

# Encountering Difference – The experience of Nordic highly skilled citizens in India

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*My dissertation is an analysis of how Danish and Finnish highly skilled temporary migrants encounter difference when they are living and working in a foreign country, India. Using the theoretical framework of social citizenship, I analyse how their identification with formal institutions (vertical citizenship) informal institutions (horizontal citizenship), and the broader social (natural and physical) environment transforms as a result of the move. The results show that citizens have divergent citizenship constellations (Bauböck 2010). They experience changes both to their legislated social rights in their home country depending on the country of origin, duration of stay and whether they are in or out of work among other factors. In addition, their behaved citizenship – attitudes and responses to people and the social and physical environments they operate within – also changes in various ways among the same and different nationalities. Among other reasons, the variations occur as a consequence of their divergent levels, ability and willingness to mobilize different forms of capital; as a consequence of framing effects in relation to people, groups and institutions; and because of different relationships to the state and the sending company.*

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I am the fourth generation in my family to become a migrant and consequently have always straddled many different countries, societies, communities, and social groups. Encountering difference has thus been a constant in my life course which is undoubtedly why my academic path has led me to write this thesis.

My dissertation is an analysis of how Danish and Finnish highly skilled temporary migrants encounter difference when they are living and working in a foreign country, India. We tend to read more in academia and mainstream media about how more vulnerable migrant groups confront new situations in a destination country: just think about refugees, diasporic communities, and forced and voluntary labour migrants. But if we are aiming to create good societies that work for everyone then we

must surely also focus on the lived experiences of powerful, dominant, majority populations even if they are more privileged; not least because they are often portrayed as ideal type citizens.

With this study I turn the tide and study up rather than study down. I analyze how the powerful encounter difference and find that they too experience numerous challenges in spite of being equipped with far more resources. They also handle situations very differently to one another in spite of the similarities between them, and their position of relative privilege.

Today, I shall take you on a short journey through the process of producing this thesis as I believe that the strengths of my work lie not only in the empirical findings, but also in the methodological and theoretical approach I take.

In 2007, working as a language instructor in Denmark, I started to wonder why so many of my clients were professional women preparing to

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ditch their jobs, careers, gender equality and privileged lifestyles to become 'expat wives' in Asia. I imagined that they would have very different roles within the family, very different living conditions, very different position in society and likely also face many more challenges. The thesis was born out of this curiosity.

I took a holistic approach to the work and used the framework of social citizenship as an umbrella under which I could analyze all the different social inter and intra actions taking place when the both the accompanying and posted or seconded partner encountered difference. I analysed the formal relationships to the state, the public authorities, public services and the labour market. I analysed the informal relations to expat communities, families, friends, employees and colleagues. The analysis thus considers what Condor (2011) refers to as vertical citizenship, the identification with formal institutions, as well as horizontal citizenship, identification with a human community. It was very clear to me during the fieldwork that the physical and natural environment had a role to play in social relationships, too, and so I argue for the inclusion of a third dimension to social citizenship, namely, the environment. Migrants are not 'free-floating'; they enact their citizenship in particular places and spaces.

In order to consider the numerous interactions and relationships taking place across borders during the enactment of political citizenship, Rainer Bauböck proposes using a constellation framework. He defines a citizenship constellation as "*a structure in which individuals are simultaneously linked to several such political entities, so that their legal rights and duties are determined not only by one political authority, but by several.*" The same can be said of the numerous links migrants have to social entities in different social spaces. So, as the first social scientist to do so, I apply the constellation framework to social citizenship: rather than conforming to any specific typology, I argue that this approach allows for consideration of the multi-dimensional interactions that take place when migrant citizens encounter difference.

I hypothesized that the Nordic migrants would exhibit different citizenship constellations as a result of the variation within and across their vertical, horizontal and environmental relationships. Being a new theory, the constellation approach has had little application to empirical data. As such, the

methodology requires a small sample study. Obtaining a representative sample is thus not the goal of my work; giving examples of the diversity among the group is.

In 2009, after conducting an extensive pre-study, I located a small sample of 8 Danish and 8 Finnish citizens, who were living in Delhi, Bangalore or Mumbai, and who came there originally in relation to an international posting, which I refer to as secondment. The most effective ways of finding them were to contact the Danish embassy in Delhi, to attend different expat meet-ups in the cities, and through word of mouth. All in all I spent just under four months in India conducting fieldwork. All informants filled out a pre-interview questionnaire and the majority filled out another one two years later. Both could be found online through a website that I created for the project, [www.globaleuropeans.com](http://www.globaleuropeans.com).

To facilitate our conversation during the interviews, I asked questions about how the migrants' working and everyday lives had changed with the move, about their welfare and wellbeing, about their attitudes towards the differences they encountered, about the changes they had noticed in themselves, and how they felt about life in India.

As well as the sixteen Nordic citizens, I also interviewed other temporary highly skilled migrants from the UK, Netherlands and Germany. While more or less the same issues were spoken about by all, they were spoken about in different ways and using different frames. The Nordic respondents distinguished themselves with their focus on trust, institutional and normative behaviors, order, hierarchy, and interpersonal relationships and communication. They also positioned themselves against foreign 'others' more frequently, for instance by referring to things Danish and Finnish, and being 'white'. For these reasons, and because I focused on the relational aspects of citizenship, I took an interdisciplinary approach. I utilized concepts from social psychology, human geography, sociology and social policy, which is not common in social policy research, but I believe it was necessary to unmask the complexity of the situation.

I shall now present some of the key findings of the study.

The first pertains to the Nordic Welfare State which is repeatedly hailed as a success story by academia and the international community for its

comparatively high levels of gender equality, affordable good quality child care and schooling, good standards of living, high levels of trust and low levels of corruption. Poignant for this thesis is that the universalist principle of welfare has repeatedly been shown to work well for sedentary Nordic citizens and its fragility has only been discussed with regards to immigration and ethnic minorities. I find however that there is cause for concern for Danes and Finns who emigrate outside of the European Union.

For the Danes, both the seconded worker and the accompanying partner lose their right to basic social security if they are de-registered for more than two years. For my informants who exceeded the two-year limit it was more the principle that their freedoms were so restricted that disturbed them, not that they thought they would suffer particularly as a consequence. Greg was perhaps an extreme case who felt very strongly about being de-registered from his family home which his father built, and to which he is the sole heir. He describes denying citizens the right to residency as like *“Amputating the leg when there is a problem with the foot”*.

According to the rules in Finland, if Finnish accompanying partners took up paid work in India, they would automatically lose their right to basic social security even if they still have an address in Finland. The working partner meanwhile would retain his right, if he was employed by an Indian subsidiary and had an address in Finland, or if employed by the Finnish office with an address in India. This is alarming for the Nordic ambition of gender equality as it continues to be predominantly women who accompany male partners abroad. Curiously though, the Finnish women in this study were not at all worried about their effective loss of the right to work. The spouse visa which many of them were on prohibited them from undertaking paid employment anyway.

All of the accompanying partners I interviewed were in fact extremely efficient at transforming their cultural capital to fit in to the new situation and create new opportunities in India: solutions included circumventing or disobeying the rules of visas and engaging in paid work; being self-employed or doing voluntary work; and making use of the internet to facilitate starting up new activities. One respondent felt liberated from the constraints of conforming to the dual worker model in Finland and seized the opportunity to spend more time

with children and take up new sports, enjoy the leisure time.

All of these findings digress from the majority of studies on so-called expat wives, where the wives' are often portrayed as victims of the secondment process. On the other hand, it supports the research findings of Pierre Bourdieu, Catherine Hakim, Anja Weiss and others who maintain that having particular forms of privilege and capital and being able to mobilize them generates more capital and more privilege. But I add a further dimension in the context of migration, which pertains to time. Almost all of the women commented that the great transformations that were occurring in Indian society in 2009 meant that there was a wealth of opportunities for them, and several of the working partners recognized that having knowledge and experience of conducting business in India would be highly valuable to employers in their respective home countries.

The citizenship constellations clearly vary between the seconded worker and the accompanying partner, and the accompanying partners' constellations transform dramatically as a result of changing relationships to the state and labour market. What's more, the activities that the women undertook were further influenced by other social factors such as their relationships to their previous employers or their husband's employers, their previous work or study activity and also where they lived in the respective cities.

An additional important finding for the literature on privileged migration is the great extent to which the sphere of work and employment intervenes in both the working and non-working lives of seconded families. In many ways, the employers replace the welfare state as the main formal institution in providing a safety net. The holes in that net are bigger for some than for others which suggests that industrial citizenship, a term originally coined by TH Marshall, is a concept that needs further investigation in the study of so-called expatriates.

Another major finding is that even though the loss of rights in the home country was reality for some of the Nordic citizens, and could potentially be for others, the majority of them trusted that if they needed it upon return to Denmark or Finland, there would be social support. Also, in spite of some criticisms, they fully supported the existence of the Nordic welfare state.



It would seem that the frames used in communicating how good and reliable the welfare state is, has had the effect of creating a sense of security so strong that some citizens have expectations that may not be realistic. This is both a cause for concern and something to behold if the result is that it yields pro-active citizens.

When it came to trust in Indian institutions, the issue of corruption was unsurprisingly a hot topic for my informants. One of the theories that explains corruption is based on a principal-agent model. To put it crudely, the principal works against corruption, and the agent encourages it. One might expect there to be many principals among the notoriously trusting and law abiding Danes and Finns, but I found only one. The collective action model by contrast proposes that all individuals are maximizers of their own self-interest, and so if they find themselves in an environment where corruption is the expected behavior, then individuals will simply go along with it, even if they are morally disapproving. And this shoe fit my informants.

Michael for instance uses an agency to help his family with administration. The agency always sends him the same person – a broker – who told them that when they are at the offices, always just reply “yes” to officials and smile. He will take care of the rest. In short, the broker is paid a fee and he takes care of all administrative tasks such as renewing visas, registering ones arrival and such. In this manner, those who can afford the service are spared time, and are free from being reprimanded for participating in corruption, even though it is common knowledge that the broker simply bribes the officials with a proportion of the money he is paid. The boundaries between corruption and legal service provision in India are somewhat blurred. Michael explains:

*“We have had some fun with it; [we joke] ‘Never drop your papers in that office because then the money will fall out!’ [Laughs]. But we get a bill, so our company in Denmark are fine with the situation and we have, of course, official bills for all the expenses we do have and [so] no problem is made. Of course we are supporting a system which we shouldn’t support, but on the other hand we would probably not be here if we didn’t play by the rules from time to time [...] The company is quite strict about [this]: you are not allowed to pay your way. But as I said, that’s fine for some Finnish clerk sitting in Finland do-*

*ing laws that are perfectly fine in Finland. Come over here!”*

A new finding for the collective action model is that there were varying degrees to which the Nordic citizens ‘went along with’ corruption. I identified four different strategies that should be explored in more depth: acceptance and compliance without reprise or frustration; acceptance and compliance with frustration; alternative actions and methods; non-acceptance and no alternatives.

When it came to trusting other people there were a multitude of responses and behaviours. Nordic citizens are reported to have very high levels of trust in other people when situated in their home countries. There, they are a dominant middle class ethnic majority. In India they become an elite ethnic minority, and so their social position is transformed, and so too is the ability to trust, for some. The examples I highlight here are simply those I find most noteworthy with regard to how they transformed the Nordic migrants’ citizenship behaviours.

All of the Danes and Finns made reference to being a visibly ethnic other, and ‘Western’ in appearance. But while some of them attributed being stared at in public to simply looking different, others felt singled out because they were white. This was not perceived as offensive for all of them. Those who were intimidated were also the ones who engaged in negative stereotyping when they made references to Indian people and society. Some also restricted their movements, by travelling everywhere by car, by sticking to large multinational chains rather than shopping locally. One person also stopped visiting popular tourist destinations. Those who felt comfortable with being a visibly ethnic other moved more freely in public areas and seemed to have more frequent encounters and relationships with Indian people which they enjoyed.

The Nordic migrants in this study were all highly educated, and they had various formal and informal channels through which they could acquire more knowledge and understanding of India. Nonetheless, they had very different capacities to use these privileges to their advantage. A poignant remark from one respondent when speaking about the challenges with communication was, “even though you understand the difference you sometimes just don’t want to behave”. There were also instances

where Nordic citizens took advantage of being in hierarchical relationships and would instruct their staff to behave in ways they knew were against the norms of behavior in India, in order to facilitate a more comfortable situation for themselves. Privilege sometimes yielded undesirable behaviours that several of the migrants commented they had never seen in themselves before.

By highlighting how divergently the Nordic highly skilled citizens encounter difference in India, I find strong support for my hypothesis. The migrants indeed exhibit widely different citizenship constellations, vertically, horizontally, in relation to the broader social and physical environment. Their different approaches to trust, hierarchy, inter-group relations, cultural and ethnic difference, and also how they are treated and perceived by other individuals, groups and institutions, seemingly influences their citizenship outcomes.

I understand my thesis to present an array of opportunities in research at the intersection of social policy and migration: Firstly, I do not believe that we can continue to speak about social citizenship, particularly in the context of migration, without deeper consideration of the socio-cultural and socio-environmental norms that denizens are used to enacting their citizenship within, and the norms of the society in which they are located, because one impacts the other. Secondly, I clearly show that the idea of universalism falls apart when Nordic citizens are seconded abroad on the grounds of residency and work/employment status. Finland's current structure forces a return to the 'old' male breadwinner model of family life, albeit a new and perhaps more privileged version. Thirdly, it cannot be ignored that the basic needs that the citizens have not only change, but they change in different ways according to the individual's abilities to activate their agency and mobilize their stocks of capital and adapt to the new surroundings. The relationships to the employers and labour market also

strongly impact these capabilities and as such more attention should be given to industrial citizenship in the context of research on highly skilled mobility. And lastly, I believe that Social Policy could benefit from taking a more inter-disciplinary approach to better understand why policies work for some and not for others.

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