Imagining difference. The experiences of 'transnational' Indian IT-professionals in Germany

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the motivations to migrate and the migration experiences of 22 Indian IT-professionals in Germany. When studying skilled migration, Germany is an interesting case as it struggled with waves of extreme right activities whilst trying to attract IT-professionals from outside the European Union at the same time. In this context, we are interested in the conflicts that the migrants may experience as a result of their desire or obligation to move, their specific cultural baggage and the way in which they encounter the different sides of German society.

Key words: Germany, transnationalism, skilled migration, Indian IT-professionals, culture, conflict, in-depth interviewing

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Introduction

In spite of the admission of five million guest workers since the 1960s (Vertovec 1996), Germany has refused to be called an 'immigration state' (Bude 1996; Akashe-Böhme 2000). Recently however political parties have begun to rethink their attitudes towards immigration as well as their immigration policies based on an emerging economic need (DPA 2001a; Gaserow 2001) [1]. Since 1999, Germany's IT industry has struggled with the lack of sufficiently skilled and specialised workers and an estimated number of 75,000 job vacancies (Welsch 2001). The new migration policies have recognised pressures to fill such labour market niches by widening the possibilities to admit skilled labour, based on the green card model[2] (DPA 2001b).

From the first of August 2000, when the green card scheme was implemented, 20,000 IT-specialists from outside the EU were permitted to live and work there for a restricted period of five years. This measure was devised to prevent their permanent settlement in Germany, as had happened with 25 percent of the guest workers (Vertovec 1996). But in spite of the expectation that 10,000 green cards would have been given out by the end of 2000 (UNI 2000a), the actual number of immigrants has been lower than the government

expected. Only on October 27th, 2001, the 10,000th green card was issued (Leven 2001).

Indian IT-professionals are in many ways privileged as migrants in Germany as a result of company benefits packages. However, their experiences are coloured by their imaginations of Germany such as those created through by the (Indian) media (most notably the perceived threat of rightwing extremist groups) and the migrants' family, and by their own expectations of Germany. Such imaginations and the de-facto culture clash lead to a conflictuous role of the Indian migrants in their host society. Many migrants "live their lives simultaneously across different nation-states, being both 'here' and 'there', crossing geographical and political boundaries" (Riccio 2001, 583). Both economic resources and symbolic resources (such as goods or food from 'home') play an important part in establishing the migrants 'transnational livelihood' (Salih 2001).

This paper explores motivations to migrate and migration experiences with a focus on cultural clashes of 22 Indian IT specialists in Germany. A central question in this paper is how the images of Germany by Indian IT-professionals shape their experiences in the country and vice versa. Before turning to the data collection and respondents in this study, we provide a brief discussion of concepts behind transnationalism and skilled international migration. The next sections focus on the respondents' personal experiences after they migrated to

Germany for their work. We conclude that the migrants face personal struggles, such as leaving their (extended) families for the purpose of career advancement whilst feeling estranged from the cultural context of their host culture. These struggles appear to encourage them to unite in transnational communities. In addition, the migrants' accounts help shed light on the low level of interest in the green card scheme.

Transnationalism

Transnationalism is a widely used but ambiguous term (Vertovec 2001), generally referring to the combination of attachment to 'host' and 'home' country or society that migrants tend to develop, which is facilitated by increased communication and transportation systems (Faist 2000; Bailey 2001; Vertovec 2001; Menjívar 2002; Remennick 2002; Willis and Yeoh 2002). Essential in transnationalism is that it transcends the level of the nation-state (Bailey 2001), whereby transmigrants "develop and maintain multiple relations – familial, economic, social, organisational, religious, and political that span borders" (Glick Schiller *et al*. (1992) cited in Bürkner 2000, 106). Much of the literature on transnationalism in skilled migration focuses on 'transnationalism from above', which refers to processes at the supra-national level (Willis and Yeoh 2002). This research aims to look at transnationalism on a smaller scale, i.e. on the individual or group level, which is called 'transnationalism from below'.

The social networks that transmigrants develop can be referred to as transnational social spaces, which is defined by Faist (2000, 191) as "combinations of ties, positions in networks and organisations, and networks of organisations that reach across the borders of multiple states". He distinguishes three types of transnational social spaces: transnational kinship groups, transnational circuits and transnational communities. In the first group remittances, which are sent home to family members and characterised by reciprocity are important. Trading networks are a typical example of transnational circuits. Transnationalist social space is always a negotiation between attachments to different places, based on perceptions of the host society by the transmigrants (Bürkner 2000). Although transnational communities have perhaps been associated more with 'permanent' migrant groups, such as the Jewish or Mexicans, more recently similar developments have been observed amongst mobile and changing group of migrants. For example, British expatriates in Singapore developed a mixed network in the work place, which they saw as useful for their careers. Their social network, however, excluded Singaporeans, due to the strong ties with other expatriates and cultural differences in socialising (Beaverstock 2002).

Skilled migration

The increase of international labour migration can be related to globalisation of the world economy (Sassen 1988). Within international labour migration, a distinction between skilled and unskilled migration

should be made, which Sassen (1998, xxv) refers to as "a new geography of centrality and marginality". This materialises in a network of global cities specialising in finance and services and in a less successful and integrated periphery (Sassen 1998).

Flows of skilled migrants have neither been extensive in numbers nor long in duration (Hardill 1998). However, their influence on the world-economy has been considerable (Massey and Jess 1995). Although the majority of skilled international migrants currently move from 'developing' to 'developed' countries (Iredale 1999), earlier studies have concentrated on the movement of managers of transnational corporations (TNCs) [3] from the headquarters in developed countries to subsidiaries in less developed countries (Beaverstock 1990 1991 2002; Findlay 1990; Cheng and Yang 1998). This study contributes to the existing literature on international skilled migration by focusing on migration of professionals from a developing to a developed country.

Willis and Yeoh (2000 2002) suggested that most literature on skilled international migration focuses on the workplace and the male individual, and is linked to intra-company labour markets. The result has been a failure to recognise the gendered aspects and the household context of skilled migration. Notable exceptions are, for example, studies by Hardill on British expatriates (1998) and by Willis and Yeoh themselves on Singaporean migration to China (Yeoh and Willis 1999; Willis and Yeoh 2000 2002). Nonetheless, as the greater

part of skilled migrants has consisted of single men, a research focus on individual males instead of households is justifiable (see also Beaverstock 1996). In the context of this research, the reason for the dominance of male interviewees lies in the cultural context from which the respondents originate. In general, it is not socially acceptable for women to have paid jobs, particularly abroad[4].

Most international migrants depend on intermediaries who make arrangements for the work and accommodation of migrants in their host country. Intermediaries can, for example, be personnel offices of TNCs that facilitate international movements of their staff, recruitment agencies, educational institutions or informal international networks of family and friends. Intermediaries function as 'migration channels', by channelling information and resources (Findlay and Garrick, 1990). Recruitment agents (inter-firm migration; Tyner 2000) and personnel managers (intra-firm-migration; Beaverstock 2002) are of particular importance, since they can contribute to a biased (for example gendered) selection that fits the prejudices of the employers (Tyner 2000).

Aside from company policies, other important factors are shortages and saturation in domestic and international labour markets for certain occupations (Beaverstock 1991). Furthermore, individual motivations, aspirations and decisions by migrants themselves influence the nature of skilled migration as well. Amongst others, Beaverstock (1991)

argued that there are three key individual motivations that influence the decision to work abroad: career-path improvement, personal development and financial gain. More recently, Stalker (2000) emphasised financial gain as the key motivation for migration, whilst other motivations are the desire to escape from limited promotion opportunities and the wish to travel and live abroad (Amit-Talai 1998). In particular where migration from 'developing' to 'developed' countries is concerned, unfavourable living conditions at home can also be a stimulus (Tzeng 1995). Cheng and Yang (1998) stated that confrontation with a Western life style by migrants from less developed countries increases awareness of and dissatisfaction with material inequality and eventually leads to permanent emigration.

Data collection

To collect data for this paper, twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted. Data were transcribed and analysed with the help of the computer package QSR N4. Initially, one interview per respondent was held but the respondents agreed to be contacted again by e-mail or telephone in case of uncertainties or the need for feedback. All interviews were held with Indian IT-professionals, working for TNCs in the Frankfurt am Main metropolitan area in Germany. The respondents were recruited using a snowball approach. Three further respondents were contacted with the help of the *Industrie und Handelskammer* (Chamber of Commerce) in Darmstadt. This was the only official channel through which respondents were found. Official institutions

were very reluctant to give information for reasons of privacy (*Datenschutzgesetz*). It was impossible to establish contact with Indian employees who are the only foreigner working for a small company in non-metropolitan areas.

This approach led to a sample of predominantly male respondents (18 male and 4 female respondents) between 23 and 30 years old, single, Hindu, (upper) middle class and educated either in computer science or in engineering. The respondents were all employees of TNCs, and had come to Germany through the Indian counterparts of their companies. Only six respondents held green cards, whilst the others have long-term visa. At the time of the interviews, the respondents had spent time periods roughly varying between six months and two years in Germany. Most planned to stay about one and a half years in Germany altogether.

Key motivations for migration

The analysis of interview data revealed a range of motivations for respondents to come to Germany (table I). The three key motivations mentioned by the Indian IT specialists correspond with the findings by Beaverstock (1991), Amit-Talai (1998) and Stalker (2000) outlined above: career, money and personal experience. Nineteen respondents stated they had come to Germany as a career move, eighteen for the experience and thirteen for the additional income. One respondent explained the career move accordingly:

"I'm willing to sacrifice it if I thrust up my career. If I thrust up money in life, a few years doesn't matter." (14[5])

This quote illustrates an aspect that has been neglected in earlier studies. Although other authors also mentioned career improvement as a motivation for working abroad, they do not stress the sacrifices made in family life while pursuing career improvement. In contrast to the findings of earlier studies (see Hardill 1998; Yeoh and Willis 1999; Willis and Yeoh 2000), the move by female respondents was not motivated by their husbands. Instead, the key motivation was, equally to the male respondents, a career move.

Insert Table I here

As the respondents moved from a 'developing' to a 'developed' country, it could be expected that a better quality of life was a key motivation for working abroad (Tzeng 1995). This could not, however, be substantiated in the context of this study. A possible explanation is that all respondents come from at least middle class families in India. The standard of living that they are used to may be comparable to what they found in Germany. Relatively however, they were more prosperous in India. Various respondents commented on the value of money in India and on the prestige attached to it. One respondent illustrated:

> "We have more value […] for money, than here. I [can] buy a DVD-player over here, and no one cares about it. But in India if I buy a DVD player, it's something." (21)

The findings of this research suggest that the relative quality of life is more important than an absolute improvement achieved by moving to a more developed country as was suggested by Cheng and Yang (1998). It is notable that eighteen respondents emphasised motivations less oriented towards materialistic improvement such as personal growth, travel and German culture. Many respondents emphasised both the educational and the 'fun-side' of their stay. They felt they were expanding their horizons, being confronted with the life-styles and habits of another country, thus showing an eagerness to stimulate their cultural imagination. For example:

> "I thought it's good, one thing is to learn a different culture, learn a different language, meet more people […] My personal opinion is, the more you travel, your outlook on life […] changes, you become more tolerant of different cultures, you learn a lot more. […] I want to open my horizons." (17)

Experiences in Germany

In the following paragraphs, we explore five themes that were significant to the respondents: language, family structures, social

structures, working culture and racial discrimination. The respondents observe that Germans are distant towards them, which they relate to a perceived inward orientation of German families, differences in socialising and intentions of racial discrimination. A combination of these factors discourages them from understanding German culture and integrating, for example by learning German. Social contacts remain largely restricted to English speaking (Indian) colleagues. Instead of taking part more actively in German society, they unite in a transnational community. Outside the 'safe' environment of the transnational community, the respondents feel insecure and 'out of place'. The negative images that the respondents have of Germans and German society tend to be reinforced by reciprocal sceptical and expectant attitudes. A lack of mutual understanding reproduces barriers between the groups.

Language

Language proficiency is regarded as an important means by which culture can be transmitted (Hofstede 1991). Without knowing the language, the communication of feelings is impaired and a barrier between cultures remains (Benmayor and Skotnes 1994). Although various respondents stated their wish to learn about the culture, remarkably few expressed their aim to learn the German language.

Most respondents have little knowledge of the German language. People who have been in Germany longer, tend to speak the language

better, but never exceed the basic level[6]. Therefore, most people communicated in English. However, many respondents also believed that outside the working environment, Germans "don't speak English at all." (3), and "it's not easy to survive here if you don't know German." (22). Communication with Germans remained problematic and a number of interviewees 'overcame' this problem by establishing contact almost exclusively with Indians or a handful of English speaking people. In so doing, cross-cultural adjustment became problematic and many interviewees were prevented from fully participating in or adjusting to the host-culture. In addition, the proximity to Indian speaking peers and the restricted period of residence in Germany contributed to the perception of most respondents that learning the language was not essential.

"As long as you can understand some little words, I think that's okay." (12)

"There's no necessity for me to learn German." (15)

The respondents acknowledged the resulting lack of opportunity to establish contact with 'average' Germans who do not speak English. They justified this however by arguing that German society itself is too different and difficult to access. Key differences that the respondents commented upon were the family structure, social structure, working

culture and racial discrimination. These aspects are discussed in turn in the following.

Family structures

During the interviews, most respondents described significant differences between German and Indian family structures. Due to the specific cultural context in India, the structure of Indian families was often spoken of as being important. Indians are closely in touch with their families:

> "I call my parents every once or twice a week or something like that. [...] family bonds are very very tightly knit in India, so [I] really can't help it." (8)

In contrast, the respondents felt that German people live their lives independently from each other and that little time is reserved for people outside the nuclear family. Even in social life, the respondents perceived that friends make appointments in order to meet each other rather than visiting spontaneously. As a result, home has become a very private part of life to which only close friends are invited. The following quote illustrates the respondents' perceptions:

> "I feel they are always wanting privacy […]. And the house is their palace. I mean palace is a very good thing, but you should welcome people to your palace. They're very restrictive. You

don't know whether you would be welcome in their house or not. In India, you don't phone before you go to somebody's house […] And […] if I see the Germans, [they live separated from] their parents […], the children after eighteen they [live] separate, the brother and sister [live] separate, sometimes the husband and wife are separate[d] […] Everybody is living his own life." (14)

In India, the respondents function as parts of the extended family, which determines their identity to an important extent. The group provides safety and protection beyond adulthood. In contrast, Germans live in the context of the nuclear family. Rather than being dominated by their social context, personal preferences form the most important part of their identities. In the Indian culture, the extended family strongly influences individual decisions. The effect of individual actions on the extended family is always considered before making a decision. The individual move abroad does not necessarily contradict this as careers and status are valued highly, and personal achievement reflects positively on the family as a whole. Together with sending home remittances, improving the status of the family indicates that the respondents exist as part of a closely-knit transnational kinship group. Simultaneously, the respondents develop a transnational community in their host country.

Social structures

It was noted above that most respondents have only Indian friends and do not interact much with Germans in their personal lives. Half of the respondents have a social circle that consists of Indian colleagues, which indicates that the respondents have little contacts originating outside the workplace and their own peer group. If they have German friends, which was the case for seven respondents, it is essential for most of them to speak English. It is easy to meet other Indians at work, since many are working in the same company. They are all in the same situation and can support each other. Respondents indicated that they highly valued the convenience of having people around who understand their problems but more importantly, their way of life and their culture. An important part of socialising is the preparation and sharing of Indian meals. Like the women in Salih's (2001) study, the (male) migrants use symbolic resources from India to construct their personal homes in the foreign culture.

The sharing of a common way of life and consequent development of a shared identity indicates that the respondents form transnational communities that are sometimes organised at an inter-regional scale (Green card Indians 2001; Munichmela 2001). Although the data from this research suggests that, as time elapses, more contacts with Germans develop, many people were satisfied with an (almost) completely Indian circle of friends. In addition to mutual prejudices or differences between Indians and Germans, the respondents also

perceived racist attitudes and the lack of initiative by Germans to approach them as reasons for the restricted intercultural friendships. A respondent remarked:

> "Nobody [of the Germans] has asked me [to go out with them], first of all. That's one thing. Here I don't think people generally come and ask you, do you wanna do this?" (17)

The respondents related this largely to the German close nuclear families and individualism discussed above.

Working culture

A key cultural difference relates to people's attitude to the work process and, in particular, the working hours. The respondents perceived that in Germany most people work eight hours a day and then go home. At work, their main objective is to work thus keeping the time for breaks to a minimum. The respondents concluded that Germans may thus be unable to make many friends in the context of the workplace. In contrast in India, it is common to take more breaks during work and to socialise with colleagues.

Furthermore, many interviewees noted that Germans work for forty hours a week, even in busy periods such as when several projects need to be completed. In India, the respondents were used to working more hours when there was much work and fewer hours when there

was little work. When necessary, they also worked weekends. Although some respondents stay behind at work in the evenings, or work on weekends in Germany as well, they explain that they do so predominantly when they feel lonely. It must be noted that the interviewees also described a number of other features of German work culture that they valued highly such as discipline, methodological approach, professionalism and more equal work relations.

Several other cultural differences were encountered by the respondents amongst which were food, German directness, planning and aloofness. In the context of this paper however, we will close the discussion with a view to the issue of racial discrimination.

Racial discrimination

When the green card system was announced, this resulted in a wave of political protests. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the CDU-candidate for premier, Jürgen Rüttgers, ran a campaign under the slogan: "Kinder statt Inder" (Children instead of Indians). Indian applicants for green cards were described as new guest workers, who would take away potential jobs for unemployed Germans (Leithäuser 2000), in particular those in the former GDR.

In the attitude towards immigrants, the notion of citizenship as 'an institutionalised form of solidarity' (Faist 2000, 202) is important, since this is lacking in Germany. For example, until 2000 immigrants could

not obtain German nationality if they did not have 'German blood' (Faist 2000; Kastoryano 2000), and they were denied political rights (see discussions in Rex 1994; Aspeslagh and Raven 1997; Guiberneau and Rex 1997; Doomernik 1998; Schuck and Münz 1998; Joppke 1999). The prevalence of racism and intolerance towards different cultural habits by some Germans further prevented integration. In the Indian media, too, Germany was portrayed as a racist country:

"Racism rears its ugly head yet again" (Mehta 2000)

"German politicians […] using foreigners as scapegoats" (Mehta 2000)

"The general impression [is] that Germans do not welcome foreigners, especially coloured ones" (Guha 2000)

Activities of a small group of right-wing extremists in (particularly East) Germany are extensively reported abroad. They perceive foreigners as a threat to economic prospects for themselves and opposing German culture, rather than viewing foreign workers as a trigger for economic development (Kim 2001). Although the respondents' personal confrontations with racial discrimination were few and restricted to being ignored or ill-treated, their accounts suggested that they were careful and tried to avoid places they believed were dangerous. It is important to note that the respondents' fear of racial discrimination plays a limited role in their attempts to develop social ties with

Germans. It is notable that the interviewees generally perceived West Germany as safe and (North) East Germany as unsafe. Three respondents did not want to travel to East Germany because they were scared:

"I don't go to East Germany. [I] even [don't go to] North Germany, or Berlin. I'm afraid. I'm scared to go to Berlin. I don't want anything to happen with me." (14)

Although other respondents had travelled to those parts, they also stated that they were scared and therefore careful, for example:

"When I went to Berlin, I was really scared, because people had told me that it's not a very safe place to [visit]. So nothing happened, but it was always on the back of my mind, that anything could happen anytime." (1)

People who had not been to the North or the East based their opinion mostly on the Indian media and stories from acquaintances. However, they also noted that since they did not go there themselves, they found it hard to pass judgement.

Conclusion

Germany has recently begun to revise its migration policies. In spite of its historical denial of being an immigration state, several measures

were implemented to facilitate skilled migration into market niches such as the IT industry. Against this background, we studied the experiences of Indian IT-professionals who migrated to Germany through migration channels within TNCs. In many ways, these migrants are privileged as they are provided with generous reallocation packages, hence economic security and quasi guaranteed career advancement. During their stay, they aimed to advance their careers, to gain money and for personal experience. It appears that the relationship between the skilled migrant and the host culture is largely one of economic functionality which serves the needs of both.

Nevertheless, the personal narratives of the respondents to this research indicate that their migration experiences must be seen as more than simply functional. Their experiences are marked by daily struggles when trying to establish a sense of home. One of the first, but major, problems is the inability of the migrants to speak German fluently whilst German people in their immediate environment are equally lacking English language proficiency. This problem is particular for Germany, since other major destination countries for Indian IT-professionals such as the United States and the United Kingdom are English speaking. Inhibited by language problems, the respondents were reluctant to establish contacts with Germans, particularly as they perceived additional differences in family structures, social structures and working culture. Furthermore, and largely based on image created through the media, they feared racial discrimination. They felt not

welcomed but threatened by representations of them as guest workers taking over 'German' jobs. Simultaneously, we observe the development of transnational kinship groups either by phone or mail to the family 'at home', as well as the development of transnational communities in Germany through the establishment of Indian circles of friends. Symbolic resources, in particular the preparation and sharing of (Indian) meals remain important mechanisms that emphasise the dislocation of the migrant from her/his host culture. Binding factors based on a shared culture and on common rejection of parts of the host culture result in a closely-knit transnational community. The experiences outlined in this paper explain, at least in part, why the interest in the German green card scheme has been lacking. In addition, it can be suggested that legal measures to limit the migrants' stay are rather superfluous and concerns about permanent settlement premature since migrants show little dedication to their host culture.

Notes

[1] See also Klusmeyer (2001) for a discussion on proposals of migrant integration by political parties such as the CDU.

[2] An alternative to the green card is a long-term visa. This is a work and residence permit for up to one and a half years with a possibility of extension.

Even after the introduction of the green card, the German government has continued to give out long-term visas.

[3] International transfer of human capital, such as managers and professionals, is essential in TNCs (Beaverstock and Boardwell 2000). For a more elaborate discussion on TNCs we refer to analyses of the Bartlett and Ghoshal (1989) Organisational Typology by Leong and Tan (1993) and Harzing (2000)

[4] See also discussion in Chant and Radcliffe (1992) on a household strategy approach in the understanding of gender selectivity in migration patterns.

[5] The number following the quote refers to the number of the respondent allocated in this research for reasons of confidentiality.

[6] Except for three respondents who had either studied in Germany or studied German in India.

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Table I: Motivations for coming to Germany by respondent and by motivation.

Respondents	Career	Travel and personal	Money	German culture	Europe over US	Company placement	Help India	Quality of life
1	•					•		
2	•		•	•			•	
3		•			•	•		
4	•	•			•		•	
5	•	•	•	•				
6	•		•					
7	•	•		•				
8	•				•			
9	•	•	•		•			•
10	•	•	•	•	•			
11	•	•	•	•		•	•	
12	•	•	•	•				
13	•	•						
14	•	•	•			•		•
15	•	•	•			•		
16	•	•	•	•				
17	•	•	•	•				
18	•	•		•				
19	•					•		
20		•		•	•			
21	•	•	•	•	•			
22		•	•	•	•	•		
Tot.	19	17	13	12	8	7	3	2