

RELUCTANT RETURNEES: Gender Perspectives on (Re) settlement Among Highly Skilled Indian Return Migrants in Bangalore

HELENE ILKJÆR

Taking its point of departure in the personal story of Nalini, this article examines highly skilled Indian women's experiences of moving back to India after years of working and living with their families abroad. The article touches on themes of gender relations, family commitments, career opportunities, and social and cultural conservatism within the context of recent waves of return migration to Bangalore, a prominent hub in the imaginary of a "new" globalising India. Tracing Nalini's story in and out of states of depression, the article points to ways in which returnee women find their own, at times, unexpected ways of dealing with the upheavals of return migration.

Keywords: Gender relations, return migration, (re)settlement processes, Bangalore, India.

“I never had it in my mind to come back – I was desperate to stay in the US. I have absolutely not been happy about coming back to India.” Nalini, a 35 year old microbiologist, had only just stepped foot within the front door of her flat in a gated community in the eastern part of Bangalore when she made this statement. Standing upright in the doorway, dressed in Levi’s jeans and a short kurta, she sent her father – who sat in one of the living room couches – a defiant look. Following her gaze, I watched him shift uneasily in his seat. In the hours prior to Nalini’s arrival home he had taken it upon himself to talk me through key moments in the family’s history, in particular Nalini’s recent homecoming to India. He was proud; he had told me, of his daughter’s “right” decision to return to India with her husband Gopal and their two daughters aged four and eight. It was right for many reasons, he said, but most of all because it was what Gopal wanted. And Nalini’s father expected her to comply with her husband’s wishes, also when it meant putting her own dreams and ambitions aside.

In many ways, Nalini embodies the story I often heard during my fieldwork about Indian women being less willing to return to India than their husbands. Many of the returnees I met in Bangalore could tell stories of friends, or friends of friends, who wished to make the move back to India but who could not do so because their wives refused. Using Nalini’s personal story as an example, the article examines questions of why Indian women may be reluctant to return to India, and, if they eventually do, how they experience and handle the return and the (re)settlement in the so-called “new” globalising India? While the imaginary of a “new” globalising India is often analyzed through themes of economic liberalisation and growth (cf. D’Costa, 2010; Kaur, 2012, 2014; Nielsen & Wilhite, 2015), this article approaches it from the perspective of return migration of highly skilled Indians. I suggest that the growing numbers of return migrants and the emergence of Bangalore as a global destination for skilled in-migration are intricately linked with the imaginary of a “new” globalis-

ing India. The article thus takes the everyday experiences of (re)settlement among Indian returnees in Bangalore as an entry point to discuss this special issue’s themes of gender and family relations in a globalising India.

Return migration and “global Indians”

Nalini’s story and the other empirical data in this article form part of my PhD dissertation entitled “Bangalore Beginnings. An Ethnography of Return Migration among Highly Skilled Indians” (Ilkjær, 2015). The dissertation is based on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bangalore in 2011-2013 and regular follow-ups on social media and Skype. All names of interlocutors are pseudonyms. In collecting data, I have used primarily qualitative methods of participant observation, semi-structured and informal interviews. Of the 47 individuals that I interviewed, there are 37 men and 10 women. In addition to the interviews, I spent considerable amounts of time with return migrants in their homes, including with the wives of the men I had interviewed, hanging out with them and participating in their weekend activities. 15 returnees – eight men and seven women – became key interlocutors whom I met with regularly. They are among the thousands of highly skilled Indians who have returned to India in recent years. Estimates ranging between 29,000 and 60,000 returnees have been cited (Khadria, 2004, p. 19; Radhakrishnan, 2011, p. 27). Other sources suggest that 10,000 to 20,000 Indians have returned annually since the year 2000 (Varrel, 2011b, p. 305), and that the city of Bangalore housed around 300,000 returnees by 2010 (Kalita, 2010, p. 22). Clearly, these numbers are clouded in uncertainty. A major cause of the difficulty in making accurate counts is the slippery nature of the category of return and hence determination of who to label as returnees, i.e. who to count. I define a returnee as an individual born and raised in India to Indian parents who has lived abroad for at least two years. Yet, while I use “returnee” as a category to describe my interlocutors’ migratory life situation at the time of my fieldwork,

the term is not intended to imply any finality with regard to their migration trajectories.

Due to Bangalore's history and current reputation as an international science and technology hotspot for knowledge-based industries (see Heitzman, 2004; Nair, 2005; Nisbett, 2009; Vasavi, 2008), the city attracts many returnees with degrees and professional experience in IT, engineering, and the bio- and data sciences. Holding at least a BA degree but often also MA and PhD degrees, my interlocutors were among those popularly described with terms like "reverse brain drain," i.e. a counter-movement to the outbound "brain drain" of educated Indians leaving the country. The returnees thus make up a new wave of migration that is changing – or adding to – the directionality of movement among the so-called "best and brightest Indians" (Kalita, 2006).

When I met them, most of my interlocutors were in their 30's and 40's, they were married and had children. Most of them moved back to India in 2008 or later – often after more than 10 years abroad – many from the US but also from countries such as the UK, Canada, Germany, Australia and Denmark. Their reasons to return included, often in a mix, the proximity to family, feeling the obligation to care for elderly parents, career opportunities in India versus the fear of unemployment abroad due to the financial crisis, and value-based reasons to do with culture and lifestyles. Usually, the men had left India first, often as young adults going abroad to study at university, then marrying in India and bringing their wives over on spousal visas. Most of the wives in the returnee families were highly educated and usually both husbands and wives had worked while they lived abroad.

Having spent considerable parts of their adult life abroad many returnees described themselves as "global Indians." According to them, a "global Indian" is an open-minded, internationally oriented person who has travelled the world and who takes a modern (as opposed to traditional) approach to family and gender matters. On an everyday lev-

el this means, for example, that the husband and wife share the household duties and that they live as a nuclear family in their own house rather than with the husband's parents. On a broader level it means, among other things, gender equality in decision-making and support of women's career ambitions. Many returnees formed a direct link between their experiences of living and working abroad and their self-ascribed identity as "global Indians." Others pointed out that Indians who had lived all their life in India could also be "global Indians," had they travelled and developed an open mindset. Indeed, international migration does not automatically create global mindsets or cause the migrants to change practices and values, e.g. concerning family life. Several studies have noted a pattern of social conservatism among Indian IT migrants, for example visible in their continued preference for arranged marriages (vs. "love marriages") and in their emphasis of "family values" (see Fuller & Narasimhan, 2007; Radhakrishnan, 2009; Upadhya, 2006, 2008; Upadhya & Vasavi, 2006). In discussing the paradoxical relations between Indian IT professionals' global career paths, international exposure and cultural conservatism, Carol Upadhya and A.R. Vasavi write that while working in a global industry seems to have given rise to a certain kind of cosmopolitanism among Indian IT professionals, "they nonetheless cling to older middle class social values and attempt to reproduce what they regard as the traditional Indian family structure" (Upadhya & Vasavi, 2006, p. 103). The traditional family structures are evident e.g. in the IT professionals' dedication to care for elderly family members and in the fact that married women are not expected to – or in some cases not allowed to – work outside the home in India (Upadhya & Vasavi, 2006, p. 109-113; see also Varrel, 2011a). Although many of the returnee women I met had continued their professional careers after moving to Bangalore, others had taken some years off work to focus on their family and/or to do voluntary community work. Many of the returnee women who did not work while living in Bangalore

intended to go back to work – “back to the rat race” as they referred to it – at the time of a likely future re-migration abroad.

In line with the arguments of the above-mentioned studies I found that cosmopolitan lifestyles and traditionalist attitudes to family and gender relations coexisted among returnees. While many of the returnees I met – both men and women – proudly described themselves as “global Indians,” and recognised the influence of their migratory experiences in their global becoming, other returnees – mostly men – were happy to reproduce what they described as traditional Indian values, including patriarchal family structures and gender relations. For many in the latter category, wanting to preserve and protect their “Indianness” had been a key motivation for the return move. This kind of motivation resembles what is referred to in return migration literature as return migration driven by conservatism (Cerase in King, 2000, p. 12), implying that the migrant has remained oriented primarily towards the values and traditions of the home country throughout the stay abroad. The wives of some of these returnee traditionalists, however, sought to challenge their husbands’ conservative ideals. Often, it was the returnee women’s discomfiting sense of restriction after the return to India that brought about their attempts of creating changes in their husband’s – and others’ – attitudes. In their post-return bids to re-sculpt expectations of Indian women’s roles and behavior in the family and in society, the returnee women used the sense of freedom and independence and the observations of gender relations they had gathered abroad. Some chose quite unusual means to inspire change. One of them was Nalini.

Nalini’s story

After some introductory small-talk, Nalini and I leave her father in the living room and retreat to one of the flat’s three bedrooms with our cups of coffee. We sit down on the mattresses on the floor and Nalini offers me “cheese bites” from Pizza Hut for lunch. She had stopped in a mall to buy them on

her way home from a job interview earlier in the day. She was overjoyed because she had been offered the job, and she hoped that this would prove to be the turning point she had longed for in an otherwise dreadful post-return period.

Nalini had returned to India with her family just a few months before I first met them in late 2011. She and Gopal had met as students in Mumbai, and following what Nalini described as “my own decision,” they had gotten married: “so it is like a love marriage.” The family had been away for five years, living first in South Africa for two years and then three years in the US. From the beginning, Nalini had been supportive of, and shared, Gopal’s wishes to leave India in search of better research opportunities. She had accepted to quit her good job in Mumbai and “slog along” in lower job positions abroad than her PhD degree should have qualified her for. The subject of return to India came up when Gopal was offered a position as manager in the research department of a major government cooperation based in Bangalore. Weighing this against the US recession, the insecure academic career path and factoring in that his mother had been diagnosed with cancer, Gopal wanted to return to India. When I later interviewed him, Gopal explained his experiences abroad and the decision to return:

Resettling in India has been the most easiest thing for me, I would say. For some reason, I always felt that I was under tremendous pressure in the US. One was the work pressure, second was the family pressure [I was] kind of having since my mother was ill and all these things. [...] A postdoc is not paid very much in the US. So, all this financial constraints were also there. I have two daughters and so somehow their stability was also much more important, family stability was also very important for me.

Once he caught a good job break in Bangalore, making the decision to return to India was easy, Gopal said. Nalini, on the other hand, was firmly set against

it. After two periods of maternity leave, she finally felt that her career in the US was getting on track, and she appreciated the many outdoor leisure opportunities in the surroundings of their rented flat in Louisiana: “I enjoyed it actually [being abroad], but my husband did not – he never understood the Western culture. He never enjoyed it there,” she said.

With Gopal determined to return to India, Nalini faced intense pressure from him, his parents and her own family members to go with his decision. In dealing with Nalini’s averseness Gopal was particularly happy about the support he had received from his father-in-law: “I remember that my father-in-law he really supported me in a very nice way. I mean, my wife was completely opposed to coming, but he used to tell me that ‘you come back and just do it.’” After months of discussions, Nalini eventually caved in. Her unhappiness about returning to India, she now explained, stemmed from feelings of having to give up on the things she dreamed of in order to follow her husband: “So many times I have had to resign [my job] because of family.” Gopal, besides being very loving and caring, was very “traditional,” she said, clarifying that this meant that he preferred her to stay at home now that they were back in India and he had a reputable job. Nalini was depressed by being “just a housewife” in Bangalore; unable to pursue her goal of a career in science. Yet, while Nalini followed her husband’s wishes in returning to India, she did not want to settle with being a homemaker. So, she applied for various jobs in Bangalore and other major Indian cities, hoping to end the situation where “at parties I am sometimes just introduced as the wife.” Nalini elaborated:

Outside India you are just yourself whereas in India you are first the wife, then the mother. In India, women are supposed to stay home and family comes first. If you don’t do that you are labeled as not being a good house-maker and people think that there is something seriously

going wrong with the marriage.

But, said Nalini bluntly: “I am not channelised for housework.” She did not like to cook what she called “Indian Indian food,” i.e. traditional recipes, and instead preferred “Western food [because it is] more health oriented.” Besides, she insisted on being an agent of her own time, meaning that she was not always at home to wait on guests even when the visits had been planned in advance. These “short-comings” (Nalini did quotation marks with her fingers) as a housewife made her a target of labels such as “crazy” from parts of her husband’s family and from neighbors who dared not socialise with her out of fear of being associated with her values or seen as condoning her behavior. Although Nalini described herself as a very performance-oriented person, the home sphere was just not what interested her the most: “I think there is more to life than packing lunch boxes and being supportive to your husband,” she said. Yet, this approach to home and family life was hard for Nalini to practice after her family’s return to India. In India she felt increasingly scrutinised by her family, by neighbors, by her husband’s work colleagues, by her daughter’s teachers and by prospective employers. Their joint mission was, she said, to judge her according to traditional patriarchal ideals of a good Indian woman being a non-working, ‘home-loving’ wife who places family first (cf. Fuller & Narasimhan, 2007, p. 138-139). Nalini was well aware that she would fall short of approval on such a scale of judgment. In comparison with the everyday scrutiny in India, Nalini’s life abroad had felt free. As we continued to talk about the years the family had stayed in South Africa and the US, Nalini was overcome with emotion and started crying. Looking at me with a tear-stained face she said about her life abroad, “it was like seeing the castle and not staying there ... I feel defeated.”

In the face of her obvious sadness, I asked Nalini about Gopal’s insistence on returning to India, even when she was so clearly set against it. Nalini

explained that she believed it sprang from Gopal's increasing fears about the lifestyle Nalini and their two daughters enjoyed in the US – although she knew that he was reluctant to openly admit this. She said:

Somewhere in his mind it was spinning that I was starting to change. I was wearing tight pants. I started cycling. I was very jolly and had lots of friends. So he got scared. He thought that I would be out of reach because I was becoming too free. And then we have two beautiful daughters. Our elder one was turning eight, right, and a few of his friends had told him that at the age of ten or 12 years the girls start to go out [in the US]. So, he got kind of scared and, as I told you, he is a very traditional person. So he could see that everything is dipping off [changing with us]. I mean, he would eat some Indian food and we three would be eating pizza. We three are drinking Coke, we three are enjoying our weekends more and more outside [the house]. Our clothes started to become shorter and shorter day by day. So it was nothing new for the local guys [the Americans], but it was very alarming for him. And then a few guys in the local Indian community, the hardcore ones [traditionalists], they told him that “you better pack it up now because it is going to be more difficult day by day” because they knew that I am a very opinionated person and if the girls also grow up and start having their opinions then it is going to be very difficult for him to battle against the three of us.

An unofficial men's club

Seeking a way out of the home in Bangalore and away from her mental state of depression, Nalini chose a measure that was quite unusual for a woman in India – she went cycling. She liked to take rides of 60 kilometers a day, leaving from their gated housing development and going through the villages surrounding Bangalore. Nalini also participated

in day-long races and week-long adventure challenges all across the country, and she successfully finished competitions abroad. Every time I came to visit the family, Nalini showed me her bikes, which took pride of place in an otherwise empty room in their sparsely furnished apartment, and she had permanently featured her love for biking with an artistic tattoo of a cycle inked on her upper arm. Nalini had done lots of spinning classes and taken her bike out for long rides in the US, and despite female cyclists being very unusual in India, she insisted on continuing this activity. This did not come without cost, though, as biking was still considered a man's sport and activity by most in India. Nalini explained:

There are now five or six ladies who are in the racing hall [club] and cycling in Bangalore ... out of like eight or nine million people. [Laughter]. Sometimes when I go cycling alone things happen. One day I was going in one village and one village guy came ... usually they pass comments, but I don't care. But one day this guy came and he tightly slapped my butt! It was very insulting. It just happened eight days before [ago]. So, I mean, it is not that easy when you try to break the boundary. You just have to bear the consequence of it.

In contrast to the environmental and ethical motivations cited by many of the new middle-class cycling enthusiasts in Bangalore (cf. Anantharaman, 2016), Nalini confided that for her biking in India had at first been therapeutic; an attempt to cling to the lifestyle she had led in the US and that she loved dearly. She said that her family had been somewhat ashamed of her behavior, yet they had allowed her to keep on cycling in the hope that it would lift her depressed post-return spirits. Also, Gopal “who is not a gym guy at all but very academic” quite admired her courage, strength and endurance and thus defended her against accusations from the family. Although Gopal, in Nalini's words, was a “traditional” man, his support of Nalini eventually

prevailed over traditional Indian ideals of wives as home-makers putting family first. While Gopal had been fearful of Nalini's changing ways when they lived abroad, he developed into a proud fan of her independent accomplishments after their return to India. Now, he often manages things in their home, sometimes with the help of his father-in-law, while Nalini is out on her bicycle. Gopal's vision of moving back to India and having a house-maker wife has thus seen some significant post-return changes. Driving much of this change in the traditional family and gender relations in their home has been Nalini's experiences of, and ways of handling, their (re)settlement in India.

As it happened, Nalini's attempts at rekindling her academic career in Bangalore have not worked out. Yet, her biking successes continue. She has twice been awarded the "national super randonneur" award for her cycling achievements and she has earned five sponsorships from large international sports companies. She is featured in cyclist magazines and national newspaper articles as a voice of inspiration for Indian women to take up sports, even if it seems, like cycling, to be "an unofficial men's club." Although unintended, her biking activities have opened up a new career path for her in India as invited motivational speaker to corporate leaders and as organiser of sports-based team-building and adventure events. Due to Nalini's perseverance, the condemnation of her admitted disinterest in housework has shrunk in the company of her accomplishments as a racer and endurance athlete. On the bike, Nalini has been able to beat the post-return blues and (re)settle into life in India in her very own way.

Conclusion

Although theirs is just one of many return migration narratives, I suggest that Nalini and Gopal's story exemplifies the way in which highly skilled Indian migrants' decisions to return – and their everyday experiences of post-return life in Bangalore – are multifaceted, encompassing aspects of both tradi-

tion and change, cosmopolitan and conservative influences. On the one hand, Indian patriarchal family and gender ideals continually influence returnees. On the other hand, by bringing back new ideas and practices returnees contribute to an ongoing process of change in family and gender relations in a globalising India. The case study of Nalini's experiences of return and (re)settlement in Bangalore points to ways in which female returnees to India overcome post-return restrictions to their careers and personal freedom, channeling the independence they have gained abroad in, at times, unexpected directions once back in India. The article thus contributes to shedding light on some of the gendered differences in highly skilled Indian migrants' experiences of return.

While she is still mourning her lost career in science, Nalini keeps busy with cycling events and treasures the boost of confidence her athletic skills gives. The ever-ambitious Gopal continuously applies for patents, dabbles with start-up ideas and looks for senior job openings in India, in Europe and in the Gulf region. When he catches his next "good break" the family will once again be on the move, following Gopal to wherever his career takes them. In all likelihood, Nalini will bring a bike along with her.

Helene Ilkjær recently graduated with a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Copenhagen. Her primary areas of study include migration, return migration, diaspora and transnationalism, the anthropology of skills and navigation, gated communities and community building, philanthropy and giving back, Bangalore/Bengaluru India.

Email: h.ilkJaer@anthro.ku.dk

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