

5 “We Know We Have to Work Like a ‘Donkey’ in Canada”

Employment Expectations and Experiences of Young Punjabis Migrating to Canada

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Introduction

Much of the scholarship on immigrant employment in Canada has adopted a political economy approach to critique state policies, institutional barriers, and structural constraints that reiterate the racialization of immigrant workers (Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2007; Sakamoto et al., 2010; Block & Galabuzi, 2018) and the intersectional nature of race, gender, and class (Ng, 1998; Arat-Koc, 2001; Zaman, 2006; Vosko, 2006; Choudry et al., 2009; Banerjee et al., 2018; Walton-Roberts, 2021; Abu-Laban et al., 2022) in the Canadian labour market. An alternative strand of work examines immigrant “employment success” as an important metric of integration (Frank, 2013; Reitz, 2001, 2007a, 2007b), identity, and belonging (Das Gupta, 2021). Although these works have been key to our understanding of immigrant experiences, most of them pay little attention to individual negotiations by migrants as they engage in paid work. In this chapter, we build on scholarship that is focused on the individual-level negotiations of immigrants around employment (e.g., see Zaman, 2006; Choudry et al., 2009; Dlamini et al., 2012; Das Gupta et al., 2014) while also considering their structural limitations. In trying to expand the focus of scholarship on immigrant employment, this chapter adopts a transnational approach, which allows for an understanding of how migrant and immigrant experiences of employment are a transnational process including expectation setting, preparation, and navigation. Moreover, a focus on the individual allows us to centralize their agency and negotiations around employment, while still attending to their social positioning and the structural context they are operating in, in both the pre- and post-migration phases.

This chapter will contrast themes that emerged in the pre-migration and post-migration phases as young Punjabis articulate their expectations of work in their planned destination of Canada along with their actual post-migration employment experiences in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In both these phases, two groups of migrants arriving through different pathways – international students and skilled permanent residents – were

interviewed. International students pursue permanent residence through a two-step migration pathway, initially arriving in Canada as temporary students and then applying for permanent residence (PR) in the post-graduation period. Skilled professional immigrants arrive as permanent residents through a direct route based on their cultural and financial capital. We are interested in interrogating how migrants following different pathways set employment expectations and navigate employment in the immigrant context, given the pre-migration context of information asymmetry and immigration agents (including fraudulent ones) and post-migration structural context of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination; devaluation of qualifications; and uncertain pathways to class mobility. We argue that the migrant's migration pathway and transnational social networks shape their employment expectations and navigations. In addition, in the pre-migration phase, the stage of journey prospective migrants are in, that is, planning to migrate, in the process of filing the visa application or having received the visa, plays an important role. Across both sites, migrants use the idea of temporariness to contain and cope with the precarious working conditions they expect to face or are facing in the immediate aftermath of migration.

While these navigations are strategic and enable migrants to ensure better preparedness and adaptation to precarious employment conditions, they do not question the basis for this precarity and leave the structural context intact. In fact, the acquiescence to precarious working conditions in the pre-migration stage points to an early normalization of low-paying and devalued work in the post-migration context. While Tungohan (2021) has discussed the role of pre-migration orientation sessions in inculcating gendered and colonial gratitude towards the receiving state, in the case of Punjabi migrants that we interviewed, there were no such pre-departure programs. Scholars such as Chatterjee (2019) and Walton-Roberts (2021) have pointed to the formation of migrant subjectivity through policy pathways, which often results in migrants differentiating themselves from each other rather than building solidarity. In the pre-migration stage, there is a distinct difference in the expectations of student and skilled migrants wherein student migrants are more amenable to low-paid and precarious employment. In contrast, those migrating under the skilled worker category try to distinguish themselves from the students who are seemingly willing to take on precarious work and migrate "at any cost." Similarly, in the post-migration period, students and skilled migrants depict different navigations. Skilled migrants are actively selecting employment opportunities that further their class mobility and/or allow them better working conditions. Students are navigating long working hours alongside their educational commitments so the actual job status or working conditions become less important. Having a job is key to their survival, alongside working towards attaining permanent residency. They are often seeking jobs that are temporally flexible and include flex time, shift work, and part-time work.¹

In exploring the employment expectations and experiences of these two groups of migrants and emphasizing their agentive manoeuvring, we seek to

expand the scholarship on migrant employment. In this chapter, we draw on qualitative data gathered through online Zoom interviews with young Punjabis across the contexts of Punjab and Toronto. We aim to develop a transnational understanding of how migrants are preparing for and navigating the institutional structures and employment opportunities across the contexts of Punjab and Canada. The first section will lay out the structural contexts within which prospective migrants plan their mobility in India and later find themselves working and living in Canada. The second section will construct a theoretical framework, which we call “transnational navigations” with which migrant agency and mobility are analysed. The third section will describe the methods used in our research in Punjab and Canada. The fourth section will present our findings in the pre-migration period and show continuities and ruptures in the post-migration period. This will be followed by a discussion of the research findings and conclusions.

Structural Contexts of Transnational Navigation

India

India is the largest source country of immigrants to Canada. In 2021, one-third of Canadian immigrants were of Indian origin (El-Assal, 2022). In 2022, Canada received 807,750 international students, of which 40% were from India (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2022). The number of Indians who became permanent residents in Canada rose from 32,828 in 2013 to 118,095 in 2022 (Government of Canada, 2022b). In 2021, 10,000 Indians moved to Canada under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program² and 130,000 received work permits under the International Mobility Program³. India is a logical source country due to its expanding middle-class population with high levels of English fluency. Prospective migrants in India often cite their interest in migrating to Canada due to its accessible pathway to permanent status (El-Assal, 2022).

There are several programs implemented by the Canadian government to attract immigrants including the Express Entry program, which was implemented in 2015 to attract highly skilled workers from abroad or international students currently working under a temporary status. In 2018, Immigration, Refugees, Citizenship Canada (IRCC) launched the Student Direct Stream to allow eligible international students from designated countries to fast-track their application for post-secondary studies in Canada. In addition, the Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) allows international students, who have graduated from postsecondary education, to gain Canadian work experience (El-Assal, 2022).

Among Indian immigrants, Punjabis are a strong majority with 763,785 Canadians reporting Punjabi as their mother tongue,⁴ approximately 2% of the Canadian population. In the Toronto area, where our study is based, 20.3% of immigrants cite India as their place of birth and among Indian

immigrants, Punjabi and Gujarati are the most spoken Indian mother tongues (Statistics Canada, 2022a, 2022b). The Punjabis are a transnational community with strong linkages to Canada and Punjab, and the Doaba region of Punjab, where the current study is located in India, has the highest rate of out-migration from Punjab. There are various estimates on the rate of out-migration from Punjab. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, India, between 2016 and February 2021, 984,000 people migrated from Punjab and Chandigarh, which include 379,000 students and 600,000 workers. Based on these numbers 1 in 33 Punjabis moved abroad in the last five years. Thirty-eight per cent of those who immigrated did so on student visas (Rampal & Agarwal, 2022). According to the Punjab International Migration Survey (PIMS), which was conducted across 10,000 households in Punjab, 11% of households in Punjab reported one international out-migrant (Nanda et al., 2022). These estimates along with the preponderance of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) centres and commercialization of immigration services relay a sense of the importance of migration in Punjab, wherein it is seen as an important route of social and economic mobility.

For young Punjabis, migration is an important aspiration and allows them to forge class mobility and claim proximity to urban modernity (Nagpal, 2022). But the fulfilment of the aspiration often entails parents selling their land or taking out loans to send their children abroad to study and gain permanent residency status (One Voice Canada, 2021). The desire to out-migrate has been actively harnessed by the Canadian government, agents of Canadian colleges and universities who are said to earn \$3,000–4,000 per student, as well as immigration recruitment agents in Punjab. In the pre-migration context, prospective migrants are subject to an immigration industry that exploits their lack of information for their own gain, often ushering students towards community colleges as opposed to universities (Das Gupta & Su, 2023). This has class implications as colleges are by and large geared to applied and occupationally specific courses that demand lower levels of English fluency, whereas universities provide avenues to a larger array of upper-level managerial, supervisory, and professional jobs demanding higher English fluency. Moreover, students are also encouraged into programs of study by agents based on the agent's "arrangement" with Canadian colleges, which may have nothing to do with the student's previous education or professional experience. According to PIMS, 20% of households in Punjab report the agent services amounted to cheating or deceiving. Despite the potential for exploitation and fraud, 62% of households report using the services of agents for assistance in migration. The propensity to seek immigration consultants or agents to migrate is heightened among those with poor networks and support systems abroad and a lack of family history of migration. Households in Doaba, urban areas, and those with large landholding reported less dependence on the immigration industry (Nanda et al., 2022). This points to the importance of social networks in mediating the process of migration, from its very inception.

Canada

Immigration has always been part of the settler colonial project of the Canadian state. Local Indigenous Peoples were marginalized, segregated, and subject to various forms of violence, cultural genocide, and in other ways cast out of the nation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; Coulthard, 2014). On the other hand, immigrants/settlers were brought in to provide the labour power that was needed to establish a settler colonial capitalist economy. This system of labour migration and immigration/settlement continues today through a range of state policies and programs (Abu-Laban et al., 2022; Simmons, 2010). While different groups of white and non-white migrants have been brought in to fulfil labour market needs, they have not all been privy to the same level of benefits and services. The varying treatment of different groups of migrants, immigrants, and asylum seekers brought to a country under different migrant categories and pathways is linked to different access to social rights – services and benefits – described as “differential inclusion” by Schlee (2021). The differential inclusions arise out of a continuum of exclusions and conditional inclusions.

Although blatant racial and sexual exclusions were removed in the post-1967 period, the advent of the Points System of immigration meant the removal of “race” as a criterion of admissibility and enfranchisement. But the principle of maintaining pockets of temporary labour devoid of most rights remained. Moreover, the bodies associated with temporariness continued to be those of poor and racialized people, who are still considered undesirable as permanent residents and citizens. In fact, Sharma (2006) has pointed out that soon after the Points System was brought in purportedly marking the end of a racially exclusive immigration policy, another policy was ushered in 1973 called the Non-Immigrant Employment Authorization Program (NIEAP), which ensured the preservation of temporary migrant labour flows into Canada. The immigrants who are brought in through these programmes work under work permits, some of which are tied to a particular employer who manages their housing and working conditions, and others which are open permits, giving them more options provided they can find employment. But they are limited in other ways such as hours of work. Over the past four decades, the proportion of temporary migrants in relation to permanent immigrants has been increasing albeit stratified in terms of the ease with which they can apply for permanent residency, for example, those arriving under the Caregivers Program compared to those coming under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). Through sustained organizing and advocacy, live-in migrant caregivers gained the right to apply for permanent residency status after fulfilling a prescribed period of temporary work in Canada, however, more recently the numbers allowed to do so remain controlled (Abu-Laban et al., 2022, p. 159). Today, temporary migrant workers are found in almost all sectors of the economy.

Although many Indian immigrants, including Punjabis, are in Canada as permanent residents, one group of temporary residents that is growing in numbers are international students. Indian nationals have received more study permits than other groups; 319,130 Indian international students were enrolled on 31 December 2022, at a Canadian post-secondary institution accounting for 37% of all international students to Canada (Olsen, 2023). Even though international students are touted to be primarily here to acquire post-secondary education, they are also migrant workers, not only because they need the earnings to pay for their tuition which is exponentially higher than the domestic rate but additionally to pay for their living expenses. Moreover, they need to perform 1,560 hours of full-time work following their graduation in order to be eligible for permanent residency in Canada. As mentioned earlier, they are on a two-step migration pathway in which the first step of entering Canada as international students is followed upon graduation by a second step of applying for permanent residency during a transitional period when they are allowed to work full-time on a PGWP. The length of the PGWP can vary anywhere between eight months to three years depending on the length of the academic program they complete. It also makes the spouse of the PGWP holder eligible for an open work permit (Sidhu, 2021).

Scott et al. (2015) state that international students are key components of the government's *Economic Action Plan* as they are viewed by the Canadian state as "ideal" immigrants, given their Canadian work experience, language fluency, and acculturation. However, students experience labour market discrimination from employers due to their status as international students and the employer's aversion to do required paperwork that it entails, for example, Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIA),⁵ as well as racism and sexism. Moreover, unforeseen contextual changes such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the shutting down of many establishments, such as food and accommodation services (Statistics Canada, 2021), which employed about a quarter of international students, gave rise to job losses and economic precarity. On the other hand, during the pandemic recovery period, LMIAs, work permits, and permanent residency applications were expedited for those employed in essential occupations such as healthcare (Government of Canada, 2022c), and flexibility was exercised by the government regarding the eligibility for PGWP (Sidhu, 2021). Taken together, the structural contexts both pre-migration and post-migration present a number of challenges starting with locating a reliable agent to facilitate migration and, finding employment compatible with studying as a student and pre-migration qualifications for a skilled migrant in the context of increasing economic precarity. To understand how immigrants navigate structural contexts of migration in both Punjab and Canada, we draw on the concepts of transnationalism and navigation.

Transnational Navigations

There is now extensive literature to demonstrate that migrants do not neatly move from one society to another, leaving behind everything that they had

embodied before including past relationships, networks, and identities. Rather, they remain connected to their points of origin through a variety of kin relations, friendships, institutional relationships, and social networks. As Levitt and Glick-Schiller (2004) state, there are “ways of being” and “ways of becoming” that illustrate the practices by which they remain connected and the ways in which they express their old, new, and hybrid identities. “Transnational spaces” and “transnational fields” are allied concepts that denote relationships, connections, and affiliations that continue across borders with the help of communication technologies, and the back-and-forth movement of migrants, marked by power inequalities. One conduit for understanding the formation and operation of transnational relations is social networks.

Previous research has demonstrated the importance of social networks in facilitating migration, settlement, and building of diasporas (e.g., see Banerjee, 1983; Dekker et al., 2018; Haug, 2008). In our study, we find that social networks are important in defining the employment preferences and decision-making of migrants as well as for finding jobs and promotions. Ideas about work and employment circulate transnationally through villages, neighbourhoods, school networks, social media, migrants who have travelled previously, and those who are prospective travellers as well as those who stay put. Prospective immigrants rely on these social networks to prepare for the labour market scenarios post-migration and new immigrants use their social networks to access employment opportunities. In addition, as migrants engage in the process of migration and seeking employment, they interact with various transnational ideas, structures, and processes including social norms about “respectable” work, aspirations for class mobility, immigration policies, employment opportunities, and restrictions in the post-migration context. To understand the movement of migrants through employment structures and ideas across transnational spaces, it is useful to draw on the construct of “navigation.”

The concept of navigation places emphasis on the ways in which migrants agentively manoeuvre the transnational field, which is seen as socially, politically, and temporally defined. Given that the structural context vis-à-vis migration policies and their implementation is constantly evolving, it is a fluid and dynamic navigation. Defining the preference for migration comes first, followed by stages of planning and preparation, and, finally, the actual spatial movement. The navigation is continually reworked in line with the demands of the situation, but as it emerges in our data, it is defined by migration pathway (student vs. skilled migrant), stage of migration (planning to migrate vs. applied to migrate) and social positioning of migrants in terms of class and gender (Triandafyllidou, 2019). As migrants navigate the structural context in the pre- and post-migration phases, their employment expectations and experiences reveal a process of agentive manoeuvring. Agency is defined as exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn means the ability to manoeuvre around these social relations to some degree (Berntsen, 2016; Sewell, 1992 p. 20).

This form of navigation is not oriented towards transforming the existing structures of domination but rather improving one's position in the existing system (Berntsen, 2016; Paret & Gleeson, 2016; Triandafyllidou, 2019, Das Gupta et al., 2014). Das Gupta et al. (2014) show how a group of professional Indian and Chinese women navigate the Canadian labour market by relying on psychological and emotional capital, reflecting what Pierre Bourdieu conceptualized as class habitus. Managing their middle-class career expectations, they look for "respectable" work by developing short and long-term goals and using their social capital to avoid falling into financial precarity.

Temporary migrants are typically more tolerant towards substandard employment conditions due to their "dual frame of reference" (Paret & Gleeson, 2016; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003) where they compare employment terms in the destination country with job opportunities in the sending country. For example, pre-migration narratives of migrants reveal their willingness to "make do" with subpar employment opportunities for the short-term due to long-term plans for a better life and/or the opportunity for skill development and cultural learning offered by post-migration employment. In the post-migration context, migrants engage in a process of "reworking" where they use informal and incremental steps to claim a better position in the existing employment relations (Berntsen, 2016). As we will discuss later, this reworking can entail an active process of selecting jobs and working conditions that are acceptable to them and using the idea of temporality.

Our focus on agency and navigation does not mean that migrants, including temporary migrants, do not engage in collective resistance. Zaman (2006), for instance, discusses the role of the Philippine Women Centre in British Columbia, which engages in activism at local, national, and global levels to fight for the rights of Philippino women, many of whom arrive in Canada as temporary caregivers under the Caregivers Program, formerly the Live-in Caregiver Program (LICP). Similarly, Choudry et al. (2009) describe the organizing activities of PINAY in Quebec, Canada, which is an organization of Philippino migrant/immigrant women. Many case studies of collective organizing and advocacy are seen predominantly among Mexican farmworkers who are employed in Canada under the SAWP, which involves alliances with Canadian unions and community organizations in Ontario, as farmworkers are not permitted to unionize in that province (Goldring & Krishnamurti, 2007). On the other hand, where unionization is allowed for migrant workers, such as in British Columbia, Vosko (2019) describes how farmworkers participated in a union drive, certification, getting a collective agreement, and a bargaining unit. Choudry et al. (2009) suggest that there is tension between adapting to precarious conditions and resisting them. The Punjabi migrants we encountered at the specific moment of the pre-migration and post-migration interviews did not articulate any interest in collective organizing or resistance. They were more oriented towards individual trajectories of mobility. This does not preclude the possibility of resistance at later

stages of their migration journey, but it points to the importance of temporality in understanding transnational processes of agentive manoeuvring.

Questions of time and temporality have been important concepts in understanding migration and transmigration (Cwerner, 2001; Griffiths, 2014; Fuhse, 2022) even though it remains under-theorized. Griffiths (2014) and Fuhse (2022) state that time is a resource which can be used to control migrants. Immigration officials and other bureaucrats can enforce an elongated period of waiting on migrants and disempower them into a total state of uncertainty and limbo, particularly for asylum seekers and undocumented people. They can require migrants, for instance, to be patient and wait for their turn indefinitely or to “do time” before they advance to the next step as in the case of the two-step migration that international students undertake. “Doing time” can also entail underemployment of skilled permanent residents while gathering Canadian experience in the labour market as in Das Gupta et al. (2014) study. In these latter cases, as Griffiths points out, “waiting is not always a negative or empty experience” (Griffiths, 2014, p. 1996), especially if there is a glimmer of hope for a better future. In our research, we find that while temporality is being enacted in a top-down manner by immigration policies and their implementation, immigrants also draw on ideas of temporality to navigate employment. Ideas about the temporary nature of precarious work were actively used by respondents in the pre- and post-migration stages to cope with subpar employment conditions.

Methods

The basis of this chapter is a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded one-year exploratory study conducted in 2021 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as mentioned earlier. Using a transnational framework, qualitative interviews were conducted on Zoom platform with Punjabi migrants – one set with prospective migrants in Punjab, India, preparing to migrate to Canada and another set with those already residing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). These interviews were corroborated with key informant interviews. In Punjab, key informant interviews were carried out with non-governmental organization workers, immigration lawyers, and IELTS centre teachers/owners. In Canada, key informants were counsellors and settlement and community workers. In Punjab, 13 respondents (4 women, 9 men) between the ages of 22 and 31 who were planning to or in the process of migrating as students or skilled migrants were accessed through the snowball sampling method. The networks of the community resource person (immigration lawyer) and research assistant were used to access young Punjabis in different stages of their migration journey: planning to migrate, preparing for IELTS, in the process of filing the visa application or having received their visa. The respondents were mostly from cities (5 respondents from rural areas) such as Kapurthala, Chandigarh, Phagwara, and Jalandhar in the Doaba region of Punjab. All had completed their undergraduate degree, and six

had or were in the process of finishing their postgraduate education. These respondents were mostly upper-caste Hindus or Sikhs, except for one Muslim and five Dalit respondents. The average monthly income of the respondents was INR 44,000, and they belonged to India's "new middle-class."⁶ We conducted two to three in-depth Zoom interviews with each respondent. In the second and third interviews, respondents were asked to share videos or photos depicting their thoughts on migration aspirations, expectations, and gender and migration.

Similarly, in the GTA, researchers worked in partnership with a long-standing community health centre called Punjabi Community Health Services (PCHS) in Peel region where 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with immigrant settlement workers who work predominantly within the Punjabi community in the GTA's western region of Peel, which has a concentration of Punjabi-Canadian residential and business areas. Referrals by PCHS staff as well as outreach conducted by research assistants led to in-depth Zoom interviews with 14 Punjabi newcomers (9 women and 5 men) between the ages of 18 and 40 who had arrived either as skilled immigrants or as international students. Twelve were randomly selected out of a larger sample of 30 obtained through a snowball sampling method. Two additional respondents were added in a more purposive manner. Out of the 14 thus selected, 10 had arrived as international students (6 women and 4 men) out of whom 7 had gained their permanent residency at the time of the interview and 3 were in transition having completed their post-secondary program and were working full-time on post-graduate permits. All were Sikhs. All the international students had completed their programs in community colleges. Four respondents (3 women and 1 man) had arrived in Canada as permanent residents under the Federal Skilled Worker program. In the next section, we draw from these interviews to illustrate their aspirations and orientations to employment.

Pre-Migration Navigation

Anticipating Precarity

In the pre-migration context, the narratives of prospective migrants regarding employment diverged depending upon what stage of migration they were in and their migration pathway. Those migrating as students, especially young men, expressed their expectations and preparedness to take up precarious employment in Canada. They expressed that this struggle is important to set up oneself for the future. They had a fair sense of the precarity involved in working long hours and studying alongside it, as they were in constant contact with their friends who had migrated earlier. This preparedness for hardships following immigration was tied into the idea of an "ideal" male migrant, who can "rough it out" to provide security and stability to his family or in the case of unmarried men become marriageable.

Balwinder is a 26-year-old who recently got married and applied to migrate to Canada under a student visa. He resided in a village near Phagwara city and had completed his BTech from the local Ramgarhia College. At the time of our interaction, he had applied for a visa to study project management at a Canadian college and, by the end of our study his visa had come through and he was preparing for his journey. His plan was to migrate first and take six months to settle down, then call his wife who was trained and working as a nurse in Apollo Hospital in Ludhiana (a city 50km from Phagwara). In speaking about his expectations of the post-migration life, Balwinder says,

I think that’s the thing there that you remain in this race and it is a donkey’s life and you keep doing that and you carry on with the load on your shoulders and it depends on your capabilities that’s how you deal with it. . . . If you look at it from a long-term point of view, yes, it’s the life of a donkey but for a limited time and after that, you can live happily because of the taxes you have paid.

This definition of the initial migration experience as entailing significant hurdles that one deals with temporarily for a guaranteed payoff is contrasted with life in India, where one deals with hardships like low pay without any guaranteed payoffs. This difference is attributed to the absence of a responsive state in the Indian context. This dual frame of reference allows the immigrant to justify and accept hardships in the post-migration period.

Moreover, this expectation of hardship is accompanied by a long-term vision of wealth and autonomy. Balwinder, like other young men planning to migrate, often talked about his long-term plan to set up his own business. He describes his plan to get into the construction business with his friends,

I am doing project management (*the course Balwinder is planning to pursue in Canada*), he has done architecture and the other friend is into estimation like construction estimation, so, all in all, we can do that (*construction business*) if we get an opportunity in the future because it’s quite flourishing there in Canada because the government is already trying to settle down many immigrants and they have less area and fewer homes so the construction business is not going to stop, hence we think it’s a right plan for us.

Thus, the expectation of low wages and precarious employment were temporal, in that it was meant to characterize the immediate post-migration experience, but the long-term goal was to attain economic autonomy.

Career Versus “Survival Job”

In contrast, those migrating as skilled migrants were less willing to engage in low-wage survival jobs, even for a brief period. Rita is 26 years old and at the

time of the interview was pursuing her MA at O.P. Jindal Global University near Delhi, India. She had no immediate plans for migration but was looking to migrate at a later stage. She recounted the experience of her cousin, who despite pursuing his accounting education in Australia did not get a job in his field and is currently doing odd jobs with his wife. She distinguishes her preference from his and says, “So I do want to move there. But I always told my parents that I don’t want to work in a wage-based job. I want proper health insurance and like, a salary package.” In contrast to Balwinder, who was from rural Punjab and did not have access to high-quality educational institutions where he could attain English fluency and other urban mannerisms, Rita was raised in the cosmopolitan environment of Chandigarh. Her desire to migrate hinged on her finding employment commensurate with her career trajectory and education in the post-migration context. Also, unlike male migrants, young women did not seem to romanticize the idea of enduring hardships in the post-migration context. Thus, the mentality of not migrating and doing low-skilled jobs was heightened among those who were from urban areas, better educated, and occupied well-paying jobs in India. Moreover, as was the case with Balwinder, Rita and others preparing to migrate, actively drew on learnings from their social networks to make their migration strategies and plans.

In contrast to Rita, who has not actively started her preparation for migration and thinks about migration more as a long-term goal, Pradeep is preparing for his second migration to Canada as a skilled worker. Pradeep, a 31-year-old, had previously migrated to the UK under a student visa and completed his MA in Marketing at London South Bank University. Thereafter, he applied to go to the UK under a business visa but faced refusal twice. He also filed a case in court to challenge the visa officer’s decision, but the court decided in favour of the UK High Commission. Currently, he is applying as a skilled migrant to Canada. Since he had already worked in the UK in a marketing position at Zara, he was optimistic about the so-called merit-based system in foreign countries, where they are interested in your experience and skills rather than just formal qualifications.

In talking about how prospective migrants should prepare themselves Pradeep says,

If you want to go somewhere and do something, for example, if you’re going to Canada, it’s important to study about how things work there and which are the places where you would be eligible to work. . . . Because once you’re there you have to work at Tim Hortons (fast food). You have to work as a waiter or a waitress at a restaurant. Even filling up the fuel in trucks and vehicles. Here this kind of work is looked down upon, but you have to work for survival. So one should know that they would’ve to work there and the life there would not be the same as the life here.

He is cognizant of the importance of doing jobs for survival and looks down upon his friend who sat at home for a year and did not even “allow” his wife to work as he waited for a job of his level. Pradeep describes his employment in the UK not as devalued and low paying but rather as one that facilitated his skill development. He describes the working environment in London as,

The best’ whereas in India . . . it is equal to being zero. There we have weekly sessions with the manager, or their managers, who are working in the top of the stores. Weekly, every Saturday evening, you have interactions. We have one-on-one interactions about what are the negative and the positive feelings we have about the sales.

Thus, unlike Rita, who also plans to migrate as a skilled worker but thinks about migration as a long-term objective, one she is not immediately planning for, Pradeep has already filed his application to migrate to Canada. Given his proximity to the act of migration, he confronts the reality of post-migration. He talks about the struggles one must endure in the initial stages of migration matter-of-factly and as something one should be aware of when planning their migration. In addition, he constructs his own experience doing low-paying work likely as a salesperson in Zara (he is ambiguous about his exact position) as meaningful due to its contribution to his skill development and UK’s positive merit-based work culture. His tendency to distinguish his own experience from that of “others” is likely heightened due to his social positioning as the only son of a well-established and rich business family from Shimla. This distanced way of communicating the hardships entailed in seeking suitable employment post-migration while also pointing out the usability and, thereby, difference in the work he has done allows Pradeep to construct himself as both the heroic migrant who is willing to rough it out and the middle-class migrant who is able to use employment opportunities to garner skills and useful experiences.

Thus, the navigations around migration as pointed out by Triandafylidou (2019) start in the pre-migration phase as prospective migrants interact with their social networks, define migration preferences, and make migration strategies and plans. This process of navigation is shaped by both their migration pathway and their stage of migration. Those who had not yet begun their visa application and were merely thinking about migration such as Rita were also more likely to express more defined preferences around not taking on low-skilled jobs. Also, male migrants reiterated the myth of the hardworking migrant more than women. Similarly, in the post-migration context, discussed next, a number of these patterns reverberate, as skilled migrants and students depict different navigations around employment.

Post-Migration Navigations

Re-Working Career Goals

There are continuities of the discourses heard from prospective migrants' narratives and those heard in the post-migration stage in the GTA in Canada. Those who arrived in Canada as permanent residents under the skilled categories expressed a certain selectivity about the types of jobs that would be acceptable to them. They often reworked their employment goals in line with family expectations and strategies for class mobility. Sargun, a 29-year-old man from Mohali, Punjab, who arrived in Canada as a permanent resident along with his wife at the height of the pandemic in the winter of 2021, was working as a stockbroker in India. After he completed his MA in Finance in the UK, Canada was only his second migration destination. He explained in a very detailed way how he was managing not only his own expectations but also his parent's hopes, while at the same time navigating the structural obstacles in the Canadian labour market. He intimated that his family is quite judgemental about the kinds of jobs he engages in since he had been a manager prior to coming abroad. If he did a "labour job," they would be frustrated and would ask him to come back to India. So, to manage these competing expectations, he re-worked his goals and decided to settle for a customer care job, which he thought was a "decent" job. It paid well and was an "office job." He also felt that it helped him to integrate into the financial market and to learn about credit cards, which were new to him. In this way, he said he maintained "a balance between my family back in India and the jobs here." As in the pre-migration stage, we find that Sargun's strategies benefit from his observations of the experiences of other relatives who are settled in Canada. For instance, he allied himself with a relative who did "a proper job" according to him rather than "odd jobs." He added that the former relative had pursued education and also "grew as a human being."

Gathering "Canadian Experience"

Sargun acknowledged that he may have to struggle and pursue more education, which he was already doing. With the objective of joining the Toronto Stock Exchange, Sargun was taking the Canadian Securities course after work to prepare himself for that future goal. Sargun's wife, Reena, was a graduate student completing her master's degree at the time of our interview. She had planned to complete her PhD and eventually become a university professor as that was her career in India prior to migrating to Canada. Accumulating cultural capital in the form of additional certifications and degrees is indicative of their middle-class trajectory and very much in keeping with their parental ambitions and proclivities which they have carried with them transnationally and receive regular reminders of.

Twenty-six-year-old Rajdeep came as a newlywed “co-PR” sponsored by her husband, who has been a permanent resident in Canada for nine years, from Kandola, Punjab. She had been the head of operations in an immigration agency in India. After a two-month job search in Toronto, she found her first job but decided to switch jobs after two weeks because she did not like the contractual nature of the job and the expectation of having to work on the weekend. The job she settled for was related to her position in India in that she worked in an immigration agency that was an intermediary between prospective immigrants and employers here in Canada.

Rajdeep shared with us that she did not plan to stay at this job for more than six or seven months before finding a better job. When asked if she felt her current job was a “step down,” she did not think so. Nevertheless, she saw her job as good for gathering Canadian experience only, and that she would eventually change it for something better. We can see Rajdeep’s temporal strategy of gathering the required Canadian experience in a less desirable job and moving towards her real goal. Her real goal was to become a business analyst and towards that end, she was taking an entry certificate in Business Analyst, which would position her to shift into that field.

“Dual Frame of Reference”

During our conversation with Sargun, he compared office cultures in India and Canada and informed us the poor office culture in India as one of the main reasons why he wanted to immigrate to Canada. In his Indian job, he felt that tensions between colleagues because of political affiliations contributed to time wastage, hampering the completion of work. He identified himself as “neutral” in terms of his politics and felt unwilling to ally with his boss just to have his support. He felt that in Canada, everybody minded their own business and did not interfere in other people’s business. This suited him well.

Those who arrived in Canada as international students, on the other hand, were much less choosy about the types of jobs they were prepared to do, reminiscent of their openness to doing “survival jobs” in the pre-migration phase. This openness to doing any job with a limited range of options was largely constructed by the restrictions on international students and related obligations to study and eventually graduate. But, above all, their primary goal was to attain permanent residence (PR) in Canada, with pursuing their desired careers coming only second.

“Any Job Will Do”

Twenty-seven-year-old Reet had completed a two-year Computer Science degree program from an engineering college in Ludhiana, Punjab. Pushed by her agent to apply for a community college program, because it would be faster than a university degree program (depicting a preference for a shorter waiting time), Reet decided to study computer networking after landing in

the GTA as an international student. The classes were scheduled throughout the weekdays with time gaps in between so that it was very difficult or virtually impossible to fit paid work in between. These temporal constraints compelled Reet to seek employment on the weekends as a security guard. In addition, this job allowed her to complete her assignments during quiet times as she explains: “It was good for me because sometimes I found that the workload for the courses were a lot, so it helped me to complete my stuff on the job.”

Although she described her security job as being rather quiet, thus providing time to catch up with assignments from college, other security guard contexts are quite the opposite. Reet told us about international students working on nightshifts and then joining their class at 8 am in the morning. Twenty-seven-year-old Kulveer from Sangrur district was an example of that. He was an international student in a human resources program and worked as a security guard at a nightclub downtown (night shift ending at 3 am) where there was always a possibility for physical violence and threat to one’s life. Nonetheless, security guard work seems to be a common job availed by international students, given its availability and its part-time and shift work nature, which makes it easier to fit into the 20-hour limitation. In the context of COVID-19, international students did not have too many choices when fast food joints were closed and shopping malls were largely “locked down.” Kulveer initially started out working in fast food outlets but lost his job during the lockdown.

Upon graduation, Reet was hired full-time as a Product Technical Support in a restaurant. This allowed her to fulfil the employment requirements for permanent residency in Canada. At the time of our interview, she expressed the intention to pursue a university education. Kulveer, on the other hand, had a very different trajectory. Like Reet, he was persuaded by an agent to enrol in human resources in a community college despite or because of a low level of English fluency. He was also told that there was not much difference between colleges and universities and that the “rest depends on you.” As mentioned earlier, he worked as a security guard at night and in a fast-food place on weekends as a full-time student until the pandemic ended his weekend job. He went back to working full-time in the same fast-food franchise after graduation at minimum wages fulfilling the employment requirements for his PR. Like his brother and cousins who were already PRs, Kulveer really wanted to become a truck driver because of the high earning potential in that occupation. To that end, he had spent \$6,000 on a three-month training program. Indeed, recent studies show that international graduates continue to be underemployed in relation to their educational qualifications because they are often unable to find full-time jobs in their fields quickly enough to count towards their PR requirements as in Kulveer’s case (Sidhu, 2021). Given that predicament, post-graduate work permit holders took up any job which would provide full-time hours for a year. Security guard jobs and jobs in such fast-food franchises as McDonalds and Tim Hortons are

beneficiaries of the labour of international students, who keep referring each other to such jobs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we discussed how two groups of migrants (skilled permanent residents and two-step international student migrants) display continuity in their employment expectations and experiences based on their migration pathway and stage of migration. Those migrating as skilled migrants are more concerned about doing “respectable” work wherein even when there is acknowledgement of the difficult working conditions post-migration, as is the case with Pradeep, there is a tendency to construct one’s experiences as conducive to skill development. Moreover, the idea of migration as a hardship that one must endure was tied in more closely with ideas of masculinity and male imaginaries of migration. Those male migrants who were in the process of migrating as skilled workers and, thereby, more proximate to the act of migration were more likely to acknowledge the likelihood of an initial period of hardship. Those migrating as students, regardless of gender and migration stage, are more embracing of the idea that they will have to do low-paying jobs for some time. However, they view this as a temporary phase, as they believe Canada can facilitate their economic autonomy in the long term.

Similarly, in the post-migration period, skilled migrants, such as Sargun and Rajdeep, navigate different employment opportunities based on family expectations and aspirations for class mobility. Some of the ways in which they engage in these processes of navigation were by re-working their jobs and employment goals, by “making do” even with precarious jobs, by viewing temporariness as a resource with which to gather “Canadian experience” and by using a dual frame of reference. Student migrants prioritized acquiring permanent status over building a career, at least in the short run. Across both contexts but especially in the post-migration context, the temporary nature of devalued work came across as an important way of managing the gulf between real employment opportunities and aspirations.

An important aspect of creating and navigating employment opportunities was the social networks that migrants had access to. Expectations and meaning-making tied to employment circulated both in the pre-migration phase and as in the post-migration phase through transnational family/kin, friendship, school, and online networks. Every migrant spoke of how their thoughts had been influenced by observing others who had migrated before them, sometimes their own experiences of migration to other locations before coming to Canada or by stories shared through their networks. They relied on these networks also to find jobs and for support in moving ahead either with their PR applications or with their careers.

The ways in which migrants set expectations and navigate employment opportunities speak to their ability to exercise agency, wherein despite structural constraints they mobilize their social networks to prepare for and access

employment opportunities that enable their social and economic mobility in Canada over the long term. This form of agency is oriented towards enhancing their position in the current system. It does not question the structural basis of the precarious employment new immigrants have to negotiate. In fact, the pre-migration acquiescence to low wages and precarious work, especially for student migrants and the post-migration management around limited employment opportunities, points to how hegemonic ideas of immigration as accompanied by economic hardship are deeply internalized. The immigrants are well prepared and reconciled to adapt around devalued work for long-term gains, which they believe is better assured in Canada than India. The structural reasons for why they are in this position in a new country that relies on their labour are not something they seem to be concerned with.

In fact, the glimmer of resistance that emerges in Pradeep's narrative is when he was denied a business visa by the UK government twice, he decided to file a case against the government. Thus, it appears that while devalued labour may be more acceptable, often due to the dual frame of reference, being denied access to a country despite meeting requirements may be a riper issue for resistance. Indeed, as we were concluding this chapter, a petition campaign (MWAC, 2023) was organized by the International Youth Student Organization (IYSO) and Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC), both based in Toronto, Canada, to stop the deportation of international students who had been defrauded by an immigration agent who had provided fake college admission letters at the point of entry into Canada several years back. The post-graduate permit holders have been ordered deported only now that they have applied for permanent residency. In addition, as pointed out earlier, the temporal point at which these Punjabi migrants accessed resistance was likely more feasible for them. Earlier in time, they were primarily concerned with either trying to migrate or as new migrants trying to find their footing. Both these positions are not conducive to resisting employment conditions. The dynamics of immigrant agency and resistance across different spaces and sectors merit further investigation.

Notes

- 1 The restricted work hours were lifted temporarily in October 2022 and will last until December 2023 to fill "labour shortages" in the pandemic recovery period (Government of Canada, 2022a).
- 2 The temporary foreign worker program allows Canadian employers to hire foreign workers to fill temporary positions when they can demonstrate that qualified Canadians are not available to do this work.
- 3 Under the International Mobility Program (IMP), immigrants are exempt from the labour market impact assessment.
- 4 Punjabi is also a language spoken by those from Pakistan; therefore, not everyone speaking Punjabi is from India but a large majority are.
- 5 LMIA has to be completed by any employer seeking to employ a non-Canadian who is in Canada as a temporary foreign worker. Only those employing migrants through the International Mobility Program are exempted from this requirement.

6 The “new middle class” refers to the middle-class identity that is accessible to upwardly mobile populations that belong to previously marginalized groups such as the poor or lower castes. This concept of a middle-class identity is more diverse and fluid than the upper caste-oriented middle-class identity that prevailed at the time of Indian independence. While this new middle-class identity is more inclusive and does not exclude people on the basis of their birth, it has a stronger focus on consumption rather than on the criteria of occupation, revenue, and education that has historically been used to define the middle class (Baviskar & Ray, 2011; Fernandes, 2006).

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