

Research Article

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Stimulating Flexible Citizenship: The Impact of Dutch and Indian Migration Policies on the Lives of Highly Skilled Indian Migrants in the Netherlands

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between migration and integration policies in the Netherlands, diaspora policies in India, and the transnational practices of Indian highly skilled migrants to the Netherlands. We employ anthropological transnational migration theories (e.g., Ong 1999; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007) to frame the dynamic interaction between a sending and a receiving country on the lives of migrants. This paper makes a unique contribution to migration literature by exploring the policies of both sending and receiving country in relation to ethnographic data on migrants. The international battle for brains has motivated states like the Netherlands and India to design flexible migration and citizenship policies for socially and economically desirable migrants. Flexible citizenship policies in the Netherlands are primarily concerned with individual and corporate rights and privileges, whereas Indian diaspora policies have been established around the premise of national identity.

Keywords: transnational migration; Indian diaspora policies; citizenship; high-skilled migrants; Dutch knowledge migration policies (kennismigrantregeling); Indian migrants.

1 Introduction

In the spring of 2016, the first author attended the naturalization ceremony at which Vinod, an IT specialist from Mumbai, and his son were granted Dutch citizenship. During the ceremony, Vinod and other migrants recited an oath of loyalty to the Dutch state. Vinod and his family seemed to enjoy the ceremony but he was quick to assert that he was only doing this for the purpose of travel and to secure more opportunities for his son. Vinod, his wife Neha and their young son moved to the Netherlands in 2009. As a “highly skilled” or “knowledge” migrant, life in the Netherlands implies many financial benefits and shorter working hours, which, Vinod claimed, allow him to both develop himself and spend more time with his wife and child. Neha, a housewife, agreed that daily life in the Netherlands was easier but both she and Vinod missed their families back in India immensely and had almost daily contact with them. Luckily, they had an active social life among other Hindi-speaking Indians in the town where they lived. To some extent, these friends filled the void left by the absence of family. Vinod learnt to speak Dutch and Neha took several Dutch classes but struggled to learn. Their son attended a British school because they believed an English education would offer him more opportunities than a Dutch one. They led a fairly contented life in the Netherlands but emphasised that they would like their son to be partially educated in India and that they “want to die in India”. When we first interviewed them in 2013, they said they planned to move

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to the United States or Canada and to return to India one day with wealth and Dutch passports. Why do Indian knowledge migrants like Vinod and Neha come to the Netherlands, which unlike the USA, Canada or Australia is not a likely migration country for highly skilled Indians? Why do some eventually choose to become naturalized? What are the consequences of such a decision for citizenship practices? What is the meaning of citizenship to these migrants and how does it relate to their identity as Indians and their attachment to India?

This paper draws on the transnational approach to migration studies, which understands transnational migration as a process that “takes place within fluid social spaces that are constantly reworked through migrants’ simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society” (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). Using Aihwa Ong’s (1999) concept of “flexible citizenship”, we explore citizenship in the transnational space between the Netherlands and India by looking at migration and eventual naturalisation in the Netherlands alongside Indian diaspora statuses. “Flexible citizenship” is based on global capitalist economic thinking that encourages individuals and families to react to shifting political and economic landscapes in a flexible and self-interested way (Ong 1999, 6). Literature on highly skilled migrants has often conceptualized migrant decision-making as individual. Our own data, and that of comparable studies, however show that families and the social/cultural context within which the family is constructed also play an important role (cf. Roos 2013, 148).

Within “flexible citizenship” regimes, passports become tickets to participate in the global labour market and cannot be seen as proof of loyalty to a nation state or a commitment to the duties of citizenship (Ong 1999, 2). Although flexible citizenship appears to be a strategic individual or family choice, states also play a role in cultivating flexible citizenship in order to improve their own position on the global market by attracting skilled and qualified workers (Ong 1999, 6). While being careful to avoid the pitfalls of methodological nationalism, which blinds social scientists to the complexities of transnational processes, this paper explores the implications of national-level construction of citizenship for transnational practices (Wimmer and Schiller 2003). We argue that citizenship, migration, and diaspora policies in the Netherlands and India, along with particular structures of the meaning of family, gender and nationality, have repercussions for the transnational citizenship practices of Indian migrants to the Netherlands (Ong 1999, 6). In the lives of migrants, transnational and national social spaces overlap and are influenced by political, economic and cultural factors.

This paper begins with a brief overview of our data and research methodology. We then outline theories of flexible citizenship and transnational migration. Next, we sketch the nature of Indian migration to the Netherlands and the migration and citizenship policies that in part shape migrants’ lives in the country. We then discuss Indian diaspora policies in relation to the Indian “culture of migration” that goes hand in hand with the growth of the IT sector and economic liberalisation in the country. Finally, we explore the flexible citizenship of Indian migrants to the Netherlands by examining the factors influencing their citizenship choices and the impact of flexible citizenship on family life, gender constructions, civic engagement and identity.

2 Our Research with the Indian Diaspora in the Netherlands

Our data was primarily collected between January 2013 and October 2014 as part of a larger research project entitled “Migration, development, and citizenship: Notions of belonging and civic engagement among Indian (knowledge-) migrants in the Netherlands and return migrants in India”. Part of the research for the broader study took place among returnees in India itself; this paper focuses on our case study of highly skilled Indian migrants in the Netherlands. Our Netherlands-based research team included one post-doctoral researcher, three Master students and a senior researcher.¹

In the Netherlands, we conducted interviews with 126 male and female Indian migrants. The majority of our informants came from middle-class urban Hindu families from various regional backgrounds and with diverse migration histories.² Most men worked in the IT sector or in financial/business management.

Although several of our informants were employed by Dutch companies, the vast majority worked for Indian companies or multinationals. Most of the women we interviewed were “trailing wives” and did not work outside the home (cf. Taylor and Napier 1996). Several of our informants were also representatives of Indian migrants’ associations. We also interviewed representatives from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, the Indian Embassy and its cultural wing “The Gandhi Centre”, and the municipalities of The Hague and Amsterdam.

Initial contact with many research participants was made through our existing network, interactive forums targeting high-skilled migrants in the Netherlands (e.g. www.meetup.com and www.indianhighskilledmigrantsociety.com) and Facebook groups. We also established contacts at India-orientated festivals, cricket matches, conferences, debates and network meetings in both The Hague and the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area.³ Most of the other informants were found through snowball sampling. The ethnographic data includes casual conversations, semi-structured, in-depth interviews and participant observation at social events, in public places and in informants’ homes. We generally recorded the face-to-face interviews; telephone or Skype interviews were written up. Interviews were often supplemented by follow-up conversations via email, Google Talk (an instant messaging service provided by Google Mail) and Facebook. We also held focus-group discussions with two mixed-gender groups, each with approximately 25 Indian migrants, in the private home of an informant. We also organized two stakeholder meetings with informants and prominent members of the Indian community aimed at developing a collaborative research agenda. With 33 of our informants, we maintained contact over a longer period, allowing us to establish friendlier, closer relations. Particularly with these interlocutors, we were able to also witness and discuss significant changes in their lives such as marriage, divorce, the death of a parent, becoming a Dutch citizen, planning the school careers of their children, or arranging ongoing or return migration.

Initial interview questions stemmed from the project’s main research question “How do Indian highly skilled migrants in the Netherlands and return migrants in India define notions of belonging and civic engagement; how are these notions influenced by their personal (gendered) migration experiences (during and after migration), and how are they mediated by government policies and practices, and diaspora politics?” (Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff 2012, 3). The interview topics evolved over the course of the research through a dynamic interaction between the practices of data collection and analysis (O’Reilly 2012, 182).

3 Flexible Citizenship

Citizenship is a “[...] contingently contested concept with a relatively consistent understanding/recognition that acquires historically contingent meaning and connotations” (Vink 2002, 400). Despite its ambiguous nature, the concept of citizenship is robust enough to serve as the focus of coherent academic and political debate. It always involves issues of membership and the rights and responsibilities pertaining to that. The politics of citizenship always refer to questions of who belongs and which rights and duties are indicated by or associated with that status. How states traditionally determine who is entitled to citizenship is largely based on either the principle of *uis soli*, citizenship by birth in the national territory, or *ius sanguine*, citizenship by blood or some combination of the two.

While both the Netherlands and India maintain a mixed principle of citizenship, it is easier to naturalise and gain citizenship by birth in Dutch territories. Indian citizenship is strongly based on the principles of *ius sanguine*. Despite these differences, citizenship in both post-independence India and post-war Netherlands can be considered “multicultural”. Multicultural citizenship ideals provide a conception of citizenship that explicitly recognises cultural, ethnic and religious differences. This differentiated citizenship is meant to assure liberty and equality in heterogeneous societies (see for example Young 1990, 2000). However, both countries have seen a shift away from this definition of citizenship in recent years. India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has become increasingly intolerant of religious difference (Kaul 2017). The Netherlands has experienced what has come to be known as an “assimilationist turn”, implicitly and explicitly calling on migrants to internalise so called “Dutch values” (Joppke 2004).

Concurrently in both India and the Netherlands, globalisation is challenging the traditional ideals that citizenship (in terms of belonging and rights) is linked to a territorially bounded national community. Many scholars have claimed that the phenomenon of citizenship is moving beyond the nation-state (Giddens 1996; Sassen 1988; Castels and Miller 2003; Soyals 1994). Furthermore, anthropologists of transnational migration have argued that the use of citizenship as an organizing principle in social science research is often embedded in nationalist assumptions and as such fails to capture the complexities of transnational (identification) processes (Levitt and Schiller 2004, 1020). Although scholars like Nina Glick Schiller, Peggy Levitt and others have highlighted the transnationalization of state practices, their primary concern was with the transnational practices and families of low-income migrants and not with states, international companies or highly skilled migrants (Basch, Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1995; Schiller and Fouron 2001; Schiller and Salazar 2013; Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Levitt and Schiller 2000). They claim that “the transnational” is a social space resulting from practices that transcend classical divisions such as nation, race and class.

Whereas these anthropologists and sociologists focused on what Ludger Pries (2007) referred to as the micro-level of transnationalism (individuals, households and their social networks), political scientists, among others, have examined the macro-level of globalization. Little work has been done, however, on the relationship between the two, namely the dynamic cultural interaction between migrants and states in shaping transnational citizenship practices. Moreover, and in line with Hansen (2009), who contended that “postnationalist” scholars have devalued citizenship by dislodging it from the nation-state, we do not want to discard the relevance of nationality to citizenship. Post-national or “global” concepts of “citizenships” often lack an institutional dimension, while in the end it is the possession of a nation-state’s passport that has real-world importance (Hansen 2009).

By understanding the “trans” in transnationalism as denoting “both moving through space and across lines, as well as changing the nature of something” (Ong 1999, 4), we hope to show that the global movement of people, ideas, products and capital does not negate the significance of the nation-states and the citizenship they confer, but that it does change them. For the wealthy and powerful Chinese migrants’ studies by Ong, citizenship is something to be strategically accumulated because it facilitates global business and creates favourable opportunities. As such, citizenship is more than just a passport, it also includes cultural capital such as language (English), education, and dress that can facilitate positions, economic negotiations, and cultural acceptance in different places (Ong 1994). It is a marker of a cosmopolitan status and as such illustrative of the “commodifying effect of globalization on culture” (Gaudette 2013 as cited in Schiller and Salazar 2013, 187).

Hence, flexible citizenship must be understood within the context of neoliberal citizenship regimes in which citizens and potential citizens are conceptualized as both workers and consumers within a semi-regulated market. Politicians in both the Netherlands and India have sought to strengthen the role of the market by rejecting the idea that citizenship confers a status independent of economic standing. Within the realm of Dutch migration policies, the inflow of migrants is “managed” in such a way that a distinction is made between desirable and undesirable migrants (Menz and Caviedes 2010, 2). Indian diaspora policies extend the rights of citizenship as a means to gain access to their diaspora’s economic and political value (Xavier 2011, 37).

In the global competition to thrive in the knowledge economy, not only states but also municipalities, universities and companies bend over backwards to attract talented, skilled migrants to satisfy the needs of the private sector. Both private and state entities work together with what has come to be known as the “migration industry” (Cranston et al. 2017). Entities such as migration brokers and specialized estate agents form a meso-structure linking states with migrants (Cranston 2017, 4). The private–public networks facilitating migration serve to highlight neoliberal economics of knowledge migration. Flexible citizenship is big business. Helping to make migrants feel at home has become an integral part of both the “migrant industry” and national and municipal economic livelihood strategies, in which desirable migrants are not asked to make the same social, economic and political commitments to the country/city that less desirable low-skilled migrants and refugees are asked to make. As such, migrants, members of the diaspora, and governments construct a flexible understanding of citizenship for those with economic means.

4 Indian Knowledge Migration to the Netherlands

Within public and political discourses in the Netherlands, desirable migrants are normally conceptualized as temporary. In an interview with a Dutch municipal policymaker, we were told that investments had been made in establishing structural social events for Indian expats so that they would “feel at home” and then become “ambassadors” for the city upon leaving.⁴ This is particularly notable because “the politics of home” in the Netherlands have largely concerned the permanent integration of ethnic minorities and a nostalgia for a simpler, pre-multicultural Dutch society (Duyvendak 2011). In contrast to the idea that home is permanent and unchanging, a new policy discourse on making expats feel at home, including sponsoring “Indian events”, such as cultural festivals at Holi and Diwali, or cricket tournaments in the case of high-skilled Indians (see also Bal 2012).

Like many other European states, the Netherlands has limited the migration of unskilled labour and asylum seekers, while encouraging skilled and entrepreneurial migration. Most of the recent Indian migration to the Netherlands fall into the latter category. The number of Indian migrants living in the Netherlands has increased significantly since the mid-1990s, from 9,476 in 1996 to 32,682 in 2016.⁵ Indian highly skilled migrants generally work in IT, consultancy, engineering or management. The nature of the global highly skilled market requires mobile, flexible workers, and therefore primarily attracts young single men (cf. Xiang 2007). According to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 69% of the Indians who were registered in Dutch municipalities on 1 January 2016 were aged between 25 and 34, and of the total number of registered Indians, 86% were male.⁶ This data echos Ong’s suggestion that flexible citizenship is gendered in such a way that masculinity is mobile whereas femininity is localized (Ong 1999, 22). Although there are differences in salary, work experience, class, regional background and education among these highly skilled migrants, most of them have completed some form of post-secondary education (Kōu et al. 2017).⁷ Just as the government does, these migrants generally consider their stay in the Netherlands temporary.

In 2004, the Dutch government introduced the knowledge migrant (*kennismigrant*) visa scheme, which stimulated the growth of the Indian community in the Netherlands. Eligibility is dependent on a prospective minimum gross salary that is indexed yearly. In January 2017, this salary was €4,324 per month for those aged 30 or above, €3,170 for those under 30, and €2,272 for recent graduates from Dutch universities.⁸ Under this scheme, a work permit is not required and a residence permit is issued for the duration of the employment contract.

The processing time of resident permits for those on a highly skilled migrant visa is also much faster than for other visas. Family members of highly skilled migrants can also use a fast-track procedure to enter the Netherlands. They can receive a residence permit allowing them to work without a work permit, and are exempt from civic integration requirements. Other benefits also include the “30 per cent rule”, which gives certain expats in the Netherlands a tax-free allowance on 30 per cent of their gross salary, subject to Dutch payroll tax, for a period of eight years.⁹

Flexible citizenship regimes require the state to use economic incentives to lure skilled migrants and global business. The Modern Law for Migration Policy, which was introduced in June 2013, made Dutch migration policy more selective and seeks to make admittance to the country more efficient while making the role of the company sponsoring a migrant more stringent and legally binding (INDIAC 2014, 22). Knowledge migrants must be sponsored, though special arrangements for “highly educated migrants” and recent graduates from Dutch universities provide them with a residence permit for one year while they search for a job. There are also special rules that apply to scientific researchers.

Local and national government work together with private partners to facilitate the lives of knowledge migrants. In 2018, the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) from the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security commissioned research on the appeal of the Netherlands for knowledge migrants, the goal of which was to gain insights into how the Immigration and Naturalisation Service and other organizations could improve their services (Buers et al. 2018, 37). In the research, knowledge migrants were conceptualised as customers. Many municipalities already provide customer service to knowledge migrants and the companies they work for via so called “expat centres”, where arrangements can be made

for residence permits, tax assistance, and information is provided on housing, schools and other social services.

“Expatriate centres” are at the heart of the Dutch “migration industry” (Cranston et al. 2017). In 2006, when it became evident that India was an important growth market for Amsterdam, Amsterdam Economic Affairs established a special India Desk at Amsterdam inbusiness, the official foreign investment agency for the city of Amsterdam. The India-directed policies executed by Amsterdam inbusiness also included quality-of-life activities. In order to be attractive as an immigration country, it was reasoned, Indian expats needed to feel welcome and at home.

One of the key findings in the aforementioned WODC report is that more international schools would make the Netherlands more appealing to knowledge migrants (Buers et al. 2018, 37). Under the Dutch education system, schools with divergent religious or pedagogical principles can claim the same subsidies as Dutch public schools. This means that some English-language schools charge relatively low fees, though they cannot match the current demand. There are prestigious international schools with high fees, but not all families can afford these. An earlier research report on the need for international schools (van der Wel 2016) resulted in the formation of a “taskforce for international education” made up of national and municipal parties. The Dutch cabinet has expressed its support for efforts to assist international schools through relaxing educational regulations and providing financial support as part of its efforts to make the Netherlands attractive to international business.¹⁰ Ironically, in 2004 the government stopped funding municipal mother-tongue programs for migrant children stating that the emphasis should be on learning Dutch (Bezemer and Kroon 2006, 18).

4.1 Naturalization

Despite the social and policy construction of high-skilled migration as temporary, survey research among knowledge migrants conducted by the Immigration and Naturalization Office in 2013/14 shows that 41% of those questioned hoped to stay longer in the Netherlands than the period of their current visa. Twenty-five percent planned to obtain permanent residence or naturalization. This is particularly interesting because 25% represents a significantly higher number of people than the number that actually applied that same year (INDIAC 2014, 44). Although only 67 Indians obtained Dutch nationality between 2010 and 2012 (CBS 2014), anecdotal reports and the aforementioned survey indicate that the numbers are increasing.

A person can become a Dutch citizen in one of three ways. The first is by having one Dutch parent, the second is by option (for those who were born in the Netherlands, Aruba, Curacao or St Maarten) and the third is by naturalization. Naturalization takes approximately one year and must be requested via the municipality in which the migrant resides. Naturalization costs €821 for one person and €1,048 for a family (meaning an individual and his or her partner; for each minor child an additional fee of €121 must be paid). Applicants must produce certain official documents, such as passport, residence permit, birth certificates of any children, marriage certificate and civic integration diploma. Migrants can become Dutch citizens only after staying in the Netherlands for at least five years and having completed either an official Dutch as a second language exam (*NT2*) or a civic integration exam (*inburgering*).

At the time of our research, the civic integration exam was divided into five parts: reading skills, listening skills, writing skills, speaking skills and knowledge of Dutch society. The required language level (A2, elementary) is prescribed by the Common European Framework of References for Languages. Migrants who pass the exam receive the diploma that is required to start the naturalization procedure. Instead of a civic integration exam, migrants with a strong educational background can choose to complete the Dutch as a second language exam, of which there are two levels: programme I, which is set at level B1 (intermediate) and is designed for those who wish to pursue vocational education or a career; and programme II, which is set at level B2 (upper intermediate) and is intended for those with a higher education or those who wish to pursue higher education in the Netherlands. Whereas some of our informants, and particularly the wives of high-skilled migrants, had undertaken a civic integration exam course, most had taken an NT2 exam. The NT2 exam does not include the same cultural and societal knowledge as the civic integration exam; as

such, the state differentiates between what cosmopolitan, flexible citizens need to know and what other kinds of migrants must know in order to naturalise. Cultural and social integration is only required from the latter.

5 Information Technology, Migration and the Indian State

Indian emigration, particularly of skilled migrants, has been increasing steadily (Giordano and Terranova 2012, 19). According to Indian government records, 11.4 million Indians left the country in 2010 (World Bank 2011 as cited in Giordano and Terranova 2012). Indian skilled migrants can be found in a wide variety of sectors, but mostly in the IT and medical fields. Although the Netherlands do have some Indian medical personnel, the vast majority (70%) of Indians work in IT (INDIAC 2013, 42).

The development of the IT sector in India is intimately linked to post-colonial nation-building strategies of the state and economic liberalism that was introduced in 1991. Nationalism and scientific development in India have been linked since the colonial period when nationalists exhibited evidence of ancient Hindu scientific knowledge (Amrute 2016, 119). Many of our informants explained the popularity of computer science in India by claiming that mathematical and scientific innovation was intrinsic to Indian culture, giving the example of the ancient Hindu “invention of the zero”. The development of the India IT industry is thus simultaneously understood to be the result of the “national character”, state support of education, and the withdrawal of the state from the economy (Amrute, 118).

During and after the colonial period the state cultivated a small scientific elite to rule the country and develop the economy. With liberalisation and the development of the IT industry, the middle class refashioned themselves from technocrats serving the state to entrepreneurs serving the nation (Amrute, 122). People working in IT are often considered “smart”, the “cream of society”, “moneyed” and “well-travelled” (D’Mello 2010, 39). Most of our informants came from middle-class families but some, like Vinod, who grew up in a Mumbai slum, had launched themselves into the middle classes through IT education supported by state quotas for Dalits, community support, and family sacrifice.

Developments in the Indian IT sector are transnational in nature and individual development within the sector is often dependent on international experience. This has contributed to what some scholars call a “culture of migration” in which (imagined) positive experiences and the celebration of migration create further migration (Ali 2007; Massey et al. 1993; Bal 2013; Rutten and Verstappen 2014). Migration brings with it respect – especially for men – because it signals economic power (Johnson and Stoll 2008; Malkin 2004; Pribilsky 2012, 219; Osella and Osella 2000). Biographical research conducted among Indian migrants in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom shows that the norm to migrate is held not just by families and social groups, but extends to social and professional networks (Kōu and Bailey 2014, 115). One of our informants, Dirash, told us for example that “[migration] brings pride, it is considered a smart thing to do”. This was echoed by Hari, who stated that “[everyone] wants to go abroad”. Within the context of personal, social and professional development, having been abroad seems to have become part of a rite of passage into adulthood that is seen as “normal” (Rutten and Verstappen 2014; Kirk, Bal and Janssen 2017).

The same economic liberalisation that set India’s IT industry on fire also set the scene for the development of diaspora policies (Xavier 2011, 48; also see Sinha-Kerkhoff and Bal 2003). In the 1990s, New Delhi began to pay attention to the previously ignored diaspora, seeing that they could “trade cultural and symbolic capital for diasporic financial and material capital” (Xavier 2011, 48). Today India is expected to be proud of its diaspora, not only because of its economic power in terms of remitting money, but also because members of the diaspora are “shining ambassadors of the great Indian civilization” and “a veritable ‘brain bank’ from which the country can make withdrawals” (Naujoks 2013, 45). The government’s relationship with this new-found Indian treasure is managed by the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, which was established in 2004 (Naujoks 2013, 50).

Despite efforts by non-resident Indians (NRIs), India does not grant dual citizenship, due in part to its history of postcolonial nation building. Nevertheless, the powerful new magnetism of its diaspora has

resulted in the adoption of two diaspora statuses. As Daniel Naujok explained: “For the purpose of diaspora policies, it might suffice to state that the diaspora consists of all persons and groups that originate from a single country and that are targeted in one way or another because of their origin and ancestry” (2013, 46). Until 2015, members of the Indian diaspora had one of two distinct statuses: they were either a Person of Indian Origin (PIO; a status established in 1999) or an Overseas Citizen of India (OCI; a status established in 2005). The PIO has been discontinued and those holding a PIO identity card could exchange it for an OCI identity card.¹¹ An OCI status is obtainable by adults and their minor children up to six generations removed from India.¹²

The OCI identity card enables its holder to travel to India and live and work there with all the rights of citizens except the political right to vote or run for office and the right to buy agricultural land. After five years of OCI and one year of residence in India, Indian citizenship can be obtained if the other citizenship is given up (Naujoks 2013, 189). OCI status allows someone to maintain a kind of Indian membership while not actually being a citizen of the state; in short, it allows for flexible citizenship.

6 Migrant Decision Making

The Netherlands was almost never the first-choice destination for our informants and many saw it as a stepping stone destination (cf. Bal 2012; Kirk, Bal and Janssen 2017, 5–6). Ranjith told us the Netherlands just was not “on the radar” in India. Many like Vinod dreamed of moving on to more traditional migrant destinations, such as the USA. Some like, Prakrit, saw the 30% tax-free rule as a very attractive part of living in the Netherlands and expressed doubt that they would stay on after this tax rebate ended for them, even though he and his wife had both invested in learning Dutch. Prakrit’s children did go to an international school, it “helps us keep our options open” he stated. He did not think that returning to India would be a good choice for them because of his wife’s work in the pharmaceutical industry, but perhaps they would move to another country.

Our research shows that many Indian knowledge migrants to the Netherlands acquire Dutch citizenship for the practical purpose of (business) travel and in order to afford their children certain opportunities. Whereas sociocultural engagement with “being Dutch” is not entirely absent from their lives – as demonstrated by enthusiasm for the Dutch national football team among some of our informants – most recent Indian migrants to the Netherlands have limited contact with broader Dutch society. In fact, many of our informants primarily engage with other Indians in social groups that cultivate ethno-cultural, linguistic, regional, religious and national identities. These flexible citizens are mainly concerned with the individual rights and privileges attached to Dutch citizenship, their sociocultural identity remains Indian, but for the majority their political and civic engagement in both countries is limited.¹³

Plans for future migration and the decision to naturalize in the Netherlands are made in the space between the cultural logics of individuals and their families and the economic and political processes shaping the movement of high-skilled migrants in both India and the Netherlands. When making decisions around their movement, our informants considered finances, family (including partners, children and elderly parents), career opportunities, emotions and quality of life. Individuals were also clearly influenced by social factors and seemed to obtain their information and examples of scenarios from colleagues and friends.

The availability of OCI cards removes many of the objections Indian migrants in the Netherlands may have to relinquishing their Indian passports. The benefits of Dutch citizenship seem for many to be primarily related to their careers. Aadi told us that mobility for his work was crucial and if in competition with someone with a European passport he would lose out because of the time it takes to arrange visas:

So, for me, why would I want to keep my Indian passport? If it doesn’t allow me ... [to travel]? That’s the problem. And huh, the system... I can take an OCI card. Really, I love my Indian passport, I love my country, I want to keep my Indian passport, but the system doesn’t allow me to move freely. So again ... solves all my problems, I am ready to give it up. But if there was an opportunity, I would like to keep it [Indian passport], you know?

About a year after Vinod obtained Dutch citizenship, we asked him if it had changed his life in any way. He replied: “Man, you have no idea, my life is so easy now; traveling [for work] is so easy.” We then asked about his wife Neha’s efforts to gain Dutch citizenship: “Well, that is a dicey thing, she has agricultural land so we think she will keep her passport.” They had recently built a house in the village of Vinod’s father (Vinod himself had grown up in a city) so it was now advantageous to have an Indian passport in the family. We observed this pattern in several families.

When a woman’s husband becomes a Dutch citizen, her children are also eligible for Dutch citizenship. Although Soha had lived in the Netherlands for 11 years and had her own business, she told us:

To be very honest, it’s not the passport we are very keen on, it’s not that we want to [surrender] but it’s just a kind of securing ourselves, if I have to put it in that way.... Maybe not for us, I think for our son at least. So we thought, like, why don’t we grab it now and make it secure for my son and I think I am a little laid back, now I know my son is getting his passport, now I feel I don’t really have to bang my head for the [civic integration] exam.

Providing children with (what our informants called) “Indian values” on the one hand and the opportunity to study and travel abroad on the other seemed to dominate informants’ decisions on citizenship and (return) migration. Respect for parents and prioritizing family over other forms of relationships were often identified as among the most important factors. Hannelore Roos’s research on Indian IT professionals in Belgium also demonstrates the “cultural imperative to be embedded as an individual in a familial network” (Roos 2013, 151).

Many of our informants indicated that the health and wellbeing of their aging parents also played a significant role in their deliberations about whether to move back to India (cf. Bal, Sinha-Kerkhoff and Tripathy 2017). However, the loss of Indian nationality did not seem to have an impact on these considerations. When interviewed, Nandita for example, had been granted permanent residency and was applying for a Dutch passport and an OCI:

We are in this dilemma, whether to stay here or not, we really don’t know. And we got this Dutch passport because at one point we thought, oh, we will get the Dutch passport, and we will go to India, and after some years, oh, because, my parents are already in their seventies. So we thought, we will stay there a while, and then we come back again, maybe we can do that. Or we thought, maybe we don’t want to come back, but our kids may want to come and study here, so having a Dutch passport would be handy then, for their future. So with these mixed thoughts, we thought, let’s apply now and decide later.

Although money, careers and children played a significant role in our respondents’ decision-making, emotional attachment to their nationality was not absent. It often seemed that our informants suppressed their own emotional sentiments about their Indian nationality for the sake of practicality. Soni told us: “I really don’t want to let go of my Indian passport, to be honest. But now ... there is a [OCI] card, so they make it easy for you and all that stuff.” After taking his oath of allegiance to the Dutch state during a naturalizing ceremony, Vinod asserted that “I will be Indian till the day I die”. Indian identity is emotional, whereas Dutch nationality is practical.

While many informants expressed attachment to their Indian identity, the loss of political rights did not seem to have any influence on their decision to relinquish their Indian passports. Vadish explained his desire to get a Dutch passport on the one hand and to go back to his home town of Mumbai on the other hand, saying: “Voting rights are important, but if I am selfish I am looking for my own benefit and ... um ... a better life for my child, but of course I want to go back.” Similarly, research conducted among naturalized Indian Americans demonstrates that the loss of political rights in India with an OCI card has a negligible impact on the decision to naturalize in the USA (Naujoks 2013). India does not offer the option of absentee ballot for NRIs, so many potential OCIs do not vote anyway (Naujoks 2013).

The vast majority of our informants expressed indifference to politics in India even if they were actively cultivating their Indian national/cultural identity. Aadi, an active member of an Indian events organization, explained that he did not vote because of corruption, and he expressed frustration with the Indian bureaucracy, saying “I can’t do anything, I just feel so helpless”. Similarly, Paula Chakravartty

claims that American NRIs are “pro-nation and anti-state” (2000, 29). Some informants asserted they were aware of the option of re-establishing full citizenship (including full political participation) should they decide to return to India one day. Even Prakrish, who said he hoped to become involved in social and political reforms in India one day, did not worry about losing his Indian citizenship by becoming Dutch, because he could eventually get it back again.

Although many of our informants were positive about the quality of life in the Netherlands (its cleanliness, tidiness, social support system, and indeed the Dutch football team), few expressed any affiliation with “Dutch identity”. One informant who had been insisting on becoming more “Dutch” by learning the language and dating Dutch girls seemed to have given up after his attempts to find a Dutch girlfriend failed. Civic engagement outside the Indian community was rare among newer arrivals and there seemed to be little understanding of the Dutch political or social system. However, such engagement was not entirely absent. Vinod, for example, lobbied for the establishment of a state-sponsored international school in his town and worked with local politicians for three years to obtain a license. Nevertheless, he and his family moved to the USA shortly after this victory. During a Facebook chat Vinod said he missed the Netherlands but was happy to have achieved his goal of living in the USA. After a recent visit to the Netherlands, they called their Dutch town their “first home” on Facebook. Vinod says they might return but they are keeping their options open; they are flexible citizens.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the relationship between transnational migration practices and national-level constructions of citizenship. The international battle for brains has motivated states like the Netherlands and India to design flexible migration and citizenship policies. The Indian state designed its national diaspora policies to create financial and material capital for India in exchange for symbolic and cultural capital, while allowing emigrants to maintain almost all the rights of citizenship. While some segments of the Indian diaspora are starting to lobby for political incorporation in India, our informants were primarily concerned with personal relationships and national identity in negotiating their relationship with India.

The Netherlands offers tax breaks to knowledge migrants, easier visa and work permit applications, and facilitates their temporary residence in the country through support of the migration industry. Although, naturalisation requires high-skilled migrants to invest time in the country (five years) and to learn the Dutch language, many migrants avoid having to learn about “Dutch culture and society” by taking a Dutch-as-second-language exam instead of a civic integration exam. Within the realm of Dutch migration policy, the inflow of migrants is “managed” in such a way that a distinction is made between desirable and undesirable migrants. Low-skilled migrants are (framed as) undesirable and their contribution to the Dutch nation-state is imagined as unwanted or useless, although they are expected to stay in the country. High-skilled migrants on the other hand are treated as desirable new citizens, albeit imagined as people in transit. This distinction reflects a new defining measure of class privilege: the ability and legal right to travel freely (Schiller & Salazar 2013, 196).

The flexible citizenship of our informants is cultivated in the space between the demands of the global economy, individual choice, cultural norms, Indian diaspora policies, and Dutch migration and integration policies. The loss of Indian citizenship, although emotional for some, is not understood to be a loss of Indian identity, and OCI status guarantees that it also does not mean a loss of most privileges. In many families, the acquisition of Dutch citizenship is understood to be beneficial to the careers of male breadwinners and for children’s educational opportunities. As OCI status disallows one from holding agricultural property ownership, spouses (mostly wives) of knowledge migrants remain Indian nationals, while their successful career husbands obtain Dutch citizenship, facilitating their physical, career, and social mobility. In other words, flexible citizenship is gendered. Men are usually the ones to secure their own mobility by obtaining new (Dutch) citizenship while wives have to rely on husbands for theirs.

With this paper, we hope to contribute to ongoing discussions about the changing nature of national citizenship in an increasingly transnational world, and about the dynamic interaction between individuals and states creating gender and class distinctions in the international mobility market. Within this market, Dutch citizenship is a commodity that marks a cosmopolitan status, provides freedom of movement, and both social and economic mobility. OCI identity cards, along with mixed citizenship in families, help to maintain Indian identity and family as well as economic connections with India. Further research into the social status and economic benefits of foreign citizenship for high-skilled Indian migrants and return migrants will help us to deepen our understanding of the relationship between transnational mobility, class and gender.

Notes

1. This study was part of a larger research project entitled ‘Migration, development, and citizenship: notions of belonging and civic engagement among Indian (knowledge-) migrants in the Netherlands and return migrants in India’, carried out in 2013 and 2014. It built on the previous research experiences and network of the lead researchers, Ellen Bal and Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, among the Indian diaspora in the Netherlands and Surinam (see Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff 2005, 2008; Sinha-Kerkhoff and Bal 2003). The project was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research NWO/WOTRO. Ratnakar Tripathy was the main researcher in India. Kate Kirk was the main researcher in the Netherlands.
2. Most of our informants hail from middle or upper middle class families and the vast majority are Hindi-speaking Hindus from northern India, but the group also included several south Indians, Bengalis, Christians, Muslims, and one Jain. Conversational and semi-structured interviews were conducted in the homes of informants, public places such as cafés, and via Google Talk, an instant messaging service provided by Google Mail. The research team also stayed in contact with their informants via Facebook. All names in this paper have been changed to protect the privacy of our interlocutors.
3. There are several associations, foundations and groups in the Netherlands that organize events addressing India sympathizers. A large number of these events are listed in the cultural diary at www.indawijzer.nl
4. Interview with civil servant, 4 May 2013, The Haag.
5. CBS. ‘Bevolkings: generatie, geslacht, leeftijd en herkomstgroepering, 1 januari. <http://statline.cbs.nl/Statweb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=37325&D1=a&D2=a&D3=0&D4=a&D5=93&D6=17-20&VW=T> [Last accessed 20 January 2017].
6. Ibid.
7. The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency makes a distinction between ‘normal’, ‘highly skilled’ and ‘super skilled’ knowledge migrants in the Netherlands. The latter primarily work for large businesses and are paid extremely high wages (Raspe et al. 2014, 15).
8. See: <https://www.rendement.nl/nieuws/id19057-nieuwe-salariseis-voor-kennismigranten-in-2017.html> (Accessed 10 March 2017).
9. For applications registered before 1 January 2012, the duration of the 30 per cent ruling is 10 years. For those registered after 1 January 2012, the duration is eight years. Source: www.belastingdienst.nl (Accessed 5 February 2014).
10. Kamerstuk 22452, nr. 73, 21 januari 2019 <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-22452-72.html> (accessed on 11/02/2019).
11. See: <http://www.indianembassy.nl/eoi.php?id=PIO> (last accessed 10-3-2017).
12. A recent announcement was made by the Indian ambassador to the Netherlands, Venu Rajamony, that Surinami-Hindustani in the Netherlands up to six generations removed from India could be eligible for an OCI card www.news18.com/news/india/india-relaxes-norm-for-surinami-hindustani-community-in-europe-to-get-oci-card-2015695.html (Accessed 5 February 2019).

13. Several prominent Indians in the Netherlands are involved in civic life in both the Netherlands and India. Members, for instance, of the Foundation for Critical Choices for India (FCCI), “a think tank and focal point for initiating and implementing studies and programs on issues of strategic importance to India in social, political, economic fields by mobilizing the resources of non-resident Indians/ persons of Indian origin” (<http://www.fcci.nl/> (Accessed 5 February 2019)).

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