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Indian Punjabi skilled migrants in Britain: of brain drain and under-employment

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the careers of skilled migrants from Indian Punjab. This study complicates the normalization of skilled migration as a “win-win” situation by examining the career trajectories of skilled migrants from the Indian Punjab who are trying to establish themselves in Britain.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper examines 20 life history interviews undertaken with skilled migrants from the Indian Punjab to Britain, in IT, media, law and hospitality industries, health and welfare professionals, and student migrants.

Findings – Skilled migrants were able to migrate on their own auspices through migration economies in Punjab. Once in Britain, however, they were directed to universities and labour markets in which they were not able to use their skills. They experienced under-employment, devaluation of their qualifications and downward mobility, which forced them into ethnic and gendered markets within their home networks and created ambivalence about migrant success and issues of return.

Research limitations/implications – The study emphasizes the need to take a transnational lens when looking at skilled migration, address how migrants’ career trajectories are limited by racism, anti-immigration sentiment and gender inequality, and consider temporality and uncertainty.

Originality/value – The paper raises questions concerning the ways in which rapidly changing “managed migration” policies in Britain have burdened individual migrants.

Keywords United Kingdom, Migrants, Skilled workers, Education, Migrant workers, Ethnic minorities, Gender, India

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper examines the careers of skilled migrants from Indian Punjab, a group significant both in number and in their reputation for “success”. With more than a million skilled migrants living overseas, India is second only to Britain and the Philippines in the numbers it contributes to skilled migrant flows (Skeldon, 2005, p. 11). Since the late 1990s, Indian-skilled migrants have become an increasing presence in European countries facing skill shortages, particularly Britain, France and Germany

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(Khadria, 2008). Indian-skilled migrants are seen as proficient high-tech workers destined to succeed in western countries. As witnessed in the German protests against government efforts to recruit skilled labour from overseas, they have also been feared as such: “Kinder statt Inder” (jobs for our children, not Indians) (Poros, 2001, p. 243). This paper questions the assumption of Indian-skilled migrants as a privileged group. It seeks to specify the features of Indian Punjabi-skilled migration flows in Britain, and explore the relationships between migration histories and career trajectories. As such, it contributes to a literature on skilled migrants that critiques the narrowness of human capital theory and finds inspiration in Bourdieuan sociology, but suggests refinements to this body of work as well as practical implications that remain to be addressed.

Britain has come to see skilled migration as an asset. The labour government in 1997 introduced the first major shift towards “managed migration” since the 1960s, embracing the potential for skilled migrants to fill shortages in key sectors such as IT, health, engineering and teaching (Somerville, 2007). First there was an increase in immigration through the work permit system. In 2002, the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP) was launched, which introduced a “points-based system” to attract high-earning candidates in sectors such as medicine, finance, business and IT. By 2005, India was the largest national group in issues of work permits, with 29,261 (39 per cent of the total), and in HSMP visas, with 6,716 applications approved to Indian nationals (38 per cent of the total) (Salt and Millar, 2006, pp. 344, 349).

In India, too, the emigration of skilled workers has come to be seen as a national asset (Khadria, 2008). The practice of high-tech “bodyshopping” that channelled graduates of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) into Silicon Valley shifted India’s thinking towards skilled migration, as “brain drain” gave way to representations of a “brain bank” abroad. Saxenian (2000), van der Veer (2005) and Upadhyaya and Vasavi (2008) have showed that the IIT-trained “astronauts” shuttling between India and the USA form a technological-industrial-business nexus that facilitates major flows of capital, labour and products, including the brokerage that makes flexible Indian labour available for the global IT industry.

Indian-skilled migration to countries like Britain has therefore come to be cast through the lens of “brain exchange” or “brain circulation” – a “win-win situation” in which highly skilled people have the opportunity to further their careers through migration, to the benefit of their homelands. However, the present research with skilled migrants from the Indian state of Punjab points to tensions and contradictions in the “win-win” model of skilled migration. Conditions of under-employment were an everyday reality, even for the skilled and supposedly privileged, voluntary migrants from an emerging global market such as India. Career trajectories were further differentiated by regional, caste, ethnic and gender identities.

To make sense of these patterns of under-employment and its effects on migrants’ lives, it is helpful to engage a literature on skilled migrants which critiques human capital theory for focusing too narrowly on how the skills and qualifications of migrants affect their labour market outcomes, and seeks to explore how career trajectories are embedded in the social positionality of migrants. The work of Bourdieu (1986) and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) on “forms of capital” and “social fields” has provided useful theoretical orientation. Research on skilled migrants has used Bourdieu’s collapsing of structure/agency and micro/macro-analysis to apprehend the interlocking contextual influences of state policies, social structure, culture and

subjectivity in shaping migrants' modes of engagement or career development strategies, advocating a relational interplay of individuals and institutions in a stratified social field like a labour market (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2005; Syed, 2008; Al Ariss, 2010; Al Ariss and Syed, 2011; Tatli, 2011; Al Ariss *et al.*, 2012). Liversage (2009a, b) has used Bourdieu's emphasis on temporality and uncertainty to see skilled migration as a "vital conjuncture" (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) in which different futures and identities are at stake.

The present research finds inspiration in all these interventions. However, the empirical material discussed in this paper opens into wider questions about the framing of "social field" that this Bourdieu-inspired literature assumes. In the discussion, we return to this literature on skilled migrants and suggest that other theorists might assist in understanding how migrants' capacities to move from position to position are limited by colonial histories, racism, anti-immigration sentiment and gender inequality. We also consider how migrant career trajectories might be understood where under-employment means that the new horizons opened up by migration are perennially deferred, where the "vital conjuncture" fails to come to a close at the point of gaining professional employment.

Research setting and methods

The paper derives from a 32-month European Commission-funded project, "Trans-net", which examined the long-term political, economic, cultural and educational aspects of the transnational connection between Indian Punjab and Britain. We focused on the state of Punjab to provide some focus within a vast and complex Indian global diaspora. Of all the regions of India, Punjab has the longest history of migration to Britain, due to the history of preferential Punjabi deployment within the British Indian army. Punjabis comprise the largest contingent of the Indian diaspora in Britain, with an estimated three to 500,000 Sikhs, 54,000 Hindu Punjabis and lesser numbers of Christians (RHLCID, 2001, p. 124).

Data were collected in the west Midlands, one of the so-called "Little Indian" in Britain, and the Jalandhar Doaba in Punjab. Of the total 190 interviews carried out in the wider project, this paper focuses on the 20 life history interviews undertaken with professionals in IT, media, law and hospitality industries, health and welfare professionals, and student migrants – who must also be included among skilled migrants as "semi-finished human capital" (Skeldon, 2005). An overview of the characteristics of the 20-skilled migrants we interviewed is given in Table I. Nine were working at the time as professionals in the IT industry, media, law, medicine, hospitality or the third sector. Three were still studying full time. However, eight were either carrying out unskilled manual work, or unemployed or looking for work, illustrating their limited career development. This was particularly the case for those who migrated to Britain as spouses, as we discuss in later sections of the paper.

The interviews were open-ended and in-depth, and elicited the participants' migration histories, experiences of work and family life after moving to Britain and reflections on their self-positioning in relation to Britain and India. They were between one to three hours in length, and were transcribed in full. In analysing the data, we sought to explore the context and history to this migration stream, the differences in social positioning that underlay people's divergent career trajectories, the strategies they used to advance their careers, and how they reflected upon their professional trajectories and identities in Britain.

Pseudonym	Gender	Migration route	Education prior to migration	Education since migration	Year of migration	Mode of migration	First employment in Britain	Employment position at interview
Satinder Sandeep	Male	Rural Punjab	Graduate Plus 2	Postgraduate Diploma	2004	Student to work permit	Post-service Factory	IT Medicine
Sukhwinder Amit Vijay	Male	Urban Punjab	Graduate	Graduate Postgraduate Postgraduate	2003	Work visa Student Student to work permit	Restaurant – –	Law Studying Media
Sanjay Dharinder Amarinder Ranjeet Jagjit Gurinder Parminder Inderjit Balvir Manpreet Preety Jagdesh Isher	Male	Via Malaysia	Plus 2	Graduate	2004	Student to family	Retail	Third sector
	Male	Via Kenya	Diploma	–	2006	Family	Factory	Job searching
	Male	Rural Punjab	Plus 2	Graduate	2004	Student	Retail	Studying
	Male	Via Italy	Plus 2	Graduate	2007	Student	Restaurants	Studying
	Male	Urban Punjab	Plus 2	Diploma	2009	Student	Retail	Factory
	Male	Rural Punjab	Plus 2	Diploma	2009	Student	–	Job hunting
	Male	Rural Punjab	Graduate	–	2005	Work visa	IT	IT
	Male	Rural Punjab	Graduate	–	2002	Work visa	Hospitality	Hospitality
	Female	Rural Punjab	Diploma	–	2008	Family	Factory	Factory
	Female	Urban Punjab	MBBS	–	2006	Family	–	Job searching
	Female	Via Delhi	Postgraduate	–	2009	Family	–	Job searching
	Female	Urban Punjab	Diploma	–	2008	Family	Sewing	Sewing
	Female	Urban Punjab	Diploma	Postgraduate	2006	Student	Retail	Sewing
	Female	Via Delhi	Postgraduate	Graduate	2004	Visit to work permit	Leafletting	Medicine
Prabjot	Female	Rural Punjab	Diploma	–	2002	Family	Advisory	Third sector

Table I.
Research participants

Migration economies in Punjab

Punjab might be seen as “an outpost of an outpost of the global economy” (cf. Upadhyya and Vasavi, 2008). During British colonialism, the development of the canal colonies set the precedent for Punjab to be fixed as the “bread basket of India”. For the British, Punjab fitted a desirable pattern encompassing revenue extraction from agriculture and the creation of an agrarian class sympathetic to British rule, in addition to widespread military recruitment. The post-colonial Indian state then reinforced these pre-independence patterns, locking Punjab into an agricultural development strategy through successive five year plans which, as Pritam Singh (2006) and Ajit Singh (2010) have argued, stifled the development of industry and knowledge economies in Punjab. This history provides the context for the migration economy that is burgeoning in the state. Complaining of a lack of opportunities for high-skilled work in Punjab, young people explained that they had little alternative but to migrate overseas.

Skilled migration routes from Punjab start with overseas study, which is one of the few available routes for young people to migrate overseas in the present regime of intensely managed and regulated migration. In Punjab, overseas study has generated a multi-million pound industry comprising agents, brokers, English language coaching and assessment institutions that are stoking and profiting from the dreams of prospective migrants. The roadsides of Punjab are plastered with adverts for consultants purveying student migration services, offering “admission to foreign universities without IELTS” (an English qualification required by overseas universities); “choose best colleges and universities, help with loans and funds, P.R. after study”; “help with part-time job in Australia and New Zealand”.

Meanwhile, the commodification of migration has enabled young people from outside the “Jat” castes and elite classes, who have long dominated in migration from the state, to head overseas. Supported by wider government policies (e.g. permitting bank loans for overseas studies, overseas educators setting up branches in India), the market for student migration has expanded from the “Jat” stronghold to include “backward” and “scheduled” castes. This study thus echoes Michael Baas’s (2006) work on Indian students in Australia, in that many of the skilled migrants were the first in their families to migrate abroad.

Unconventional migration patterns

The life histories of the skilled migrants depart from conventional analyses of chain migration. The most common story was that the idea of migrating overseas for study and professional work emerged from the dynamics of their peer groups. The contingency of this process is illustrated in the following account from Satinder, who was from a village in Ferozepur and became interested in studying overseas as a product of the friendship group he made when studying at a private college in Ludhiana. After completing their Plus 2, he and his friends went to Chandigarh during their holidays, to take the IELTS (English language) test:

We went to Chandigarh, spent like, 6-7 weeks, had some training and then did the test. And in that time when we was taking that courses and doing the classes, we used to go to in Chandigarh there was a British Library, we used to go there and sit there, talk to some foreigners and all, just read some books. And over there we met a lady from Delhi, Mrs Arora was her name. And she just came over, “ok guys, what’s up, what are you doing and all that stuff, if you want to go abroad”, cos she was like an agent for [name of university] [...] She discussed particularly in my course like in networking and IT, she advised “ok so [name of university] is the university for all that IT stuff”. And then I said “ok, if you select this then

it's good – we didn't know anything about UK or these universities or anything". But she told us "this is the best option to go there, there are lots of Punjabi people in that city so you won't find it much difficult to live there and socialize and all these things" Satinder (student to HSMP).

Satinder's account resonates with others stressing the attraction that going abroad had for young people and their desire to interact with "foreigners". Whilst the impetus for going overseas was their long-standing exposure to emigration in the Jalandhar Doaba, the "migration belt" of Punjab, it is important to note that their migration often took place outside of social relationships with earlier migrants. Skilled migrants seem less reliant on the information, sponsorship and material assistance which are common to traditional chain migration (Johnston *et al.*, 2006, p. 1228). Nonetheless, the structure of the migration business and its interdependence with earlier working class labour migration from Punjab meant that student migrants were channelled through the nexus of agents to the "new universities" and "backstreet colleges" in Britain, which, unbeknown to prospective migrants, offer qualifications providing less prestige and value in the British labour market context.

The gendered nature of these migration processes, embedded in practices of male homosociality and freedom of movement to pursue trips to Chandigarh, is also highlighted by Satinder's account. It is not surprising that the female-skilled migrants we interviewed had migrated to Britain through more conventional networks. The majority of female-skilled migrants had come to Britain as spouses. Jagdesh (student) came independently, but she was substantially assisted by her sister who was already married in Britain, who identified a suitable diploma course, helped financially towards the initial instalment of the course fees and was now looking for a marriage proposal to solve Jagdesh's visa problems.

Devaluation of qualifications and under-employment

Most of the skilled migrants experienced their qualifications and experience being devalued after they came to Britain. The extent to which this was the case depended on the mode in which they migrated. Those who migrated within transnational corporations such as Wipro or Royal Caribbean were able to preserve their employment status by virtue of their skills and experience being recognized within company structures. Movement within organizations reduces the risks associated with migration (Poros, 2001; Liversage, 2009a).

The career development of those who migrated on their own auspices was less straightforward. Particularly burdened were those in "protected professions" (Salaff *et al.*, 2002) such as medicine, which control entry to migrants very strictly. They typically had to endure years of "labour jobs" in Britain whilst they prepared for course conversions (see Raghuram and Kofman, 2002). Inderjit (family) had worked as a nurse in Punjab but since she came to Britain, following her father, she had spent a year working in a sandwich factory. She was trying to convert her nursing diploma into qualifications recognized by the Nursing and Midwifery Council, but first needed to improve her English before she would be eligible. For another example, Balvir (family migrant) was trained as a doctor in Punjab and came to Britain in 2002 following her marriage to Sukhwinder, who was a lawyer (work visa). Sukhwinder's career took the lead, as he worked in a law firm and studied for his law conversion course, whilst Balvir – as Sukhwinder's wife and therefore a "tied migrant" according to the immigration rules (Raghuram, 2004) – spent six frustrating years in Britain attempting to pass the Professional and Linguistic Assessment

Board exams, to have her medical qualifications accredited so that she could practice in Britain.

Others with “softer” qualifications had experiences that made them convinced that their CVs were being disregarded because of their Indian experience. Manpreet (family migrant) was a software tester from Delhi, but had spent 18 months applying for jobs in Britain without getting a call. “Maybe the thing is that they prefer their own citizens first to get the jobs”, she deduced, “rather than giving the jobs to migrants”. Those with Indian degrees fared no better in the British labour market than those who arrived with only A-level equivalent “Plus 2” qualifications, so it seems that the prerequisite for a self-initiated migrant to obtain employment commensurate with skills was a degree from a British university. The lack of recognition of overseas qualifications was supposed to be dealt with by the National Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) for the UK. The service came attached with a £100 fee, qualifications were instantly devalued, and the certification was insufficient to redress the doubts that employers had over the value of overseas qualifications.

Family migrants were particularly likely to be under-employed. For the female marriage migrants we interviewed, there were numerous difficulties in taking the time away from family responsibilities in order to engage in further study, although many of them were very keen to obtain British qualifications. They also had difficulties in raising their fees, as within the first two years on their “probationary” spouse visa they still had to pay overseas student rates. Preety (family migrant) had gone for numerous consultations with the career development team at her local college of further education and was thinking to do a “labour job” until the two probationary years passed, and save money rather than asking her husband and in-laws for financial help because “I haven’t asked them, I think the answer would be no but I wouldn’t ask them anyway as I don’t like to ask anyone for anything”. Whilst these difficulties relate clearly to gender relations in their marital homes, male marriage migrants fared similarly. For example, Dharinder (family migrant) was a hardware technician in Nairobi but when he married in Britain had to make do with soldering in an electronics factory. “This testing and hand soldering work could not match my skills”, he said, “but I know that when we start in a new country we have to start from scratch”.

Career strategies and the ethnic economy

Faltering in their career development due to the lack of recognition of their qualifications and experience, itself rooted in the socially embedded and racially exclusionary judgements of employers, many fell back on the ethnic economy established by earlier generations of working class Punjabi migrants. Following the recommendation of one of his classmates, Satinder (student to HSMP) applied for a job with a Punjabi-run media company. He had stayed with the company for four years and benefited from all manner of patron-client relations with his employer Mr Singh. For example, Mr Singh had falsely inflated Satinder’s salary to enable him to apply for the HSMP, and also served as his landlord.

The Punjabi ethnic economy in Britain being highly gendered, female migrants did not progress so harmoniously in their careers through the ethnic economy. For example, Preety (family migrant) and Jagdesh (student) were both educated to tertiary level from India. Jagdesh was, moreover, converting her Indian three-year diploma in IT to English qualifications by studying at a college. However, both of them had been channelled through their networks of kinship-come-friendship into piece working

in the sewing industry for a woman called Bubby didi, a British-born Punjabi businesswoman who was paying them cash-in-hand and neglecting to pay their National Insurance contributions.

Despite absorption into the ethnic economy, the skilled migrants remained resourceful and industrious, and strived energetically to get what they called an “English job”. They talked about their career development in a language of personal growth that was highly individualized and rooted in their own dynamism and effort. Amit, for example, insisted that “I have a very clearly chalked out career plan definitely, I know where I want to be after one year of my MBA, after three years of my MBA, after five years of my MBA, after 10 years of my MBA”. Punjabi-skilled migrants in Britain were not passive victims of the differential workings of capitalism, the state and the family. However, it would be mistaken to confuse this with a “win-win situation”, as their reflections on their situation reveal.

Ambivalence concerning migration

The skilled migrants we interacted with expressed a marked ambivalence concerning the merits of their migration to Britain. Their degree courses allowed them to remain in Britain on post-study work visas or through applying for the HSMP, but the frequently changing entitlements to such schemes gave them a sense of precariousness. They had mixed feelings about whether they wanted to transfer their professional skills and competences back to India. They suggested that there was now a lot of scope in India for such work due to India’s new place in the global economy. Some were intending to return to India, as there was no longer much of a difference in job prospects, and moreover, their earnings in India could afford a much better standard of living, with domestic help and family close by:

If we talk about IT almost everything related with IT is now moving to India, all the IT support and this, it’s all going to India. Here, I won’t say it’s like, much far better but still like, it’s ok. Not bad. It’s not that good either, compared to like the life [in India], and there you’re living with the family, not far away from your parents and, still with all friends and everything (Vijay, student to work permit).

The skilled migrants were often disparaging about their career development in Britain and compared themselves unfavourably to friends and colleagues who had remained in India. However, return was impossible until they had transformed themselves into the successful professional subjects that they felt they should be. The sense of frustration is captured by Sanjay, who had married his girlfriend in a bid to stay in Britain because, as he put it:

The major problem was I had graduated and then I was so many years in England, y’know I haven’t got anywhere career-wise, where am I gonna start when I go back? That was putting me off. That was the main purpose of hindering me from going back and keeping me back here (Sanjay, student to family).

Having to do “labour jobs” incongruent with their professional identities, their self-definitions as an “educated person” or “successful” were threatened (cf. Batzinsky *et al.*, 2008). Sandeep (student to work visa) was now well regarded by his siblings in Punjab as someone who had “good money”. However, he had higher expectations of his career. “I think that was a bad decision”, he reflected. “This country’s given me a lot, but it’s taken something as well”. Their anxieties about loss of status and the social expectations on them from their families in India raise questions about the effects of under-employment on their lives.

Discussion and practical implications

Whilst the research participants hoped to be able to advance their careers by migrating to Britain, this ambition proved to be unattainable for many. This research has shown that devaluation and lack of recognition of qualifications and experience, discrimination of migrants combined with gender inequality in labour markets conspired to prevent many skilled migrants from Punjab from entering high-skilled work and left many reliant on an ethnic economy run on patron-clientism. Consequently, they had to reconceptualize not only their strategies but also their identities as they struggled to enter the higher sectors of the British labour market. This gave them a marked ambivalence towards migration.

These empirical findings question the assumption of Indian-skilled migrants as a privileged group. Moreover, they also open into wider questions for the literature theorizing skilled migrant careers. First, whilst many have found Bourdieu's framing of "social fields" useful for understanding migrants' trajectories in skilled labour markets, Bourdieu treated social fields as autonomous and nationally bound, which raises problems when considering the experiences of skilled migrants. As this research has shown, skilled migrants operate transnationally, moving between the educational and labour markets of their home and destination countries, and the cultural capital of their qualifications may be unconvertible when they cross national boundaries – the "social alchemy" (Bourdieu, 1986) of the certificate sanctioned only by one state. This research suggests that it is important to extrovert the boundaries of how social fields have been defined, and understand how migrants continually position themselves with respect to multiple social fields.

Second, it is evident that the accumulation of cultural capitals by skilled migrants is limited by racism and discrimination of immigrants. Although Bourdieu's early ethnographic investigations in Algeria and his native Béarn were attentive to colonial histories, race and gender inequality (Wacquant, 2004), these dimensions were lost from the later publications in which he elaborated his theoretical position. Bourdieu's co-researcher Sayad (2004) remained more alive to the legacies of colonialism, labour exploitation, devalued gender identities, solitude in the country of immigration and pressures from families "back home", which impinge on migrants' abilities to move upwards and affect their very self-identities.

This is important for highly skilled migrants from the global south to the north, like the Indian Punjabi migrants described in this paper, for whom the "vital conjuncture" of migration overseas may not close by attaining professional employment, but remain perennially open. This threatens their identities and they try to stave off the stigma of their "labour jobs". Liversage (2009b) has rightly drawn attention to how this outcome occurs disproportionately often for highly skilled migrant women, but the differentiation of trajectories by regional, caste or ethnic identities also needs consideration.

It is important for policy makers to understand that receiving states like Britain are not adequately using the skills of migrants, which is an obstacle to "brain exchange" or "brain circulation". The career trajectories of Indian Punjabi-skilled migrants in Britain raise concerns about dependence on consultants and agents, who charge high fees but channel prospective migrants towards low-prestige institutions. Concerns are also raised over discrepancies in accreditation frameworks between countries, which need to be reviewed if the skills and experience of migrants are not to be overlooked and wasted by employers. Beyond NARIC, there is a need to raise awareness of skills equivalency among employers, combined with strong

anti-discrimination policies with respect to race and immigration status. The two-year probationary period in which family migrants on spouse visas are treated as overseas students for tuition fees blocks many skilled migrants at a critical point in their migration trajectories, and disproportionately affects women. Finally, recent changes in Britain since the 2010 general election of the coalition government – putting caps on the HSMP and proposing to close down the post-study work visa – have made skilled migrants even more insecure. The tumultuous pace of change in Britain's policies of “managed migration” needs to be reconsidered from the perspective of migrants' rights.

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