



EDITORIAL

Brain Drain vs. Brain Gain: How the Diaspora Is Quietly Reshaping Local Tech

Ten Pakistani-founded companies now sit among America's billion-dollar startups, and a growing number of the people behind them never fully left — they invest, mentor, and increasingly build back into Pakistan even while building somewhere else. The story was never just "brain drain." It was always brain drain and brain gain happening at the same time, and the second half is finally becoming visible.

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Introduction

In June 2026, the National Foundation for American Policy published a study that quietly rewrote part of the brain-drain narrative Pakistani tech media has repeated for years. Analysing more than 700 US startups valued at a billion dollars or more, it found ten with a Pakistani founder or co-founder — placing Pakistan alongside China, Canada, and the United Kingdom in the global rankings of immigrant entrepreneurship, behind only India's 96 and Israel's 60. Sualeh Asif, born in Karachi, co-founded the AI coding startup Cursor. Qasar Younis, born in Lala Moosa and later chief operating officer at Y Combinator, now runs the \$15 billion autonomous-vehicle software company Applied Intuition. Rehan Jalil, a NED University alumnus, built a data privacy platform that Veeam acquired for \$1.725 billion.

The instinct in Pakistani tech coverage — including in this magazine — has been to read numbers like these as further proof of loss: the country's best minds, gone, building wealth and jobs somewhere else. That instinct isn't wrong, exactly. But it's incomplete. An estimated 10,000-plus Pakistanis now work in tech in Silicon Valley alone, and a meaningful share of them never fully exit the local ecosystem. They angel-invest in Karachi seed rounds from California. They mentor Lahore founders over video calls at odd hours. They sit on advisory boards for startups they will likely never work at full-time. Brain drain and brain gain, it turns out, are not sequential chapters in Pakistan's tech story. They are the same chapter, told from two different rooms.

"Brain drain and brain gain were never sequential chapters in Pakistan's tech story. They are the same chapter, told from two different rooms — one in Karachi, one in Palo Alto."

What Brain Gain Actually Looks Like

It rarely looks like a homecoming, and that's part of why it goes underreported. It looks like Indus Valley Capital, the early-stage fund founded by former LinkedIn executive Aatif Awan specifically to back Pakistani startups with Silicon Valley-standard diligence and diaspora capital. It looks like the Organization of Pakistani Entrepreneurs of North America, a network founded in Boston in 1998 that now runs chapters in Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore alongside its North American ones, with roughly 50,000 people on its mailing list — quietly one of the largest standing bridges between overseas Pakistani capital and the local founders who need it. And in



June 2026, it looked like Islamabad signing a formal partnership with Silicon Valley's Plug and Play Tech Center, brokered in no small part by the credibility diaspora professionals had already built with that ecosystem, to run acceleration programmes for 300 startups out of Pakistani universities.

This is what economists studying migration call "brain circulation" rather than brain drain or brain gain in isolation — talent, capital, and knowledge moving back and forth across a diaspora network rather than leaving in one direction and never returning. It looks less dramatic than a headline about an engineer moving to Dubai, and it doesn't show up cleanly in emigration statistics, which is exactly why it has been so easy for Pakistani tech commentary, including our own, to miss it while fixating on departures.

Key Findings & Impact

The scale is still modest relative to India's, and it's worth being honest about that rather than overselling the comparison. India has 96 unicorn founders in the same NFAP study, an institutionalised diaspora venture network decades deep, and a domestic ecosystem large enough to routinely pull senior operators back for real, full-time returns. Pakistan's version is thinner and newer — closer to a handful of committed bridge-builders than a mature circulation system. But thin and newer is not the same as absent, and treating diaspora engagement as purely theoretical, the way some of our own coverage has, undersells what is already measurably happening.

Venture capital into Pakistani startups hit record levels in 2026 by several trackers' counts, and a disproportionate share of the earliest, highest-conviction cheques into local seed rounds now come from exactly the kind of overseas Pakistani operators the brain-drain narrative counts as pure loss. Roshan Digital Accounts — the mechanism that already pulled more than \$11 billion in overseas Pakistani inflows into the formal banking system — were recently expanded to let foreign companies invest through them directly, turning a remittance product into something closer to diaspora investment infrastructure. None of this reverses emigration. It does mean the people who left are, in growing numbers, still functionally present in Pakistan's tech economy — just present as capital and counsel rather than as headcount.

What's Next?

The policy opportunity here is more tractable than reversing emigration outright, which is the goal most brain-drain conversations quietly assume and then fail to achieve. Formalising the on-ramps for diaspora capital — the RDA expansion is a genuine model — matters more than any single repatriation campaign. So does actively courting diaspora-led funds and networks the way the Plug and Play partnership does, rather than treating overseas Pakistanis primarily as a remittance source to be maximised. Universities, too, could do far more to institutionalise the mentorship many diaspora professionals already offer informally, one LinkedIn message at a time, by building structured alumni-return programmes the way Indian institutions have for two decades.

The engineer who left for the Bay Area and the one who stayed to run a WAPDA grid station, which this magazine wrote about only weeks ago, are not opposing case studies in what Pakistani talent should do. They are two ends of the same network, and the country's tech ecosystem needs both functioning well to work at all. Brain drain is real, and the policies that cause it deserve every bit of scrutiny we've given them. But the next chapter of Pakistani tech is as likely to be written by a Cursor co-founder wiring an angel cheque into a Lahore seed round as by anyone sitting in an office in Karachi — and it's past time our coverage, and our policy, treated that as the asset it already is.

About the Author

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