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All about my skills, not me or mine: Vignettes of Precarity among Skilled Indian Professionals in the UK

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Indian migrants form a significant proportion of UK's skilled labour force. In migration related discourses, mobility is viewed as an asset, capital or value attributed to the migrant individual self. This study captures vignettes of migrant experiences of Indian professions across various economic domains in the UK, illuminating the simultaneity of precariousness and resilience. Their lived experiences do not fit neatly into the traditional concept of skilled worker-citizen relationship as policy shifts and broader ideological changes fostered by an anti-immigration climate produce discursive patterns of alignments between the labour market and work practices disrupting professional, personal and familial arrangements.

1. Introduction

Currently, policy and academic debates on global skilled migration are wedged in a paroxysm of fear and uncertainty. Figures from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) show the compelling presence of migrants in the UK workforce, with foreign-born workers forming nearly 11 percent of the national workforce (See ONS 2017). The UK has seen the constant rise of skilled migrants since the 1990s, closely linked to the processes of global labour markets, sectoral skills shortage and neo-liberal policies. This article explores the lived experiences of skilled Indian migrants from four key work domains, characterised by skill, mobilities and transnationalism. Although these workers are classified as highly skilled or skilled workers[1], there exists a diversity of alignment with work requirements, relationship with the state, nature of social relations and family ties. Accordingly, this article introduces the concept of 'mobility work alignment' to analyse this diversity of contours within skilled migration in the UK labour market. Most importantly, the obfuscated nature of the working lives of skilled migrant masks the fractured support structures within which such agents operate. The paper draws on recent and previous empirical research done on skilled professional Indian migrants in the UK (see Arun *et al*. forthcoming; Arun 2017; Arun 2010). Section 2 reviews some of the relevant themes on the skilled migrant neoliberal self, drawing on debates on precarity and resilience. Section three present data and findings, while section four summarises the conclusions.

2. Neoliberal self, resilience and precarity as norm for skilled migrants

With a total of 701,000 non-UK nationals working in the areas of public administration, education and health sector, data shows that Indian nationals accounted for 57% of total skilled work visas granted (ONS 2016). Further non-UK nationals are more likely to be in jobs they

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[1] Since 2011 in the UK, the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP) has been replaced by the five-tier points based work permit system. Under this, the Tier 1 visa category relates to 'high-value migrants' from outside the EEA, covering entry of entrepreneurs, investors, and those under the 'exceptional talent' visa. The Tier 2 category is for 'skilled workers' from outside the EEA with a job offer in the UK, and includes skilled workers who are transferred to the UK by an international company, skilled workers where there is a proven shortage in the UK. This paper refers to the latter group of skilled workers.

are over-qualified than UK nationals, showing that migrant work is segmented by country of origin, sector, skills and earnings (ibid). Mobility is an increasingly important requirement for the individual employee in skilled and highly skilled occupations (Kesselring 2014: Bauder 2012). Drawing on a sample of highly skilled Indians in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, Ku and Bailey (2014) show that international geographical mobility has become a normative part of professional careers, and as a strategy for enhancing competitiveness in a neoliberal international labour markets. Thus self-actualisation, rather than pure economic motives, appears to be the major driver for migration.

Global mobilities is also seen as a global field that relates to habitus (based on the Bourdieusian concept of learned behaviour), rules and games and in which dominant systems of distinction based on class, occupational prestige, gender, race and economic capital are contestable (See Arun 2017). For example, Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and cultural capital has been linked to migration and internalisation of social structures (Arun 2017; Thatcher and Halvorsrud 2015; Erel 2010). Issues of global migration often raise deep-seated issues about work, equality and policy, resulting in diverse precarious working relationships (see Meier 2015; Raghuram 2014; McDowell 2008). For Sassen (2016), the term migration serves little purpose when multiple forms of socio-economic dislocations evolve into into predatory formations, through assemblages of knowledge, interests, and outcomes, thus leading to expulsions of people, social groups and livelihoods. Such vested interests as seen through the persistent effects of neoliberalism lead to various consequences and vulnerabilities. For some, the term resilience refers to a range of behavioural responses, whilst the term precarity relates to low-wage, insecure labour markets, temporary forms of citizenship, and social inequalities (Reid-Musson 2014; Goldring and Landolt 2013; Standing 2011). Often precarious work articulates with new migrant divisions of labour becoming a systemic facet of labour market restructuring (Wills et al. 2010). At times the micro-behaviour of individual and groups may obscure the massive web or impact of neo-liberal practices and thinking, for example, Hall and Lamont (2013) use the concept of social resilience to capture new logics into social life.

This study draws on the agentic behaviour of skilled migrants within neoliberal narratives of global immigration regulatory policies and regimes, engendering narratives of 'resilience' in every day lives of UK based Indian migrants. The global competition for highly skilled migrants has increased considerably along with the increasing part highly skilled migrants play in maintaining the growth of developed economies (See Bailey and Mulder 2017). Yet such mobilities ignore the multiple roles undertaken by migrants (See King and Raghuram 2013). This could be because, as Anderson notes 'as a tap regulating the flow of labour, immigration controls function as a mould, helping to form types of labour with particular relations to employers and the labour market. In particular, the construction of institutionalised uncertainty, together with less formalised migratory processes, help produce 'precarious workers' over whom employers and labour users have particular mechanisms of control' (2010; 301). The effects of austerity and hostile social attitudes after Brexit predicate on this moral view of the self-sufficient migrant, but in reality it tests the social ties, resources and resilience of individual migrants, their families and wider community networks (Root et al. 2014). Thus the ambiguous nature of 'resilience thinking' (Walsh-Dilley and Wolford 2015) has compelled

scholars and practitioners in development practice and global studies calling for the grounded and embedded processes of meaning-making around resilience as this study aims to show. Experiences of skilled migrant workers, from the global south, particularly India, fall within these two categories of precarity and resilience. Whilst often deemed as operating in straight alignment with the state through regulation of their 'eligibility' of work, employment contracts, bringing families into the UK and claiming access to legal welfare rights, yet their grounded every day lived working narratives blurs these two concepts. This may relate to how immigration controls regulates nature of migrant work and prevents exploitation, it may also undermine the long term economic and social lives of such workers, and inhibit full integration into society. As Anderson (2010) argues how, whilst immigration controls are often presented by government as a means of ensuring 'British jobs for British workers' and protecting migrants from exploitation, in practice such mobilities often can undermine labour protections (see Anderson 2010). Such mechanisms also curtail flexibility of mobility and full integration into the economy and society that migrants live in, as explored here.

3. Data and Findings

The research deploys narratives as an ethnographic tool to relate and reproduce stories and experiences that 'capture' the voices of such globally mobile workers. The decision to use narratives is largely based on the value of conversation and voice as a dynamic medium for generating information (Webster and Mertova 2007) on shared stories of working migrant lives. Thus, the shared experiences through narrative research can help both individuals and communities to make meaning out of their social situation. For the current research, a total sample of 28 UK based Indian professionals were selected from four skilled mobility domains, viz, academia (8), Information Technology (IT) and Engineering (12), medicine/dentistry (5) and the care sector (3). The sample was selected through pre-existing research links as part of a larger study (Arun 2017; 2010) with Indian Associations, cultural organisations and community centres across various geographical locations, primarily cities of Manchester, Belfast, Aberdeen and Greater London. These varied locations provide diverse political and economic contexts that had contrasting experiences with relation to Brexit (changing economy in relation to EU for Norther Ireland); prospects for devolution and impact on the Oil Industry in Scotland: the Northern Powerhouse project and implications for job opportunities in Greater Manchester; and the higher levels of global diverse workforce in London. The narratives were elicited through face-to-face interactions with the selected sample respondents over two phases, from June to December 2016 and November 2017. In most cases, family members were present for the interviews, in other cases, telephone or skype conversations also supplemented such interviews. The key themes for these interactions were their individual pathways to mobilities, ways in which they perceive relationships with the state, work environment and wider community; modes of engagement as migrants in a 'foreign' culture and society; and their perceived outcomes of such alignments for families and children in future. These could relate to accumulations of capital, skills, confidence and engaging in community relations; intergenerational transmission of cultural practices within families or broader plans for building global links. The presentation of ethnographic data helps to elucidate the concept of 'mobility alignment', to provide the analytical leverage to theorize: (1) work relations beyond standard

labour relations; (2) the gendered and racialized alignments that aggravate forms of precarity in highly skilled work and (3) forms of resilience, risk, resourcefulness in skilled mobility.

3.1 Findings

3.1.2 Internationalisation as Mobility/ Mobility as Internationalisation

Internationalisation is a key feature of the current UK Higher Education strategy particularly more distinct in the post-crises period. Mobilities in terms of both staff and student exchanges within academia is embedded within discourses of internationalisation, academic mobility (Mavroudi and Warren 2013; Ackers 2005) and forms of academic labour (Cantwell and Lee 2010; Jöns 2009). For the academic labour market, with its higher degree of internationalisation as both a requirement and a condition, mobility is becoming a characteristic 'attitude', (Bauder 2012;5) and that values international experience and mobility, and considered a symbolic form of capital (Bauder *et al.* 2017). As observed from narratives with academic professionals, mobility is intertwined with job opportunities, rewards and family ties. A number of respondents who were Indian-origin academics (from early career professionals to mid career professionals) emphasised the temporality of mobilities- due to nature of jobs (short term contracts; higher earning; dual career families; promotion opportunities).

One senior lecturer (male, age 37) in engineering, stated, ' *I knew that my move to Manchester will not be for the long term. Whilst those who take up their first lectureship jobs make long terms plans for their career, I took up this position as way to improve my professional experience and earnings, so I could apply for promotion of professorship closer to my home (Glasgow), where my family ties are. I commute during the weekends, but this is a short term cost for a longer term career growth'.*

As noted previously, internationally mobile academics are more likely to be employed full-time in most national systems of higher education (Welch 1997, cited in Bauder 2012), and foreign-born female academics are more engaged in prestigious research activities and less in teaching and administration than their native-born colleagues (Mamiseishvili 2010, ibid), challenging notions of gender division of roles in academia. For academics, their international experience is very relevant, manifested through conference presentations, research partnerships and visits. However, such temporary moves affected place making, social ties and community building. Often social relations are built around similarly mobile professionals, rather than relating to local networks, identities and relationships. Nevertheless, families with school going children, particularly mothers, built local networks with similar migrant Indian families, and accumulating social networks as a way of information gathering, preparation for secondary schools and harnessing cultural networks.

One of the respondents from Northern Ireland, felt that the impact of Brexit could change experiences of internationalisation in the region due to withdrawal from the EU and relationship with mainland Ireland, and thus preferred to move either to the Republic of Ireland

or Britain, thus seeking opportunities. Thus mobilities, then were assumed to be routine, rather than through choice, due to the imminent political changes on stability of jobs.

Further the increase in international fees, scrutiny of student engagement among Tier 4 students[2] and restrictions on working hours did impact on the number of non-EU students in general. Drawing attention to international student migration/mobility as a relatively neglected field in migration research, King and Raghuram (2013) point to the contradictions of student mobilities between 'desired' of their internationalism and fee contributions, and as 'unwanted' because of the politics of migration control. Most narratives with academics in the sample also supported observations that a good number of PhD students from India continue to work as post-doctoral scholars in fields such as science and engineering, accumulating work and academic experience as Early Career Researchers (ECRs). In particular, as seen in the sample, international academic links between UK and Indian universities enabled student mobilities in areas such as naval architecture, whereby students were absorbed into key engineering sectors, including the oil industry. For Bauder (2012) experiences of international mobility for academic labour differ from the experiences workers have in other occupations, as the academic labour is valorized and devalued in the migration process. Cantwell and Lee (2010), focussing on the experience of international post-doctoral researchers in the UK and the US, show that despite their rising numbers, the workings of neo-racist global academic labour markets and culturally specific stereotypes affected career and work opportunities of such skilled migrants.

3.1.3 Restructuring of Gender Dynamics
Gender dynamics presents both contradictions and rhetoric within skilled migration. Studies on women migrants in Switzerland show how women's lack of participation in the economic sphere, often leads to loss of autonomy, feelings of social 'non-recognition'- characterising another form of brain drain in global mobilities (Riano 2012). With increasing economic migration, previous research has shown that gender, along with other social divisions, contributes to new cultural practices, forming global and transnational formations (Arun 2010). Some forms of gender dynamics are presented below:

Professionalisation of female migrants:
The experiences of care work in gendered migration, particularly female migration has received much attention within discourses of care work, care chains etc. Previous research on the experiences of NHS based nurses from India divulges mixed narratives of empowerment and disempowerment (Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Walton-Roberts 2012; Arun 2010). Women in the current sample reported that on having attained certain levels of education and work experience from India, as female migrants, nurses have been able to build successful careers in the health sector, and gain formal citizenship in the UK. Female nurses reinforced how they strategically respond to the labour shortage in Western European care sectors, and sought

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[2] For example, post-graduate and research students are seen as one form of migration into the country, although the number of foreign students arriving in the UK continued to fall. In 2016, 134,000 students entered Britain compared with 175,000 a year earlier (See ONS 2017).

capital in this way because legal citizenship status within the UK nation state relates to employment, whilst nursing work functions as a pull factor, it also transforms notions of nursing as a feminine occupation. For example, nursing, once seen as "devalued" work, is taken on by young men and women from India, altering notions of feminine or masculine[3] capital (See Arun 2017). Here, gender is a primary form of capital as gender capital[4], is a disposition, a form of capital (Huppatz 2012; McCall 1992), although gender intersects with classed, racialised hierarchies of work and status (see Arun 2017; Dyer *et al*., 2008).

Deskilling as gendered process

India women who enter the UK as spouses do make a range of pathways to adaptive resilience. Many report to working in lower skill and short term jobs such as shop assistants, teaching assistants in learning centres (tuition and learning centres for school curriculum and support for secondary school entrance exams) which provided fewer opportunities for secure work, exhibiting professional deskilling and devaluation. Further, evidence from the sample showed that women in the age group of 26-39, who did manage to get jobs in their professional fields have had to withdraw from work due to child care responsibilities and demand of spouses' work practices. As out of school childcare options were limited, mothers took responsibilities for homework, extra-curricular activities and school routines. This women, as dependant spouses are funnelled into low-cost or underemployment, and often into the temporary echelons of labour markets.

Observations from the sample of respondents across the domains, women from dual career relationships, fare better in the labour market. Those working as doctors in the NHS, or as IT professionals share working lives with their spouses, spinning off benefits through help in juggling child care, training and professional development opportunities and more informal learning opportunities through social and personal networks. Nevertheless, women commonly tend to take up family friendly positions within these sectors such as General Practitioner (GP), or those specialisms that not require night or weekend shifts (microbiology, pathology etc).

(Non) Recognition as precarity

Professional recognition was pointed as a major issue for women who were joining spouses, as their alignment of mobilities relates to recognition (or lack of) reinforcing regressive gender relations through difficulties in pursuing professional careers. Here one form of brain gain is related to another form of brain drain when gender and ethnicity is factored into mobility of skilled workforce. Women, as spouses of skilled migrants are less visible, relegated to dependants or care givers. Thus this resourceful gender capital was not recognised in terms

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[4] Here, gender capital refers to female and feminine as well as male and masculine forms of capital. In general, nursing as an occupation is socially constructed as feminine, based on feminine traits such as caring and bodily work. The increase in the number of males undertaking nursing professions demonstrates how notions of masculinity are changing (Arun 2017).

translating, converting their acquired human capital in fields of medicine, dentistry, engineering and science. Those who were qualified dentists, in the sample reported anomalies in the way they are treated in the UK labour market. Comparing with dentists with degrees from institutions within the European Union who are automatically recognised, but do not have English language skills, are often absorbed into the labour market. But Indian dentists, as non-members of European Economic Area (EEA) countries. However those who qualified outside the EU, are required to take the three-part International Qualifying Exam (IQE), which takes around 18 months to complete and costs around £2,800, despite possessing professional and language skills. Thus women in the sample reported that they were not able to pass the exams in the first or second rounds, facing high fees and leading to lack of self-esteem. The registration process takes more time to complete, given the requirement to complete voluntary experience in dental clinics which was also harder to obtain. Hence one woman from the sample reported working as a receptionist in a dental clinic, as way to responding to such tough conditions as a form of adaptive resilience. Similar, experiences were shared by those women whose academic qualifications (PG or equivalent) was not recognised, thus affecting their abilities to work as in skilled professional sectors. In general, these forms of adaptations point to intersections of the private and public spheres, reinforcing gender roles, but are mostly ignored in migration studies. This could be as often the skilled migrant is mostly assumed to be male, and resourceful in adapting in the host country. Other studies also show that wives of skilled migrant men suffer from cumulative disadvantage, and that it is necessary to adopt a complex model involving the interaction of gendered/racialised immigration laws, workplace and household experiences (Iredale 2005; Purkayasta 2003).

3.1.4 Risky Alignments as Resilience

Risk is an inherent feature of mobilities. Respondents in the sample identified risks related to occupational mobilities, stability of work which shaped associated uncertainties in relation to educational choices for children and long term life planning. For IT professionals and engineers, instability of work was common as many of those who have no work restrictions in the UK, took on contract jobs as a normal work routine. This meant frequent travel, daily commuting between cities, alongside periods of absent work arrangements. Yet, as one respondent (male, age 45), describes, *'contract assignments offer more money so I can plan my economic needs for the foreseeable future. The flip side of this arrangement is lack of family time, tiring routines and long commute- I feel disconnected to places, people and work places, and at time miss most family ties, both here and back home in India'.*

For those working in naval architectural jobs related to oil industry, work opportunities were linked to the cyclical nature of the sector. The boom in the early to mid noughties led to many job opportunities for Indian engineers in the city of Aberdeen, as many retrained to find work in this sector. However the post-crises period and decline of the oil prices led to massive job losses in the sector, leading workers to leave the city to find jobs in mainland England. The sample respondents reported of related decline in the housing industry where house value plummeted, with uncertainties in jobs and subsequent redundancies. Such uncertain economic conditions have compelled migrants to adapt or respond with resilience. For example, instances

where Indian workers either resort to cyclical or return migration were reported to be common. Some moved to the Middle East, or East Asia for better working conditions, or others relocated families to India, and took on short term foreign assignments. The flip side here as reported is the splitting of families in different locations for the continuity of children's' education and accumulation of economic capital for such purposes. Those on Tier 2 visas, with no recourse to public funds, often feel that paying higher rates of taxes meant they had very less rights in the host society in relation to entitlements and taxes. In particular, those on company based contracts based on Tier 2 visas are compelled to thrive on uncertainty in relation to work contract extensions for specific companies relied on short term visas. The sample of IT professionals in the study revealed that they are less inclined to make investments in housing due to difficulties with getting mortgages with short term visas and tend to depend on the rental housing market for housing needs. This also affects schooling of children, particularly those in secondary schools, where children often travel long distances for suitable schools. Some preferred to return to India once secondary schooling was completed due to educational choices for children. Thus risk for mobile professionals is related to short term work adjustments and long term uncertainty relating to familial arrangement and educational opportunities for children.

4. Conclusions

Research has shown that the state, through its policies and practices, impinges on the mobility of the skilled and highly skilled in a variety of ways, (Mavroudi and Warren 2013; King and Raghuram 2013; Hawthorne 2008). In particular, immigration policies, through targeting the skilled, resourceful migrant self- function as regulators of employment, working conditions and right to family life. Further, lack of state support provided to help migrants and their families has created and continues to reinforce the idea of the "good" vs "bad" migrant citizen (Root et al. 2014; Standing 2011;). This paper, through the conceptualisation of 'mobility alignment,' provides the analytical leverage to understand work relations beyond standard labour relations in various domains. The different forms of resilience, risk, resourcefulness in skilled mobility show adaptation amidst vulnerability, and inability to plan for the long term. Thus while Indian migrants exercise choice and agency in choosing to work in the neo-liberal labour markets of the UK, there are mixed evidences of precarity across these economic domains, through a spectrum of insecurity linked to the nature of jobs, simultaneous deskilling of labour through non-recognition of professional qualifications and reinforced gender relations. These are equally matched with shades of resilience in relation to adaptations in the labour market, harnessing gender capital or taking on risky alignments through patterns of return or circular migration, familial separations etc.

Taken together, these tenets of international mobility and forms of mobility alignments create a worker-citizenship system that is central to regulated mobility. In many ways, such regulations can be seen as collusion between the state and employers, sectoral policies and societal structures. The structural nature of labour markets, reinforced through gendered, racialized and classed forces, further compound their vulnerabilities. Further social structural arrangements within households, workplaces, and national policies affect the migration experiences of women, as joining spouses, as they are often rendered invisible in migration

debates. Critically, migrant networks and ties are viewed independent of their family structures and networks, which has implications for local community place making, work life balance and quality of workforce in any society. Thus while the neo-liberal migrant self is seen as the reflexive, resourceful, risk taking agent, the ways in which Indian migrants engage with immigration policies through lived experiences and family ties need more attention in migration and work discourses.

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