

**Provincial Globalisation:  
The Impact of Reverse Transnational Flows in India's Regional Towns**

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**Overview:**

International migration from India has produced important diasporic communities in different countries, leading to the formation of transnational networks. Transnational linkages between migrants and their home regions or towns are often conduits through which a range of economic, social and cultural resources are transmitted back to India. Such 'reverse' transnational flows have become significant drivers of globalisation and socio-economic transformation throughout the global South, with both positive and negative impacts on development.

This five-year research programme, initiated in January 2010, is designed to explore processes of 'provincial globalisation' in India by tracing the transnational flows of resources sent by migrants and diasporic communities to their regions of origin. In order to take into account the great diversity in regional economies, societies and histories, the programme will compare the operation and effects of these networks and processes across three different regions of India – central

Gujarat, coastal Andhra Pradesh and coastal Karnataka. Within each region the focus of research will be on the key provincial towns and their rural hinterlands. The studies will document a broad range of ‘reverse flows’ -- economic resources such as household remittances, investments in land or businesses, and financial support for NGOs; ‘social remittances’ such as flows of ideas and know-how; and cultural and religious transactions such as donations to temples. By mapping the key transnational networks, mechanisms and sites for resource transmission by migrants, the constituent research projects will examine comparatively the influence of such transfers on political and economic processes, social development, and cultural/religious institutions and identities in the selected regions.

**Background:**

The increasing scale of international migration from developing countries has produced large ‘diasporic’ communities in developed countries, many of which maintain close ties with their homelands. The literature on migration and transnationalism has shown that transnational networks have had profound consequences – social, cultural, political and economic – for both the sending and receiving countries. Migrants support families at home through remittances, invest in land or business ventures in their hometowns, or donate money to development projects or religious institutions. Transnational networks also act as conduits for ‘social remittances’ as new ideas, cultural values and expectations are transmitted to people at home, and diasporic communities are often important political actors in their homelands. Transnational flows have had diverse social outcomes, for instance by reinforcing or reconstituting cultural identities or altering traditional structures of kinship or gender relations. The circulation of migrants themselves, who return to their homes periodically or permanently, is an important component of ‘reverse flows’.

The research programme will investigate the transnational networks that connect migrants with selected regions in India and the effects of reverse flows of resources. The regional or provincial focus is important because most research on globalisation in developing countries has concentrated either on the macro-level of the nation-state or on the major metropolitan cities, bypassing the smaller urban centres and their rural peripheries. However, there is scattered evidence that in India, the impact of transnationalism has been especially significant at the ‘middle’ level of the region, especially those (such as the regions selected for study) with significant histories of international out-migration.

Despite the large literature on cultural and political aspects of the South Asian diaspora and their position in the host societies, the question of diasporic

relationships with India has not been adequately addressed. This research assumes importance in view of the fact that people of Indian origin constitute the second largest diasporic group in the world and India is largest recipient of overseas remittances in the developing world. While many Overseas Indians send resources to India to support their families at home or to contribute to development, the consequences of such flows are not necessarily benign, and may have both positive and negative outcomes. For example, migrant resources may contribute to regional economic growth but may also exacerbate local inequalities or create dependence on remittances. Investments in agrarian land or rural development projects may lead to an escalation in land prices and exacerbate polarisation in landholdings. Transnational flows also transect the cultural and political fields, especially in the domain of religion, in some cases leading to the sharpening of religious identities and inter-community conflicts.

#### **Objectives:**

The overall question framing the research programme concerns the effects of reverse flows of resources through transnational networks on social development in India. The specific objectives include:

- To map the transnational social fields that have been formed due to international migration from the selected regions;
- To trace the flows of people, resources, capital, labour, and ideas that traverse these networks;
- To identify the key institutional mechanisms and the larger economic and political dynamics that direct and shape reverse flows;
- To analyse the consequences of these flows for specific sectors or social processes.

To achieve these objectives, the programme will focus on three broad types of flows, which are closely inter-connected:

- Economic transfers, such as financial or business investments, purchase of property, and household remittances;
- Social investments, including philanthropy, support to NGOs, networks of NRIs devoted to development, private initiatives;
- Cultural and political interventions, such as support for religious organisations or political parties.

**Programme structure:**

The programme consists of five independent but interlinked research projects located in three states of India – three doctoral and two post-doctoral projects – and includes both Dutch and Indian researchers. The Ph.D. projects will be intensive micro-level studies of the selected regions, while the two post-doctoral projects will provide macro- and meso-level mappings of transnational linkages and flows at the regional, state, and national levels.

**Research sites:**

Substantial regional differences in political-economic formations and patterns of migration in India necessitate a comparative approach. The project sites, located in the states of Gujarat, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, have been selected to represent contrasting patterns of migration, transnational flows, and development outcomes. They also share common features – all are productive agricultural and rapidly urbanising regions where the dominant landowning/ agricultural groups have diversified economically, processes that in turn are linked to out-migration. However, the time-scale, type, and destination of migration differ in each case. Although different types of migration are found in all the regions, for the purposes of this research programme the focus will be on particular groups of migrants who appear to be most significant in terms of transformations in the home regions.

A major assumption behind this research agenda is that the specific history of migration in a region shapes the transnational networks and resource flows that emerge as well as the institutional mechanisms and ‘destinations’ of flows. For instance, transfers by skilled and semi-skilled workers are likely to flow through family connections in the form of household remittances, while business and middle class migrants may be more likely to contribute in the form of philanthropy, religious donations, and business investments. The three regions will also provide a contrast with respect to their hypothesised impact on social development. There are several areas or sectors where transfers by Overseas Indians may have had the most impact, both direct and indirect – for example, where contributions to temples have exacerbated inter-community conflicts, or where investment in land or Special Economic Zones has heightened class or caste tensions. The analyses will take into consideration the specific political-economic structures and histories of the selected regions as well as the policy environment governing transnational flows, investment opportunities, and the like.

The focal site for each regional project will be the major regional town, but the scope of the research will encompass the entire district/ region including the rural hinterland. Regional towns are assumed to be the central nodes through which

transnational flows of people, money, and knowledge transit, connecting the region with the rest of the world. It is expected that such flows have significant effects on the towns themselves, as new investments, forms of social action and cultural activities expand and transform local society, and new institutions and structures emerge to service these flows. These towns are also likely to be key recipients of resource transfers, such as investment in property, hospitals, or educational institutions, with attendant cultural or political impacts.

**Methodology:**

Transnational social fields are shaped by institutional actors, power dynamics, and policies at different scales – below, above, and at the level of the nation-state – hence the study of reverse flows must be multi-scalar as well as multi-disciplinary. Accordingly, the research programme will utilise several research strategies and methods, both quantitative and qualitative.

The main thrust of the programme will be on qualitative methods and fine-grained ethnographic research, which will enable us to explore in depth the complexities of migrant experience and transnational relationships and to understand the mechanisms and modalities of resource flows. The regional Ph.D. projects will be social anthropological in approach, entailing extended periods of intensive fieldwork but also utilising survey methods where required. They will also employ multi-sited ethnography in order to trace connections, relationships and processes across space and time. Recognising that transnational social fields are constantly evolving and that people within these fields are also on the move, the field research will focus on the dynamics of these flows and on identifying shifting connections.

Complementing the field-based studies, two overview projects (one from the perspective of economics, the second from another social science perspective) will provide the macro-level context for the processes observed at the regional and micro level. These projects will utilise available national, state and regional level primary and secondary data sources but also attempt to generate new kinds of data through innovative methods of data collection and analysis.

This multi-disciplinary perspective, encompassing the disciplines of sociology, social anthropology, economics, and geography, is essential to capture the diverse ways in which transnational flows are embedded in social networks or permeated by cultural values or political aspirations. The overall programme has been designed to facilitate comparative and multi-scalar analysis by integrating the results of the individual research projects at different stages. The skills of the research team will be supplemented by consultations with experts from other fields such as urban studies

and development studies, as well as development practitioners and a range of other stakeholders.

**Significance and outcomes:**

The research programme will produce significant academic as well as policy outputs. Most of the academic literature on transnationalism and on the South Asian diaspora does not capture adequately the effects of reverse flows into the provincial areas that are the main sources of migrants. The programme will contribute significantly to the literatures on globalisation, transnationalism and migration and development, by moving down from the global and national levels to the region and locality. It will be methodologically innovative in its multi-scalar and multi-dimensional analysis, multi-disciplinary research design, and by undertaking a comparative analysis of three regions.

The research outputs will also contribute to national and international policy debates on migration, development, and the contributions of Overseas Indians to India's development. Resources transferred by migrants to developing countries amount to nearly twice that of official development assistance, but our knowledge about the 'informal' mechanisms through which most resources flow, and their uses and destinations, is highly inadequate. In India, the debate on migration and development has focused mainly on the economic impact of remittances, but diaspora philanthropy, especially to and through community and religious associations, is an increasingly significant form of resource transfer. However, there is little concrete information on the scale, content, or impact of such donations. Thus, in the context of policy concerns regarding the involvement of Overseas Indians in national development, the Provincial Globalisation programme will provide crucial inputs about the various modes and consequences of 'reverse flows' of resources into India.

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