

STUDY ON GENDER-BIAS AND SOCIAL SECURITY OF ASIANS IN AUSTRALIA: CASE STUDY OF INDIAN WOMEN PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract:

In the era of globalization, many women have opted for employment abroad to advance their career development. These immigrants are faced with a host of new challenges and new experiences, including differences in educational background, religion and culture between the place of origin and the place of work. The career progress of these professionals, and how they influence bilateral relations between the two countries, are some of the issues which have been addressed. This paper has explored these aspects, focussing on women from India making their careers in Australia.

The main objective was to explore the transnational cultural context of the Indian women professionals in Australia. The study has explored and analyzed the transnational global networks of social relations that link together the country of origin and country of employment. The researcher has constructed a “transnational social field” that extends beyond single location, with a distinct kind of social field in which they maintain familial, economic, political and cultural ties.

Key words: Transnational, Diaspora, Migration, Indian Women professional, Bilateral linkages

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1. Introduction:

The first decade of the 21st century has witnessed a rapid transformation in the knowledge base of our society. Owing to the accelerated pace of industrialization, urbanization and globalization there is a growing demand for professionals and technocrats at national and international levels. Associated with the demand, in recent years, migration from poorer to richer countries has increased significantly. The main focus of this research paper is on post-colonial immigrants from India or ‘new immigrants’ who are primarily from professional backgrounds. Today Indians of varied cultural, linguistic backgrounds participate vigorously in community based and cultural associations in Melbourne. Cultural contacts and intercultural communication does not necessarily result in a uniform world

culture. 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).

According to the UN Population Division (2006), A UN compilation of migration statistics from 228 countries and areas indicates that the United States leads the world as a host country, with 38 million migrants in 2005 constituting almost 13 per cent of its population. But the share of the population who are migrants is larger still in Australia (19.6 per cent in 2005) and Canada (18.9). Especially women have been an important component of international migration population over the past five decades.

India is now a major supplier of professionals in the world economy. Indian colleges produce about two million graduates each year, 80% of whom possess some proficiency in the English language (The Economist 2005). As not all the graduates in India can be absorbed locally, many find migration to the affluent Western countries an attractive proposition since it offers an opportunity to earn higher incomes and afford a better standard of living. Indian professionals have successfully established high-technology enterprises and occupied positions in the upper echelons of the corporate sector India has emerged as a leader in providing offshore services to the industrialized, developed countries on the basis of its relatively low-cost, well-trained, English-speaking workforce. According to the recent reports Indians now constitute the third largest population in Australia and are ahead of the Chinese (Australian Bureau of Statistics). This inflow is mainly connected with an increasing demand for higher technical and professional skills within Australia resulting in a less restrictive immigration policy towards immigrants from Asia. Indian computer professionals have been one of the major beneficiaries with the shifting emphasis of skill requirements in the Australian immigration program.

Between 1948 and 1968, the influx of immigrants into Australia comprised largely of unskilled workers, but from 1969 onwards an insufficient supply of professionals led to increased recruitment of skilled people from overseas (Iredale, 1997).

Since the introduction of the temporary business entry (long-stay), 457 visas in 1996, skilled temporary migration has become an increasingly important element of international migration to Australia. In 2005, Indians became the second largest migrant group under the skilled migration category after Britain and New Zealand. During the period 2004-2005 out of 9,414 Indians, 7244 qualify as skilled migrants and this figure is rising steadily.

Owing to the high skill levels and capacity, Indian women professionals in IT, medical and education sector are becoming an important social and economic force in Australia. These women play a vital role in strengthening the bilateral ties and relations between India and Australia.

Against this background, the present research deals with the Asian diaspora in general and the Eastern-Indian (Oriya) diaspora in particular, where national boundaries crisscross and where human networks go beyond community relationships. In this era of liberalization, privatization and globalization, many Oriya professionals are migrating to the developed countries such as USA, Canada and Australia, looking for a relatively better and brighter future. The most startling part of the immigration story of Oriyas is that after 1990, a large number of professionals in the field of computer engineering, software development, medicine and accountancy from Orissa opted to reside permanently in Australia.

2. Globalization, Migration and Global Indian Women:

'As a woman I have no country, as a woman I want no country, as a woman my country is the whole world' -quoted by Virginia Woolf at the start of the twentieth century, at a time – in between two devastating World Wars – when the world was rife with rising nationalism, boundary disputes were deadly and exclusions were rampant (**Stolcke, 1997**). This is appropriate for the women migrants in the 21st century.

New global formations, exemplified by 'post-national' types of membership/citizenship (**Soysal 2000**), increasingly internationalized professional labour markets (**Iredale 2001; Ball 2004**), 'imagined (global) communities' that transgress the nation-state (**Parreñas 2001**), and the dynamic nature of migrants certainly 'challenge any notion that the state and individual are hermetically sealed' (**Kapur 2003: 12**). Women now outnumber male immigrants in the major immigration countries of Australia, the United States, and Canada, and this shift is due to the increased migration of women from the Asian countries. Yet their position in transmigration has largely been ignored. Indeed, women were largely absent from the study of international migration prior to the 1970s and this inattentiveness has been widely criticized in the literature of the 1980s and 1990s (Boyd 1986, 1992, 1995; Cheng 1999:40; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999; Pessar 1999; Kofman et al 2000).

It was only in the mid-1980s and 1990s that gender, as a set of social relations and a central organizing category affecting decisions, circumstances, institutional processes and

outcomes of migration. Shifts in Australia's immigration selection since the 1980s to give greater prominence to skilled, well-educated workers have indirectly favored the selection of women immigrants. Well-educated and skilled professional women can now more easily apply to migrate to Australia based on their own attributes, rather than those of their husband or father. Yet another contributing factor to the rise in Australia's population of women immigrants is the erosion of traditional social constraints on these women in their countries of origin. In combination with advancements in transportation and communication tools, these elements have led to the intense movement of people, products, and ideas over international borders highlighting the fluidity of the modern international order (Khoo and Yeoh 1998; International Monetary Fund: Far Eastern Economic Review 2001).

Given globalized communications, more people are aware that life may be better somewhere else, and this also serves as a catalyst for migration. A case in point comes with increases in highly skilled migration (HSM) as a result of changing global labour market demand/supply conditions and consequently, changing immigration regulations, increasing internationalization of professional labour markets, as well as scientific and professional contexts in leaving and receiving societies (Iredale 2001; Ackers 2004; Couton 2002).

The increase of international labour migration can be related to globalization of the world economy (Sassen 1988). 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) from the head quarters in developed countries to subsidiaries in less developed countries (Beaverstock 1990 1991 2002; Findlay 1990; Cheng and Yang 1998).

Melbourne's Indian population includes an extensive network of community associations and other institutions. The expression of Indian identity in a modern, multicultural city is increasingly evident from the participation of members in the workforce and the proliferation of Indian restaurants and specialist shops. Supported by the strength of a common position in an information-driven global economy, this transnational group of professionals actively constructs an ideology of belonging to the nation that reconciles the individualism and consumerism of a "global" culture with the values of a nuclear and often patriarchal family, defined as "Indian". "Global Indianness" is still a dynamic ideology

that draws attention to gender and class, and also continues to retain an important fluidity across contexts and personal histories.

Professional women immigrants socialize with the individuals from the host country and find it easier due to their proficiency in English, and are able to cope with the difficulties associated with being far away from their homes and being in an unfamiliar culture (**Tung 1998**). Ostensibly no longer weighed down by the shackles of tradition, Asian women became the embodiment of “global” beauty, as also showed intelligence and proficiency in English. This regard for the nation made them successful both at home and abroad, while reinforcing the successes of economic liberalisation in India (Ahmed-Ghosh2003; Parameswaran, 2004).

At the 2006 Census, there were 52,853 India-born persons in Victoria (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008). They represent a wide range of languages, faiths and cultural groups. Overall the population is highly educated and proficient in English. Around 35% of Victoria’s Indian-born population (18,942 persons) speak only English at home (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008). 2.1% of the Indian-born population in Victoria identified as speaking English ‘not well’ and less than 1% spoke English ‘not at all’ (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).46.9% of the Indian-born population in Victoria assessed themselves as speaking English ‘very well’ and 13.5% as ‘well’ (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).

The Oriyas, migration from the state of Orissa to the industrially developed countries is a recent phenomenon. During the 1960s and 1970s in the state of Orissa, a number of technical and engineering colleges and institutions have been established in major cities such as Rourkela, Bhubaneswar, Talcher, Berhampur, Cuttack, and Baripada. These institutions produced large number of engineers and professionals who are unable to get employment in India. As a result, many Oriyas migrated to the United States, Canada and Australia looking for a brighter future. This period was often called as the ‘Brain Drain’, which pushed large number of engineers, doctors, scientists, and teachers from India to the developed countries. The migration did not stop, further as a result of the developments in the field of transport and communication have led to unprecedented migration of Oriyas since the late seventies. Presently Oriyas are found in many parts of the world. Oriyas abroad are now proud of their mercantile tradition. They are not only in business but also are highly educated, having gained professional qualifications in such fields as science, technology, medicine, economics and business management. In the early 21st century, the Oriya community seems to be at the

crossroads in every sphere of life (Sahoo, 2008). The Oriyas continue to keep in touch with their relatives and old friends in Orissa and in other countries. Their personal linkages are maintained through telephone, letters, Internet, Email and through personal home visits where as the socio-economic linkages are manifested through the form of marriage arrangements, kinship networks, remittances and religious ceremonies. They have succeeded in reviving some of the old ideas and values. Further due to the development of Internet it has now become possible to create an Oriya 'Virtual Community' where the people of Oriya community all over the world can participate in a community.

3. Research Methodology

Respondents were contacted through various Associations like Oriya Association (Orioz), cultural, social and religious activities, get together, personal contacts. As all the respondents knew English, translation was not required. The majority of the Indian women who move to Australia, do so to be with their husband. There are obviously drawbacks to the sampling strategy. Because there is no comprehensive list of Indian women Professionals residing in Australia the sample can never be truly random or truly representative. Focused group has been selected and were invited separately in groups for Oriyas and Indians respectively. Consent was obtained from all participants prior to their engagement in the study. We conducted this study in a large, culturally diverse Melbourne city, using ethnographic methods, including unstructured in-depth interview, focused group discussion and participant observation. Qualitative approach has been taken into consideration. For the qualitative purpose, the method of group discussions has been followed.

Focus group questions were asked on the following methodology designed by the researcher, on the following broad theme:

- Career growth and scope of the job
- Social and cultural network
- Degree of adaption to the culture of Australia
- Gender Barrier
- Global Indians

4. Degree of adaption to the culture of Australia

It must be noted that the interviewees also described a number of other features of Australian 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, directness, planning and aloofness. Many respondents emphasized both the educational and the 'fun' sides 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, meet more people and thereby you become more tolerant of different cultures, you learn a lot more.

Similarly there are cultural barriers involving consumption of alcohol and dietary needs that may provide a further cultural barrier for migrants to integrate or at least feel comfortable at social workplace events. Examples include migrants that may be invited to an Australian Barbeque where it may be difficult culturally especially if the migrant does not eat meat or does not drink alcohol as perceived by women Indian migrants.

Many Indian migrants arrived in Australia on the **SIR** (Skilled Independent Regional visas) and felt very isolated when they arrived in Australia with little or no support regarding settlement (i.e. housing, employment, schools and general relocation information). This area must be improved if the Australian Government wishes to enhance ties with South Asia.

Gender Barrier:

Swarna, a Psychiatrist; experienced some harassment during her schooling. She had her schooling in a small town in Bendigo some 35 years back. The children did not have much exposure to other cultures, with the result that she and her young brother was the subject of 'racial inferences and taunts'." Teacher also some time said in disgusting voice, "all these overseas students..... "The attitudes of students and staff changed dramatically when they got to a reputed high school in Melbourne where students were much more disposed to accepting difference and the school's multicultural policies made schooling very culturally inclusive. Veenita, a doctor said 'Gender barrier is still there at the workplace whether you are an Indian or Australian, does not matter. You can't get promotion. When it comes for surgery in the hospitals, they'll not let a lady doctor do the operation .I as an Indian women doctor, felt twice the burden. Surekha, a solicitor, who did her schooling and college at Sydney said 'In the legal profession gender inequality remains an issue. It is evident in my workplace where male bonding in many ways allows male junior solicitors or trainees to command more respect from the Partners (who are male) more so than senior female solicitors or more experienced female legal staff. A professor in Math said 'In academic workplaces in Australia, I feel that there is a gender bias but not a culture bias. I have never faced any discrimination at work. I have moved up in my role through my work at my organization'.

Global Indians

The importance of “balance” between individual, family and community responsibilities was not a recurring theme in the narratives of professional women I interviewed. Although these women expressed a diversity of viewpoints on how they achieve or fail to achieve that most desired balance in their own lives, they frequently referenced a common set of values and morals that they defined as “Indian”. For most women, “Indian” values were incorporated into what they understood to be “global” values with little or no conflict. Indeed, in many instances, “globalness” and “Indianness” were not understood as conflicting or antithetical to one another, but complementary. The strategies that individual women use to produce an unproblematic idea of “global Indianness” are instructive of how gendered discourses of family, religion, culture and class come to constitute “global Indianness” as a cultural ideology.

5. Participant Observations:

The experience the author gained as a participating observer is summed up as follows:

First, on a couple from Assam and Delhi, who have taken voluntary retirement from Indian Civil service and came to Australia in their mid fifties to attain satisfaction in academic field. The wife followed the husband in her academic pursuit in Australia. After completing her Ph.D. from a reputed University in Melbourne, she tried to get into one of the academic Institutes but did not succeed (She felt frustrated with herself). Now she is working with an NGO. She told ‘ I don’t feel comfortable with young Australians. Their way of talking and thinking differs from mine. Their accent is different from mine.’

One young south Indian woman shared that she spoke to her parents in the same accent that they used to speak with her back home. Yet when operating outside home, the accent she had acquired as a result of her schooling and her interaction with the mainstream came into play. This suggested that there was a certain comfort and confidence level in responding to both the kinds of situation. Author interacted with an Oriya woman, who was born in India and after doing her primary education in India, her parents moved to Australia. About the reason behind the migration, she told that her parents migrated to Australia because of their children’s educational prospects and Australia’s political, economic and social stability.

In an Annual Cultural event of Oriya association at Canberra, a strong bonding was observed amongst them, to retain Odiya language and culture. All of them young or old tried to talk in Oriya. The 3rd generation children were trying to talk in a blend of Aus-Odiya language. Most of the professional women came with either their father or husband. While discussing with some of the Indian women doctors came from West Bengal (eastern part of India), Karnataka (southern side of India) and Ahmedabad (Western side of India) as to why they migrated to Australia, their responses were unanimous; Australia's position as an emerging power, presented them with obvious opportunities. One lady in a get together was describing her experience as 'hard work' and said that she looked for Indians with whom to associate, attended Indian functions and generally sought the company of other Indians because of her loneliness and feeling of isolation.

In most of the Indian families, Indian cuisine was the first preference. However, women find it difficult to maintain balance between home and work. The Indian men are not in the habit of doing household work like westerners, all the household chores come to women. Another woman, who is working in a bank, is having problem in leaving her aged mother at home. 'I feel guilty of leaving my aged ailing mother at home alone. She is developing dementia by staying alone. Nobody is there at home or in the neighborhood to talk to her.'

Adhering to orthodox religious observances of worship, the caste system, arranged marriages etc were already been viewed as out of date and incongruous in Australia. The need to blend in with the social milieu of their peers and become part of the mainstream was a far more significant concern for younger people of Indian descent. However, in organizing various cultural events, there is a desperate effort among older Indians in Australia, to keep alive those cultural practices which they brought with them at the time of their migration, giving responsibilities to younger people to organize cultural festivals so that they can retain and pass on the Indian culture to the future generation Indian migrants.

6. CONCLUSION

The past decade witnessed the ascendance of skilled women migrants in Australia. In Australia, the United States, and Canada, and in many other countries where women outnumber male immigrants, the increased flows are related to the increased contribution from Asian sources of immigration. With the recognition of networks of skilled worker circulation, many social scientists and national policymakers have tended to shift from a

discourse of 'brain drain' to notions of the globalization of human capital, brain exchange, brain circulation and the creation of a global mobile workforce.

Despite women's multiple, intersecting identities (such as race, ethnicity, class, ability, sexual orientation, age, religion and so on) they all experience elements of exclusion unique to their gender at some level (Kofman et al. 2000: 83-84; Raghuram and Kofman 2004:97). The transnational workplace is marked by a contest of identities. Professional interaction and work practices in the medical sectors demonstrate that the identity of Indian women doctors remains unclear. They are not fully accepted as part of the medical practices, and are even viewed as a threat by some within the organization. Some women migrants represent an opportunity to advance their professional goals. Employees who feel they are elevating their skills and gaining experiences when assigned to projects demonstrate a much higher level of accomplishment.

Gender barrier still persists irrespective of nationality. Most of the respondents, despite good relationship with Australians, do not have a close friendship with them, particularly as they perceive fundamental differences in family structures, social structures and working culture. Women become critical in defining the practices and beliefs that can legitimately support an exclusive Indian cultural identification. Indian women negotiate their positions as individuals, as mothers and as icons of a new nation and are connected in important ways to changing representations of woman-as-nation icons in India, past and present. Family, religion, culture and class come to constitute global Indianness. Globalness and Indianness for them are concepts which complement, rather than conflict, each other.

In sum, the Indian professional woman, actively participates in the social, economic and political domains of the country, thus becoming an important social and economic force in the host society. At the same time, they are seen to be maintaining, reinforcing and extending the relation between the migrant communities and their places of origin. For instance, remittances by the immigrants to their families back home, arrangement and participation in marriage and other ceremonies, sponsoring of home festivals and events and more.

There is an understanding of the multiple roles of transnational networks, what Meyer(2001) calls 'a connectivist understanding,' provides an invaluable insight into the functions of, and policy issues (immigration, corporate strategy, development assistance) around the mobility of highly skilled workers. The strategies that individual professional women use to portray an unproblematic idea of "global Indianness" are instructive of how

gendered discourses of family, religion, culture and class come to constitute “global Indianness” as a cultural ideology.

The concern for family’s bright educational future as well as social and economic wellbeing has motivated Indian migration to countries such as Australia. As regards retaining the culture, older generations are contributing for the new generation. However, it is less significant in the younger people. The findings of this study suggest that women, as mothers of the nation and reproducers of society, are increasingly entrusted with the task of maintaining cultural identity through educating the young and modelling their own behaviour.

It demonstrates that although Indians have succumbed to a great extent to liberal values, especially in assimilating with the new culture, yet feel uncomfortable in the social gatherings. Using social networks beyond national borders and utilizing bicultural or bilingual skills may allow migrants to circumvent structural disadvantages in the host society. Cross-border ties provide ethnic communities with valuable social capital that can foster their horizontal and vertical integration. These effects extend far beyond the economic - the right type of social capital can help ethnic communities cut across class and spatial boundaries and barriers and help facilitate mobility for the second generation.

Shortcomings:

Some research exists on data generated on Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants in Australia. However, very little of that comprise a comprehensive gender analysis. There is a definite focus on the male expatriate, with women being analysed only within the context of ‘the trailing spouse’ with little or no agency. The majority of the work on international migration has focused on the *productive* sphere, often casting women migrants in the role of ‘trailing spouses’ moving to join their male ‘bread winner’.

The study was restricted to Indian Women professionals who are elite and highly educated. It is also not comparative in nature, neither with other immigrant women, immigrant men nor the non-immigrant population.

Policy suggestions:

Human capital is the most important form of wealth for a modern nation and countries with the most intellectual resources are achieving the highest rates of economic growth. In the drive for human capital, many industrialised countries are giving priority to policies aimed at attracting highly skilled immigrants. Highly skilled migration is shown to be gendered, with

men tending to stimulate moves, and married women either giving up their jobs to follow their husbands or not migrating at all. There should be a modification in migration policy which would increase the flow of Women professionals in Australia. Since there is non-recognition of overseas qualified professionals in certain cases, these can be devastating for women, who typically discover their qualifications are not recognised in Australia. They were discouraged to resume their career for not being the principal applicant. There should have been an advocacy for improved recognition procedures for over-seas qualified doctors. Such factors enhance the likelihood of preference in families being given to males' requalification and career progression in Australia - a choice which compounds women's initial career disadvantage. One measure that could be taken is that there should also be some kind of instruction within the organisation for native employees that highlight the need for tolerance and understanding of the situation of their foreign colleagues. In general, more social activities should be offered after work hours to ensure that both migrant and native employees have the opportunity to meet within a social setting. Lack of support from the extended family like parents and in-laws for Indian women could also be attributed to the Australian Government policy which allows for skilled migration from immigrants below the age of 40. It shows skilled migrants below the age of 40 get maximum points unlike the provisions contained in the Canadian immigrants policy. Family migrants and the age-bars do not allow parents of these immigrants to get an easy entry into Australia except as a visitor.

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