinct characteristics of a highly feminized industry with a

Figure 7. Digital Nomads in Southeast Asia, 2019



Source: ASEAN Post/Euroconsulting

preference for working within informal spaces. With females making up 70 per cent of the demographic, it is obvious that the region has always been a relatively safe place to travel and work alone as a woman. It appears from the data collected that digital nomads prefer to work from shared spaces such as hostels and coffee shops (ASEAN Post, 2019).

From a geographical perspective, the clustering of nomads is strongly weighted towards certain major nodes; Bali and Chiang Mai have emerged as the "titans" in this category, probably because of existing infrastructure facilities, lifestyles, and reasonable affordability compared to other locations. At the same time, highly-priced cities such as Singapore attract a negligible number of digital nomads, indicating that, in most cases, affordable cost of living becomes the determining factor for choosing a location. Although the data above are not comprehensive in terms of all digital nomads, it is still clear what factors influenced some countries, especially Thailand and Indonesia, in creating their own visas for this group of people (Ibid). Although updated data on digital nomads is desirable to accurately assess their regional contribution, it remains unavailable at this time.

3. Catalyzing Regulatory Harmonization

The "visa revolution" that has taken place in the Global South has ignited a fierce battle among countries by adopting a new perspective towards remote work immigrants, where they are no longer seen as tourists but as a key economic resource. The best example of this is the highly tailored environment created to remove the hassles associated with living away from one's home country such as the case of India and Southeast Asian countries.

3.1. Southeast Asians Responses

Southeast Asia is known to be an attractive destination for remote workers because of low-cost lifestyles, a pleasant climate, and the delicious food offered in the region. For over a decade, remote workers used a haphazard system of short-term travel visas and border crossings to make ends meet.

Yet, authorities in the region have decisively changed their approach and abandoned laissez-faire attitudes towards remote workers, opting to build strict framework-based policies. Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia have developed remote work-focused visa policies, which offer rigid protection under law for those who use them. Remotely working schemes give income straight to the local economy and at the same time guarantee protection for individuals from any immigration laws (Linton, 2026).

There are significant differences between countries in terms of legislation regarding these current schemes and very strict requirements must be followed concerning income levels and application process (Litania and Ajmone Marsan, 2023).

Destination Thailand Visa (DTV). Offers an exclusive five-year validity period along with multiple entry benefits. Freelancers may enjoy residency for up to 180 days during each entry. Application criteria can be accessed via the official Thai E-Visa Website and require that one has a fixed balance of 500,000 Thai Baht (approximately US$15,000) (Royal Thai Embassy, 2024).

Malaysia DE Rantau Pass. Regulated through the official portal of MDEC DE Rantau Portal. It provides a visa-free stay for up to 3-12 months with a possible extension of another 12 months. A minimum annual income of US$24,000 needs to be shown, and applicants get access to a network of structural centers that are "nomad-ready" (Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation, 2022).

Indonesian Remote Work Visa (E33G). It can be obtained conveniently through the official Indonesian Immigration portal. The visa is specifically designed for highly paid individuals looking for a permanent home base in a place such as Bali. The visa requires a strict minimum foreign income of US$60,000 annually and also US$2,000 cash in the bank initially (Directorate General of Immigration Indonesia, 2024).

Philippine Digital Nomad Visa. Enshrined in Executive Order No. 86 and crafted to establish the Philippines as a hub for tourism in

the region. The visa is jointly managed by the Philippine Bureau of Immigration and the Department of Foreign Affairs which comes with a renewable period of one year. It includes the unique requirement of reciprocity, wherein the applicant's native nation needs to provide similar benefits to Filipino nationals (Linton, 2026). As of this writing, however, the delegated government agencies have not rolled out the final implementation rules for this visa category.

3.2 India's Strategic Response

Digital nomadism operates as a "stress test" for states, encouraging them to take action by creating the idea of financial interoperability. Financial interoperability changes the face of the world economy by transforming it from separate national markets into real-time networks. With the arrival of the digital nomad era, this change in comparison with the previous period may be referred to as a transition from being an outsider to becoming a borderless participant. This transition is enabled through connecting Fast Payment Systems (FPS), which does not imply correspondent banking at all (Aurazo, et al., 2026). The connection of such systems like Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in India, PayNow in Singapore, and DuitNow in Malaysia has created something similar to a "roaming service" for financial purposes (FF News, 2025). Thanks to this, tourists can pay for various services from having coffee to booking a coworking place by just scanning QR codes.

The economic impact is thus not just one of mere convenience but represents a total restructuring of what was referred to as the "nomadic tax". Historically, border trade involved a chain of middlemen all taking their share, which resulted in the total cost being significantly greater than the 5-7 per cent "tax" on transactions (Beck, et al., 2022). This has since been streamlined with the establishment of the UPI-PayNow/UPI-DuitNow connection pairs, cutting costs by nearly half in many corridors, to be exact by 45 per cent. In addition, thanks to the ISO 20022 standard messaging format, information travels alongside payments, resulting in real-time regulatory and anti-fraud checks performed within seconds

rather than days (International Organization for Standardization, 2025). Not only does it make things easier for the nomads, but it provides an added advantage for local micro merchants who are able to accept foreign currency payments online using their smartphones. The benefits are summarized in Table 2.

But what is even more important is the interoperability which would facilitate the emergence of a new global financial system resembling the decentralized nature of the Internet. As more and more countries are seeking access to these multinational financial systems, there is the emergence of what has been called the "Global Real-Time Rail". The latter is a payment infrastructure that allows individuals to "send and receive data-rich payments in real time, 24/7/365 days a year" (Payments Canada, 2026). By 2026, financial identities that are portable and liquid will no longer be an issue (Bank for International Settlements, 2025). It becomes easier for the nomadic worker to go across jurisdictions without facing any financial challenge. The successful implementation of the "regional linkage hubs" shows the strategy adopted by the G20 in creating a payment system where cross-border transactions would be as easy as domestic transactions (Financial Stability Board, 2025).

Table 2. Key Financial Interoperability Linkages (2026)

Linkage	Participating Countries	Primary Benefit
UPI-PayNow	India & Singapore	Near-instant P2P remittances and merchant payments via mobile numbers.
UPI-DuitNow	India & Malaysia	Dramatic reduction in "middleman" fees for the migrant and nomadic workforce.
Project Nexus	Multi-country (ASEAN+)	A multilateral blueprint for connecting multiple national instant payment systems.

Source: FF News, 2025; Times News Network, 2026; and Bank of International Settlements, 2025

4. From Brain Drain to "Brain Circulation"

The south part of the globe has experienced continuous migration of its talented individuals over the years in a phenomenon known as Brain Drain. Engineers, physicians, researchers, and other professionals would migrate to the west and reside there permanently due to the lucrative salary packages and infrastructural facilities offered by the western countries (Remoto, 2026). This brain drain phenomenon created a structural gap in which the developing nations were effectively sponsoring the developed nations through the development of talent that would finally leave their countries. However, the emergence of telecommuting and digital nomads has revolutionized this narrative into one of 'Brain Circulation'. Saxenian (2000, 2002) defined this as 'the recursive, two-way flow of highly skilled professionals who study and work abroad but then return or commute regularly between their native countries and host tech hubs'. In the case of digital nomadism, the brain circulation is facilitated by the power of informal knowledge transfer and the rise of micro-FDI.

The Power of Informal Knowledge Transfer. The significance of this synergy can hardly be overstated due to how much it has succeeded in turning the whole concept of migration into something new using Knowledge Transfer. While previously information and knowledge were kept behind the walls of the headquarters in Silicon Valley or London, nowadays when an Indian AI programmer chooses to work in Ho Chi Minh City's coworking facilities for three months, he or she not only works at a desk, but also transfers a set of skills. Through "water cooler" talks, meetings, and hackathons, the global experts become mediators between developing countries and the latest inventions from across the globe, ensuring that local coders are aware of the best practices, coding languages, and project management systems of their foreign counterparts without having to get visas (World Economic Forum, 2025a).

The Rise of Micro-FDI. Other than the exchange of ideas, the movement has created a new form of funding called Micro-FDI. The digital nomad now acts as a bottom-up investor who pumps money

into the economy just by being in the locality. This entails employing local people for certain positions, supporting local enterprises, and even nurturing local businesses that they come across while being in the place. As a result, they become the natural marketing agents for such enterprises owing to their international contacts (Ibid).

This situation is best illustrated in the 2024 study about digital nomadism in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The article has pointed out 'how cities can leverage the digital nomad trend to stimulate local entrepreneurship, boost the service sector, and foster a vibrant, multicultural community that benefits from fresh perspectives and global connections' (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Leong, and Cahalane, 2024). This is similarly aired recently in the World Economic Forum where ASEAN is challenged to ensure that 'micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises are able to participate in the regional digital economy, rather than being left behind by complexity and compliance costs' (World Economic Forum, 2026).

5. The "Friction of Success": Addressing Challenges

The phrase "friction of success" can be used to appropriately describe the challenges associated with the development of digital nomadism, which have now hit a point of critical mass, whereby success creates its own challenges since digital nomadism becomes an established part of the labor force in the global economy. With digital nomads becoming more than just temporary residents and moving into the category of locals that constitute the permanent work force, issues of integration begin to become more challenging. This is not only because of the hospitality required but also the societal and governmental framework needed to deal with the friction caused by the embedded existence of a highly mobile, well-paid labor force (World Economic Forum, 2025b).

Overcoming this tension is the key challenge for the next phase of the digital revolution. Since the movement requires a fine balance between various factors such as culture, affordability, and advanced technology, a disruption in any of these aspects could lead to the destabilization of the

whole process. With these people becoming increasingly interconnected, the problems relating to affordable housing, social equality, and legal legitimacy are becoming more visible (Linton, 2026). It is important to overcome this tension not by discouraging the spread of remote work, but rather by developing an institutional framework in the countries hosting these individuals to make sure that their "success" does not come at the cost of the environment supporting them.

The Rising Tide of Digital Gentrification. This issue of "digital gentrification," however, is now a reality in former utopian locations such as Bali and Goa, where the arrival of well-compensated remote employees fundamentally transforms the local economy. In particular, because these digital nomads typically receive payments in strong currencies and make purchases in weaker local currency, there is a major economic distortion that causes an unnatural surge in the value of the marketplace. This creates a 'bubble' that separates foreign talents with locals (Wu, 2024). Even as these new arrivals do create some immediate investment in so-called "lifestyle" businesses like expensive coffee shops, fancy gyms, and upscale hotels, the net result is that everything suddenly becomes vastly more expensive to live on, pricing out many of the same locals whose labor makes these places possible in the first place.

The most telling example of this phenomenon is seen through the significant increase in rental costs, which amounts to 15-20 per cent (KC and Triandafyllidou, 2026*)*. This fact is indicative not only of the natural rise in market price but of an actual exodus of native populations and services. When the "native" population cannot afford to live in its neighborhood anymore, the chances of any cross-fertilization of minds between locals and digital nomads become virtually nonexistent. In this case, digital nomads end up living in an isolated environment, cut off from their original purpose of being introduced to local culture. If something is not done to secure adequate housing for all individuals, these regions may lose their distinctive character forever due to the financial success of digital nomads.

The Maze of Taxation Ambiguity. Such a kind of "maze" can be considered as another regulatory issue. The tax systems, which were developed in the 20th century, were not capable of adapting to the changed circumstances in the 21st century labor market. The main criterion that can show such kind of obsolescence is the growing amount of foreign earnings by a foreigner for a business company located in another country and known as "homeless income". It is also referred to as "stateless income" (Brauner, 2025). As there is no Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement between India and ASEAN, the problem lies in the fact that there is either the case of overtaxing the nomads who are working far away or no taxes collected at all, resulting in the lack of funds required by host countries to build infrastructure for nomads. The use of the uniform tax regime will make sure that the host country receives its money's worth when building digital infrastructure and other utilities for nomads. In turn, the latter will feel relaxed in terms of fulfilling their civic obligations instead of engaging in 'jurisdiction shopping'. This strategy of spending a few months in one country and then shifting to another place for another couple of months has been employed by the nomads for several years now to avoid triggering tax residency in any of the countries (Linton, 2026).

The Borderless Challenge of Data Sovereignty. This case highlights a very crucial point in regards to the weaknesses that lie within the very nature of the remote work process. There exist differences in the degree of protection provided by information technology laws in different nations. This situation is very much felt by digital nomads when 'storing data in one country, processing it in another, and still subject to regulations from the third' (Rattan, 2026). In an era where more workers will be mobile, their digital trail will have found itself scattered among many different nations that have varying levels of standards when it comes to protecting data or might not have any protection laws at all. This is best exemplified by the 'dynamic risks of software engineer logging into a production database from a coffee shop in a high-risk jurisdiction, or a sales director negotiating contracts while on a 'hush trip' in a country where the enterprise has no legal

entity' (TechClass, 2025). It therefore becomes imperative to establish a universal data system to create digital trust while moving between nations.

6. Strategic Roadmap: The Digital Trust Corridor

The emergence of the Digital Trust Corridor (DTC) can be regarded as an absolute game changer in relation to the previous "accidental" phenomenon of digital nomadism, replacing the previous practice of abusing immigration policies with a well-thought-out structure that will meet the needs of today's knowledge workers. Remote workers have been using different migration policies for several years, living on "gray area" visas with legal, tax, and immigration ambiguity (Harris, 2026a, also Linton, 2026). The emergence of the DTC will result in the emergence of a secure structure that will see the current generation of remote workers not only as tourists but as an economic power. In some online literature, it is known as a trusted data corridor. This corridor is "a governed pathway that lets trusted, accredited participants exchange verified, purpose-based data with each other, even across borders, under shared rules and auditable controls" (Leach, 2025). It is hoped that the said DTC will offer stable conditions such as coordinated interests of various states, reliable digital infrastructure, and well-defined legal frameworks within which the process of relocating from one country to another can take place with no friction.

The Unified Nomad Pass. The implementation of the Unified Nomad Pass (UNP) will surely serve as a groundbreaking revolution in terms of mobility within the region. The said pass is geared towards breaking down the existing dichotomies of the restrictive immigration systems in place which essentially compel individuals to choose between either being tourists or settlers. This concept is particularly conscious of the need for a 'missing middle' in the current visa policies, which do not cater to the demands of a remote professional who requires more flexible visa provisions. The UNP is designed to provide a seamless entry into the country for citizens of member states of ASEAN into India and vice versa.

Notably, the introduction of the UNP extends beyond mere access to the right of entry as it establishes a specific tax and residency status for the "remote worker." The establishment of the "remote worker" category through this process is vital in resolving any legal and financial issues faced by members of the digital nomad community. This category will provide a framework for ensuring effective taxation and social inclusion within the countries to which they travel. The more logical point to start is by revisiting Indonesia's E33G KITAS (Traveloka, 2026).

Portability of Social Benefits. The idea of Portability of Social Benefits deals with the most basic insecurity of the borderless worker – the absence of a consistent social safety net (Cruz, 2004). Conventionally, contributions towards health and pensions are restricted to certain geographical borders, so with each transition from one nation-state to another, a worker is forced to "restart" their contribution history, losing out on their seniority and any form of social security in the future. For this reason, the creation of an innovative "health and pension wallet" through the blockchain technology proves to be a groundbreaking innovation. This has been originally proposed by Estonia as 'Nomad Security' which include 'telehealth services and a portable digital health record, ensuring consistent healthcare support no matter the nomad's location' (Accelerate Estonia, 2026). This is something that Southeast Asian and Indian governments must consider and maybe improve to maximally harness the potentials of digital nomadism in the area.

Tier-2 Satellite Hubs. The paradigmatic approach to adopting Tier-2 Satellite Hubs aims to spread the benefits of the digital economy to regions outside congested mega-cities and establish themselves within rising cities. In this way, through the promotion of "Nomad Villages" in cities like Da Nang, Chiang Mai, Iloilo, and Mysore, this blueprint acts preemptively against the rampant gentrification witnessed in tier-1 cities such as Manila and Delhi. A good example of a nomad village is the Sikkim model. India launched its first digital nomad village in July 2025. It is officially called the 'Nomad Sikkim' project which is

designed primarily to attract professionals 'seeking a balance between remote work and a peaceful lifestyle' This project is a joint initiative of Pakyong district administration and Sarvahitey NGO. The Yakten Village is equipped with high-speed wi-fi networks and is designed to promote eco-friendly practices as well as foster a sustainable remote work environment (Akashvani, 2025). In 2026, the state of Sikkim opened its second village in Gumpadara, Soreng District and in the near future in Rey, Gantok District (Nomad Sikkim, 2026). By doing this and if replicated in other states, India creates a two-way street where the nomads will be able not only to continue their career path abroad but also to contribute to and learn from the thriving tech industry of India while supporting local livelihoods in the host village.

E-Nomad Initiative. To complement other countries' initiatives, it is recommended that India should launch the E-Nomad initiative to aggressively join the international race for skilled talent, thereby making itself an alternative destination to Southeast Asian countries which are already popular among digital nomads. It is through the identification of high growth technology clusters like Pune and Hyderabad that the Indian government has sought to leverage its current advantages in terms of manufacturing prowess and start-ups to attract foreign talent. This approach indicates that the Indian government has moved beyond offering conventional tourist visas and has now chosen an economic strategy, wherein the new e-visa regime will pave the way for global professionals to integrate into the Indian ecosystem while servicing their global clients.

7. Conclusion

Digital nomads do more than act as temporary residents; they serve as the contemporary builders of the decentralized Indo-Pacific. The nomads represent the live link connecting technology centers such as Bangalore to co-working spaces in Bali. In order to survive in the highly competitive world of the global market economy, it is imperative for India and Southeast Asia to break away from the old notion that the nomads are

nothing more than extended guests. Instead, they should be recognized by the policy makers as a key element of the new regional identity and must be given accordingly soft and hard infrastructural support.

To facilitate the increasing number of nomads in the regions, national and even local governments must play an important role. These institutions should be prepared to address the 'frictions of success' and must be ready to adopt necessary innovations in immigration governance and infrastructure development to harness the potentials of digital nomadism. At the current rate, one simply cannot ignore the growing influence of the digital nomad on the successful establishment of cooperation between India and the ASEAN countries. Although decades of diplomatic meetings may have very well prepared the ground for economic cooperation, the fast and organic development that is taking place now is brought about by the activity of the digital workforce across digital boundaries.

In the case of India and Southeast Asia, the digital nomads act as informal envoys that are responsible in closing gaps in culture and serving as conduits in paving the way for joint projects. As such, digital nomad embodies the very essence of the "Look East" becoming "Live East" and the shared vision where geography does not matter as much as connectivity. In order to make sure that the process develops in full swing, the Indo-Pacific region must itself change, advancing beyond visa initiatives as well as creating a climate in which remote work can thrive in any way possible. By accepting the digital nomad as an integral part of the modern Indo-Pacific region, India and ASEAN countries will guarantee their prominent role in the dynamic digital axis now and in the years to come.

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