

# Indian wives and husbands on the move: Conjugal relations experienced by women living in Finland

**Minna Säävälä & Tuomas Martikainen**



*This article examines Indian immigrant women's experience of changing family relationships and conjugality after settlement in Finland. The data consists of 14 thematic interviews of women originating in Northern India and living in the metropolitan area of Helsinki. The interviews were carried out in Hindi by a trained Indian anthropologist. The interviewees or their husband were either from the ICT sector or from business in the catering and trade sector. The class position of these two categories differs in the country of origin and in Finland which influences importantly women's attitude toward and practice of conjugal life. Conjugality was stressed more by the upper middle-class ICT women. However, the sharing of domestic duties tended to become more equitable in both class categories. Women often started their married and migratory life in a kin-oriented set up but the social conditions they faced in Finland structurally pushed them towards tightening conjugal relationships.*

**Keywords: Indian migrants, Family, Information and Communication technology, Ethnic business.**

## Introduction

South Asians have emigrated from the Indian subcontinent since centuries. It is estimated that 20 to 25 million people of Indian origin currently live overseas (Khadria 2006). In ancient times people of South Asian origin settled in East African and South Eastern Asia as traders. They left in large numbers for the Caribbean, Malaya and Fiji, among other places, as indentured labourers and to Eastern and Southern Africa as entrepreneurs. Later days have witnessed new forms of emigration. Labour migration to the Gulf region has become a major migration flow (Ali 2007).

After the Independence of India, Great Britain received a wave of mass migration. Currently 1.3 million people of ethnic Indian origin live in Britain, and more recently United States, Canada and also other OECD countries, including Finland, have received considerable numbers of Indian immigrants. Indians migrate to these countries as students; as professionals particularly in management, science,

ICT and health care; and in ethno-specific businesses such as trade and catering (US Census Bureau 2014; Martikainen & Gola 2007).

Kin networks and marriage strategies among transnational South Asians have attracted considerable scholarly attention (e.g., Ballard 1990, 2008; Charsley & Shaw 2006; Mehrotra & Calasanti 2010; Chantler, Gangoli & Hester 2009). Marriage emerges as an important means of producing and transforming transnational networks, while marriage practices and dynamics are themselves transformed in the process (Charsley & Shaw 2006).

The changes in couple relationships, division of household work and family decision-making in the transnational context are issues that tell about the future prospects of transformations in intimate relationships in the context of intensifying globalization and transnationalism. Although mundane issues such as who washes the dishes may appear trivial, they are contributing to social change in a wider scale and simultaneously reflecting wider transformative processes. Here, we will discuss

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how transnational mobility influences conjugal relations by analysing interview data on Indian women who have migrated to Finland.

The number of persons of Indian background living in Finland is 5.971 persons and sixty percent are males (Statistics Finland 2014). Most of the Indians in Finland have lived in the country for less than 15 years and many are unmarried men, recently married couples or families with small children. Many came to Finland along the ICT boom in the 2000s or as traders and restaurateurs (Martikainen & Gola 2007; Hirvi 2014).

## Data

The material of the study consists of semi-structured interviews (N=14) conducted in the Helsinki metropolitan area in 2006. North Indian women were interviewed as part of a larger study of South Asian women (Martikainen & Gola 2007). The interviews were conducted by a trained anthropologist of Indian origin in Hindi. The interviewees were recruited by the snowball method. The interviewees were asked to sign an agreement stating their consent to be interviewed for the study. The transcripts of the interviews were given to the interviewees for their approval. One interviewee refused the use of her interview in the study.

The interviews were semi-structured, open-ended thematic interviews (Fontana & Frey 2000). Despite the predesigned questionnaire, discussion was allowed to flow to unexpected topics relevant for the study if that turned out to be the case. The interviews lasted from one to several hours. Pseudonyms are used in the presentation of the data.

The interviewees were between 25 and 40 years old, all born in Northern India and having lived in Finland for at least one year. All but one Sikh were Hindus. They were all married, with one or two children, and two out of three interviewees were employed. This is more than is the case generally among women of Indian background - only one in three is employed (Martikainen & Gola 2007). The women are of two distinct socio-economic groups: women who are themselves or whose husband is working in the ICT sector (N=9, abbreviated as ICT women), and women who are themselves or whose husband is an entrepreneur in the restaurant, catering or trade sector (N=5, abbreviated as ER women).

ER women had moved directly from India to Finland, while every other woman among the ICT women had lived in other countries as well. They can be described as 'transmigrants', cosmopolitans or 'global nomads'. International career building is important for transmigrants in the ICT sector. However, while the women of the two groups differ in terms of educational and class background as well as in their migration history, there are also many features that unite them, including their country of birth, age, married status and motherhood. Marriage has played an important role in their migratory history in both groups: The women share the experience of immigration via family unification or as a co-migrating dependant from a geographically and culturally distant land outside the European Union. This has many implications regarding their experiences as well as rights and opportunities in the country.

## Ideals and reality: couples and kin

North Indian women come from a relational family system, based on corporately organized kin groups. This implies that socialization of persons aims at creating recognition of the kin group's interests as the basis of moral good that overrides individual interests. Ideally, such a social universe is built upon reciprocity, mutual obligation and personal sacrifice which are regarded as more important than personal freedoms (Ballard 2008). In this model, patrilineal descent is a far more important founding stone of kinship than the conjugal tie. This ideal typical and very generalizing image of the hegemonic South Asian kinship system should be seasoned by acknowledging the agency of the subordinates in everyday life. Hierarchical and patriarchal systems are constantly negotiated and challenged, consequently undergoing minute though perpetual changes. Moreover, regional, caste, and class specific differences are important (Fruzzetti & Tenhunen 2006; Säävälä 2010). Despite the variation, the incongruity between the hegemonic principle of kinship in patrilineally oriented kinship systems of India and the similarly hegemonic principle of nucleated, individualized family systems prevalent in industrially advanced, postmodern societies such as Finland is clear.

When the interviewees were asked about their ideals of family life, the household unit formed by

a married couple and husband's parents – a patrilineal stem family – was considered as the ideal by two out of three interviewees. The term used most commonly by the interviewees was a 'joint family'.

*Joint family is okay, I prefer joint family. Okay there are always advantages and disadvantages of everything. But I do not think that one should leave his/her parents (Ladybird, 35, housewife, husband ICT professional)*

The interviewees saw joint living as desirable due to the needs of the children, advantages in the form of help in child care and for moral reasons: for carrying the responsibility over the ageing generation. There were, however, also women of the opinion that a nuclear household is preferable due to quarrels and domination embedded in 'joint' household.

Several interviewees, both among the ICT women and the ER women, mentioned having been brought up in some form of extended household and some have lived in such a household before migrating to Finland. Currently all the interviewees, apart from two families in restaurant business, lived in nuclear households. Thus the gap between the ideal and the actual living arrangements was quite striking. Under the current immigration legislation, it is impossible for immigrants from outside of EU to bring their elder parents to live with them in Finland.

Most of the families among the ethnic restaurant business people had some relatives living in Finland, witnessing chain migration based on kin networks (see Ballard 2008). Even if families did not form extended households, kin networks appeared important for their everyday life, survival and business success (cf. in Britain, Ballard 1990, 2003; Baumann 1996). The situation was very different among the ICT families who rarely had any relatives around in Finland. They had chosen to come to Finland solely on reasons related to the husband's attractive job offer and future job opportunities for themselves as well. The two categories of Indians were structurally very differently positioned in the global migration scenario and had different future prospects.

The absence of the vast network of relatives, neighbours and friends was deeply felt by many migrant women. One of the reasons why so many considered joint living as positively is the contrast that the idea of the joint family plays vis-à-vis the nuclear realities they face in Finland:

*And we had [a joint] family so I was involved with the family only and could not do anything. [...] There is no social circle, there is nothing at all, now slowly my friends and I have started a [social] circle and we meet each other every month now, otherwise there is nothing here. (Butterfly, 31, housewife, husband restaurateur)*

## Being an Indian wife

When immigrants settle in a society manifesting different features than their taken-for-granted models of family life, it is inevitable that the group identity and self-image of ethnic minorities tends to become tied to idealisation of domestic lifestyles (Grillo 2008). It becomes typical for the migrant to contrast their own good and moral family life with that of the morally decadent local family system. On the other hand, this tendency is coupled with the majority population's view over the immigrant family in precisely the opposite moral tenor. In the highly politicized discourse of immigrant integration, the migrant family comes easily to be considered as a haven of morally objectionable practices, gender inequality and oppression, child abuse and lack of human rights (see, e.g. in Norway: Wikan 2002; in Finland: Peltola 2014).

The effects of this moral discourse were audible in the interviews among Indian migrant women. When asked about views on local women by the fellow Indian interviewer, the discussion shifted automatically to women's roles as mothers and particularly wives. Nisha (33, restaurateur) referred to having witnessed local mothers leaving their small children to fend for themselves at home and going to a bar. Later she concluded that 'they [the Finns] are selfish with their children as well. They think of themselves rather than others'. Asha (37) another restaurateur, in turn was of the opinion that local women are more depressed than Indian women due to their and their husband's extramarital affairs:

*'One is this habit of suspicion, they keep a close eye on their husbands; I mean they cannot trust their husbands as they also do such things. They themselves do wrong things so they do not trust their husbands. Although they might show 'I am like that, I can do.'*

Asha saw herself as an Indian woman to be free from such depression and suspicion. She felt that



she could trust her husband. What was wrong with the local women in Asha's view was that they did not sacrifice to the family in order to deserve the respect and dedication of their husband. This in turn made the marital bond unstable. The same type of comparison, although with somewhat milder expressions, was provided by Anushka (32, working wife of ICT professional), who was of the opinion that she feels much better than any local woman, who is eaten by 'some kind of family-insecurity'.

Some of the interviewees brought up the image of the housebound, immigrant woman being considered as oppressed in the public discourse in Nordic countries. Butterfly (31, housewife, husband a restaurateur) retorted,

*Like some people think that they have such good life and we have so many restrictions in our life, our husband try to boss us, I do not think about all such things... I am satisfied with my life. Okay there are family problems but this is their (other women's) opinion, whatever is there is there. But I have never compared, even I cannot compare that the Finnish women have very good life and why we are born in India, I never feel that way.*

Also another woman felt that being an Indian woman,

*I am an independent lady of my house who has got all the rights being a mother and being a wife. I have got full respect from my husband and from my children. (Sana 31, housewife, husband a restaurateur)*

Butterfly (31, housewife, husband restaurateur) first denied there existing any difference between a Finnish woman and an Indian woman, but then she started to describe how no local woman could stand for all the compromises and the responsibilities that Indian women have to bear:

*We people have some liabilities to manage in life. For example, I need to control my tongue in front of my elder brother-in-law, as I cannot speak this or that in front of him. There is a respect for the elders... We might have to leave [...] our preferences because of the elder person in front of us. Our life is based on quite a lot of compromise, those sacrifices are not there in their [Finnish women's] lives. That these people cannot sacrifice. No sacrifice. I do not think these people can do that, I do not think so. What I have seen till today.*

By creating a rather sinister and unhappy image of the local women, the interviewees managed

to create a contrast that helped to build a positive image of themselves as dedicated, sacrificing and obedient wives. The comments of the women working themselves or whose husband was working in the ICT sector had a less spiteful image of the local women. The main issue for them was not the difference in family roles per se, but the independence and individualism that they have observed in local women. It took such forms as being outgoing, physically fit and carefree or making decisions without asking the husband's opinion. The ICT women often came to think of the role of the conjugal couple when asked about how they felt their own life differed from that of the Finnish women:

*If I compare myself then there are many decisions for which both of us, husband and wife must reach mutual groups with 50-50 compromise. It is not that I cannot make a decision on my own, [but] I guess Finnish females are more dominating, the female criterion is very dominating to make decisions, she does not have to wait for the husband's say. (Toni, 30, ICT professional)*

Independence was seen by many interviewees as a negative characteristic but some ICT interviewees such as Toni above and Sonam observed it with certain awe. The ER women emphasised more than the ICT women the role of the woman as a yielding and adaptive member of kin group, while the ICT women stressed more conjugal mutuality.

### Who decides in a migrant family?

Migration triggers and activates many social-psychological processes, some of which are related to self-identification. As most women had their background in extended families, the transfer to life in a de facto nuclear family household has given them both new opportunities as well as new duties. For many women, the migration process takes place simultaneously with their getting married. Marriage is for most Indians a *rite de passage* which is the necessary last step to full adulthood (Fruzzetti & Tenhunen 2006). Toni explained how she had become more independent and self-reliant in Finland and gained more self-confidence:

*It is not so much, of course there is a little change, as earlier I was used to living at home, so there was a protected environment within the household. After that, when I got married, I lived with my in-laws [in In-*

dia], in other words there were elders at home. So in that situation you can take up the help of the elders in decision-making and the like. That has changed a little that now we two, husband and wife, make decisions. (Toni, 30, ICT professional)

The women were quite contemplative over the changes that migration had brought about in their lives:

*One might not change due to change in the country but as one comes out of the shelter of the parents, so let it be India or any other place then one gets more independence ... Earlier for everything I was used to look for mummy or papa. And now from where mummy and papa will come? And then there is this confidence that okay we are out and we can manage. And still if there is any lack of confidence then husband comes up to give his company. (Sana, 31, ER housewife)*

Sana had been living in Finland for nine years. She did not have any Finnish friends or other contacts to the local population and neither had she learned to speak much of any Finnish. Loneliness and increased self-reliance can be seen as the two sides of the same coin.

Due to the demanding phase in life cycle after marriage, having come to Finland without any motivation or interest towards the country, and the emergent lack of social relations, the initial period of settlement in Finland had been quite stressful for some interviewees. The situation was to some extent easier and more rewarding to the socially upper-middle class ICT wives who more commonly had immigrated as a result of a mutual decision with the husband. Generally speaking, the ICT wives had more social and economic capital and better educational resources than the ER wives for making use of the opportunities that immigration offered them.

The differing class background in the two groups of women studied here was also reflected in the models of gender relations and expectations of married life. The ICT women had had a more conjugal oriented marriage right from the beginning, reflecting a tendency towards growing conjugality that is witnessed also in India among middle class families (Säävälä 2010; Mooney 2006). The situation of the marriage migrants in the restaurant sector was very different: they had mostly come to the country as a direct consequence of the marriage arranged for them by the kin groups. They started

their married and migratory life in a collectivist set up but the social conditions they faced in Finland structurally pushed them towards a tightening conjugal relationship. Some women seemed to remain in a limbo, dedicating themselves to being a housewife and remaining weakly integrated to Finnish society in terms of language skills, employment, participation or social relations. This combined to their experience of society as unwelcoming and even morally questionable.

### Sharing household work

Due to relatively narrow income differences in Finland, it is practically impossible to hire servants to carry out household work in the manner usual in middle class families in India. Someone in the family has to start to cook, clean, wash the dishes and laundry, do the shopping and look after children even if the wife and husband have never been engaged in such activities. A study in the United States (Bhalla 2008) maintains that despite migration creating a new constellation in gender relations that may lead to more equitable division of household labour, families of Indian origin have faced 'tremendous amount of conflict' due to unequal sharing of household chores.

However, only minor conflicts on household work were reported in the interviews. When asked about the changing situation, it appeared that in the families where the wife was employed, the husband had taken up an active role at least in some household tasks. There were a few cases of men totally shunning all domestic duties; these were families where the wife was a homemaker. Some husbands were picky about what duties they were prepared to take up. Cooking was mostly carried out by women although a few men took the task of cutting vegetables. Men were said to do shopping, look after children, wash and clean. The same tendency is witnessed also in some other immigrant groups (e.g. Tiilikainen 2003 on Somalis in Finland). The men engaged in childcare and cleaning and other tasks that they would most probably never have touched 'back home'. Although in most cases women carried out larger part of household chores and thus no true gender equality could be said to exist in the realm of household work, women did not complain about the situation. Instead, those

**Table 1. Differences in women's views on family and gender relations.**

	ICT women	Ethnic business women
Class background	Mostly upper middle class	Mostly lower middle class
Decision on migration	Mutual with husband	Outcome of arranged marriage
Ideal household composition	Extended or joint	Extended or joint
Ideal wife	Mutual decision-maker	Dedicated wife
Women's work	Preferably in waged employment	Could work but not necessary
Division of household work	Husband participates	Husband participates to some extent

who found their husband partaking in the duties appeared proud about their husband's new role in the household.

Many immigrant couples found themselves without the large kin and other network and they had only each other to rely on for helping to cope with everyday realities. Even if some relatives were around, they did not necessarily live nearby, or the female relatives may be employed or studying and unable to provide much everyday help.

## Discussion

The ideal of the co-resident extended family is resilient despite most non-EU immigrants, including Indians being deprived of an opportunity to realize this ideal. Most of the interviewees lived in nuclear household units. Having the senior generation living with them is practically impossible due to immigration legislation. Social reality does not give them an opportunity to make their ideals come true. However, transnational interconnectedness remains strong.

Transnational living tends to change the division of labour between husband and wife and it strengthens the conjugal tie vis-à-vis the larger kin groups. Family and welfare policies in Finland give an opportunity to South Asian mothers to have their children in affordable and high quality municipal day care and providing them occasions to seek education and employment. Many mothers take advantage of the situation even if they come from a social background that considers women's labour force participation as unusual. When the extended family is not around to provide support in child care and everyday reproductive work in the domestic domain, the couple has to carry the responsibility of making decisions independently. The women's attitude towards this independence-cum-responsi-

bility is ambivalent: they cherish the possibility to have a say in decisions but simultaneously may feel insecure having no elders around to ask advice and share the responsibility.

The division of labour between husband and wife appears to transform in the transnational situation: wives see their husbands participating in household chores much more than is usual in Indian contexts of the same social classes. Despite a more equitable division of domestic labour, all the interviewed women carry a larger burden of household work than their husbands, even in situations when they themselves are gainfully employed.

The importance of the conjugal tie is more explicit among the often highly educated ICT professional couples than among the often less educated ethnic entrepreneur couples. Class position of the husbands and wives both in their country of origin and in their current situation as immigrants is one of the most important features relating with their attitude and ideals of conjugal life. The transnational kin network seems to cater for the upper middle class couples' emotional and social needs while among the ethnic entrepreneurs, wider hierarchies of kin networks are very resilient as they form a tangible source of economic and social support. It is to be expected that marriage and conjugal practices among these two class segments of transnational South Asians will drift father apart in the future, reflecting the different socioeconomic role of kin relations for them. This despite the largely shared ideal of the primacy of kin group vis-à-vis couple relationship.

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## Uusi näyttely Siirtolaisuusinstituutissa:

# Eija Tähkäpää – Palasina maailmalla

**9.12.2015–31.5.2016**

"Palasina maailmalla" on sotalapsuutta käsittelevä teos. Lapsia lähetetään muualle turvaan – ja taas takaisin kotimaahansa – jos sitä on vielä olemassa. Heitä siirrellään ja sijoitellaan jatkuvasti, paljoakaan asianosaisilta kyselemättä. Siirrot pelastavat, mutta myös vaurioittavat. Juuret katkeavat, kieli unohtuu, kohtelu voi olla hyvää tai huonoa. Ikävä, suru, orpouden- ja erilaisuuden tunne sekä hätä ja pelko ovat mukana näillä matkoilla. Palasina maailmalla pureutuu tähän ajankohtaiseen aiheeseen.

Eija Tähkäpää on turkulainen kuvataiteilija ja sotalapsenlapsi. Teos "Palasina maailmalla" on osa Turun taiteilijaseuran "Satamapaikka"-näyttelyä vuodelta 2011. Teos on ollut aiemmin esillä Suomen Joutsenella sekä Turun Kristillisellä opistolla.

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**Avoimna ma-pe klo 9-16**

