



Book Review

Amrita Datta. (2023). *Stories of the Indian Immigrant Communities in Germany: Why Move?* Chad: Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. xxi+106. Price: €39.99. ISBN: 9783031401466. Hardcover.

Deepra Dandekar

Department of South Asian History, South Asia Institute
Heidelberg University, Germany

Email: deepradandekar@gmail.com/ deepra.dandekar@sai-uni-heidelberg.de

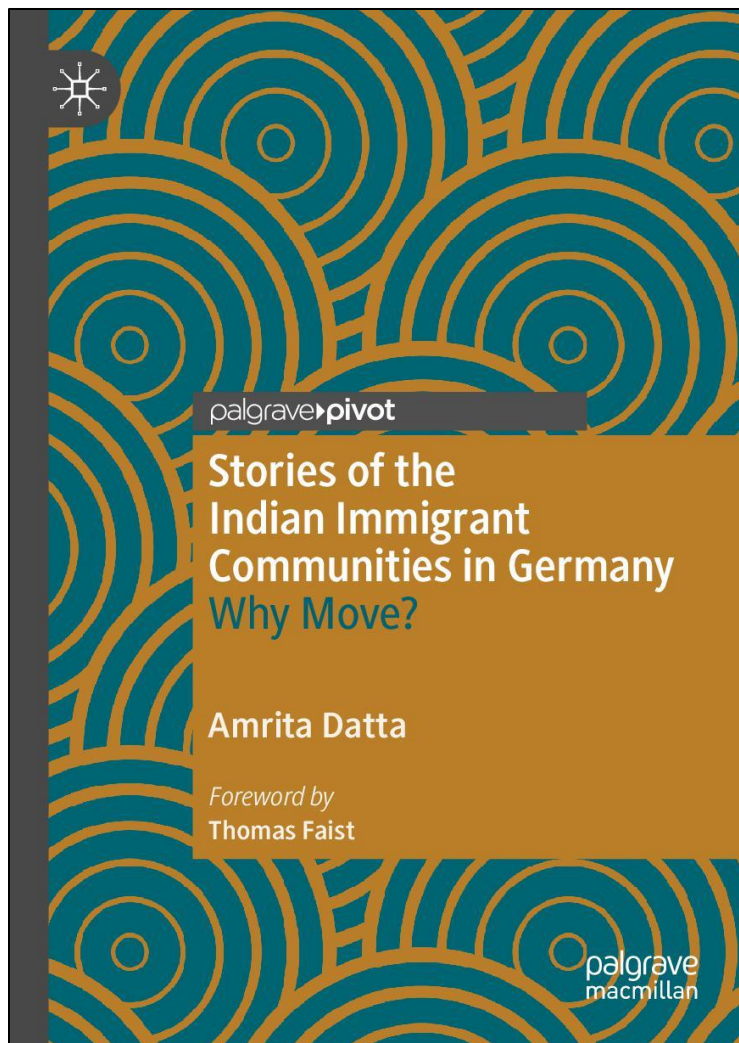


Image 9.1: Jacket cover. Image source: Amrita Datta

Why Move? is a revolutionary book in many ways, addressing an important, and a very topical debate: increasing white collar immigration to Germany. Using statistical data to undergird and guide her research questions, Amrita Datta's monograph is informed by qualitative data—semi-structured interviews with Indian immigrants in Germany.

Quoting Datta (p. ix), out of the total number of Indians in Germany, 57.6% are white collar immigrants, their numbers having increased from 42000 in 2010 to 159000 in 2020. The EU Blue Card has enabled Indian migrants to further consider Germany a place for long term opportunities, especially as the EU Blue Card allows their families to accompany migrants (spouse and children). Datta begins by outlining some motivating factors underlying Indian migration: unemployment and economic precarity in India, authoritarianism, and frustration with healthcare infrastructure that has gained salience during the

pandemic, along with gender discrimination and religious violence. Increasing white collar migration from India is obviously also a matter of internal conflict in German society that suffers from structural racism. The figure of the elite, highly skilled Indian migrant certainly poses Germans with a self-definition issue that emphasises their dependence on the Global South. Exacerbated by the spectre of labour shortage and energy crisis in Europe that threatens Germany's economic stability, these challenges feel all the more daunting in a post-pandemic climate of wars. Having only experimented with guest workers before, Germany does not traditionally see itself as an immigration country for elite, white collar, educated dreamers, who plan to, along with families, settle long-term in Germany.

Why Move? contains nine chapters including the *Prologue*. The first chapter *Pandemic and Politics* explores the Indian immigrant frustration with poor healthcare infrastructure, economic precarity, and political instability in India after 2014. There was growing discomfort among Datta's interlocutors about the obfuscating nature of Hindutva coupled with the absence of free speech: concealing the real challenges of bad governance, employment generation, public education, and health care. Non-Hindus were more likely to emigrate than Hindus, though growing discomfort about governmental failure in India was common for all emigrees, irrespective of religious affiliation. Besides, public healthcare in Germany could also be navigated without fluency in German and this was a large motivating factor for migrants.

Chapter 2 titled *Refuge from the Bovine?* consists of a robust discussion of political instability. The popularity of Hindutva served to motivate Indians to seek political refuge in Germany, despite India ranking lowest in the list of countries from where Germany accepts refugees. Accepting refugees from India would require Germany to acknowledge the presence of political instability, which poses a significant challenge. Despite India being considered the world's biggest democracy, DeStatis recorded that 7410 Indians sought protection from the German government to escape political turbulence in India. In the absence of Germany recognising India's political instability, "the biggest challenge for Indians seeking refugee status in a third country is to demystify that India is a democracy" (p. 17). This challenge henceforth led to the employment of subterfuges that camouflaged Indian attempts to seek refuge that Datta describes as "shadow emigration", or other pathways of migration that sidestepped problematic contestations surrounding their exiting India, escaping political conflicts, and the suppression of free speech.

Chapter 3 (*Gendering the Immigrants*) highlights the case of gender freedom/ unfreedom as a motivating factor for Indians migrating to Germany, with women and non-male migrants constituting a significant proportion of emigrees. Women comprised 36% of the total number of Indian immigrants to Germany between 2016 and 2022 with 67% of them being independent migrants. Interviews Datta conducted with women migrants highlight crucial points about the extent of patriarchal violence in India. In contrast, free mobility in Germany comes as a relief "where the moral borders at home (emerge) as a crucial competitor of physical borders of the barbed wire that often provokes women and non-male actors to take a leap of faith for survival and better livelihood" (pp. 32-33). Datta further describes this liberation (p. 34) as: "some of the participants actually looked forward to the immigration process in the hope that migration would liberate them, while the others unknowingly discovered liberation in a post-immigration phase." The robust discussion on gender continues in Chapter 4 (*In Pursuit of Freedom: Queer Girl Moves to Berlin*) where Datta narrows down on a few qualitative instances of the freedom/ unfreedom experience. Datta clarifies her analysis about one of her interlocutors (Sukanya—name changed) in the following words (p. 40):

...my submission is to look at Sukanya's experiences from the intersection of multiple discrimination at home and the host country leading to a situation where immigrants are compelled to prefer one set of discrimination to be less interfering, less dangerous and more negotiable in everyday lives. I call this a "discrimination bargain." Discrimination bargain compels the immigrants to operate in a framework of choice-based othering.

Choice-based systems of othering and discrimination bargain based on the 'autonomy-agency' structure of decision making is thus in Datta's words (p. 41), "a continuous process of balancing among multiple decisions across time and space." Datta is clear about how qualitative studies and findings are located in the tangible experiences of political unfreedom in the home country that lead to the soldering of feminist and creative solidarities abroad—something Datta calls

“intimate cohorts” (p. 44). It is these “intimate cohorts in the host country that dismiss and replace political unfreedom expressed in the home country” (ibid.). However, since intersectional discrimination is not absent in Germany either, especially within the usual formalised networks of solidarity, participation in these networks again join the familiar arc of what can be described as the discrimination bargain.

In Chapter 5 (*Immigrant Homemakers*), Datta discusses the barriers Indians encounter, while settling long term in Germany that can be located within the methodological frame of nationalism. To produce Germany as a “invented homeland” (p. 47), Indians must first navigate the obstacles of housing and culinary, religious and political practices. Analysed through an everyday frame of immigrant host-society interaction, especially in the light of an increasing number of migrants, the interaction between Germans and Indians have begun to spill over into other social fields apart from work spaces, that generate cultural conflicts. While Indian visibility in German public spaces was traditionally low with Indians practicing what Datta calls “forced self-exclusion” (p. 48), the EU Blue Card scheme has allowed families to migrate, resulting in Indians interacting more, and confronting deep-seated racial hostilities in the German public domain. This hostility is mostly expressed in the difficulty of finding housing (p. 51). Calling the experience of racism and the resultant trepidation that continues to pervade and haunt Indian migrant lives in Germany “social constants” (p. 53), Datta describes how the experience of precarity never really abates even after migrants are successful in making their permanent homes in Germany. Moving on to the challenge posed by culinary practices, Datta discusses how Indians have substantial cultural differences when it comes to matters of food, language, and dress. However, in Germany, due to the racialisation of Indians into one othered category, these everyday cultural practices of difference have come to acquire deeper and more dangerous political meanings that transforms food and culture into political practices. Enforced vegetarianism is an important example of this political practice and discourse that has North Indian Hindus and Hindu festivals impose hegemonic status in the representation of India. The diabolic transformation of the everyday located within a climate of racism results in rising uncertainty among Indian migrants, making their homing a never-ending process.

The discussion of ‘homing uncertainty’ continues in Chapter 6 (*Uncertain Mobilities: Pandemic, Time and Certitude*) wherein Datta explores the underlying reasons about why migrants continue to stay on in Germany despite the difficulties they face (something she calls “lifestyle migration” [p. 64]). In her reading of it, the trauma of the pandemic and its mismanagement in India has continued to dominate and motivate such decisions. Since Germany has an efficient and affordable public healthcare system that can be navigated in English, the health concern counterbalance anxieties about children forgetting their roots. This is a delicate balance that Datta describes in the following words: “Indian immigrants in Germany are negotiating through multiple levels of uncertainties and concomitant risks informing their decisions and indecisions” (p. 62). Since the pandemic has changed the way work is organised, the option of working from home has further resulted in even more uncertainty for migrants, producing them as disposable and perpetually vulnerable migrant populations, especially as many are unable to bring their aging parents to Germany. This makes migration an intensely anxious and emotional journey that Datta describes as the “gap-lapse framework” (p. 65): micromanaged across physical and temporal distance. Caregiving is increasingly managed by depending on technology: CCTV and virtual intimacy (p. 67), a situation in which taking calculated risks is no longer possible.

Using autoethnography in Chapter 7, Datta describes her own traumatic experience of the pandemic as a migrant caught between lockdown regimes (*Immigrants as Biocitizens*). Traveling to Germany with a Covid-negative certificate from India, she describes how she was nevertheless unable “to confirm my status, or more precisely the status of my body with regard

to inoculation rules of the Germany government” (p. 70). While Datta had been allowed to migrate to Germany with a Covaxin certificate, this certificate was not enough to allow her to remain mobile in Germany, as Covaxin was neither understood nor recognised by German doctors. An experience shared by many, Indian migrants thus fell into the gap between international migration and local systems of Germany, with a doctor, distressingly for Datta, and rather unfortunately, describing Covaxin as “a black box” (p. 73). Datta then describes her harrowing experience in the following words (p. 75): “Already fully vaccinated with Covaxin in India, structurally I was compelled to get inoculated all over again because in the eyes of the German government I was unvaccinated.” The pandemic thus transformed immigrants into problematic biocitizens whose bodies had to mandatorily comply with the state’s governmentality with a bare minimum of information available to them as they underwent the health risk of double immunisation. This was how the message was brought home: migrants became disposable bodies, made to feel responsible for their own health for being allowed to migrate.

Why Move? ends with a conclusion titled *Imagining Tomorrow* that summarises the book’s findings—that immigrant experiences in Germany are constantly unstable, evolving, and at a formative stage. The challenge on the German side lies in retaining white collar, highly skilled professionals in Germany by offering them a stable future: simplifying German bureaucracy, addressing linguistic nationalism, and structural racism in Germany. Structural racism in Germany is a specific thing with specific historical moorings and can not to be generalised and confused with other racisms across the world more generally (including in India). She provides instances of how the Federal Statistical Office (DeStatis) has since 2020 begun recording migration backgrounds in their micro-census data (p. 84) that makes identifying and possibly targeting Indians and foreigners of colour more easily. When combined with other subtle and overt forms of structural racism in Germany, DeStatis’s categorisation of “immigrants and their descendants” may well become a tool of renewed violence—especially if misused by the burgeoning far right—the so called Neo Nazi political groups in Germany.

Why Move? is a powerful book that forces us to introspect on the growing scope of migration studies—its evolving relevance to ever-changing, different, and new political locales—not just traditional neoliberal bastions like the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, China, and South East Asia—Malaysia and Singapore. *Why Move?* is also a book that leaves many of us—especially if we are Indian migrants in Germany—feeling helpless and frustrated. While Datta’s qualitative interviews describe elite, liberal, and white collar migrant subjectivities that experience shock at their new subaltern status, both in their home country and abroad, this burgeoning spate of elite migration does indeed pose a challenge to German society. White collar Indian migrants *are* elite, and enjoy global networks; they are not to be easily dismissed off in the long run. Given Germany’s internal crisis, and India’s political and economic instability, this migration is not about to end too soon either. With traditional neoliberal English-speaking bastions reaching their alleged ‘saturation point’, Germany (and Europe) is the new destination of what is an evolving battleground that will witness the Indian elite struggle.

This Indian migration story has, perhaps, just begun!