

# Impact of Anti-Immigration Protests on Psychological Stress and Migration Intention of Indian Migration Aspirants

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## Abstract

The increasing rate of anti-immigration protests in various countries of destination has contributed to the heightened uncertainty among people who wish to migrate. This qualitative study investigates the effects of such protests on psychological stress and migration intention of Indian migration aspirants. The results have shown that exposure to anti-immigration demonstrations leads to fear, anxiety, perceived discrimination, and insecurity, thus influencing migration decisions by causing hesitation, reevaluating destinations, plans, and increasing dependence on alternative routes. Gender variations were realized, as female aspirants were more likely to report more safety concerns and be more vulnerable emotionally, but male aspirants were more likely to report more anxiety linked to economic risks and employability. Some of the coping styles embraced by the participants included information seeking, social support, positive reframing and contingency planning. The findings highlight the complexity of the interaction between the world's socio-political environment and personal migration desires, which is why it is important to support migration through the psychosocial support system and moderate immigration discussion.

**Keywords:** Anti-immigration movement; Psychological stress; Migration intention; Indian migration aspirants; Qualitative study; Coping strategies

## Introduction

The migration between countries is often viewed as a strategic reaction to the structural imbalances in the world's economies and societies. People are migrating in search of a better life, education, career mobility, and quality of life<sup>1</sup>. India continues to be among the largest countries of international migrants in the world with an increasing number of young adults willing to study or work in other countries. Migration is not just a geographic mobility move, but a way of social promotion and self-realization for Indian migration aspirants.

According to the classic theories of migration, push-pull interaction is vital, whereby poor conditions in the country of origin drive these people away, and good conditions in the destination countries pull them to them<sup>2</sup>. However, the modern migration dynamics are relying more on sociopolitical tones in the

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<sup>1</sup> Castles et al., 2020

<sup>2</sup> Massey et al., 1993

destination cultures. In the last ten years, the European, North American and Australasian countries have witnessed a revival of the nationalistic movements and anti-immigration demonstrations. Such protests are usually accompanied by populist discourse that portrays migrants as an economic liability, a threat to culture, or even a security liability<sup>3</sup>.

Anti-immigration demonstrations are not only political phenomena of social exclusion but also symbolic actions. Such protests, through comprehensive media reports and through social media releases, are known to reach audiences all over the world, even those potential migrants who have not yet travelled to the destination states. It has been empirically discovered that media representations of aggression toward immigrants may also result in the dehumanization of migrants and the increased perception of threat<sup>4</sup>. For migration aspirants, there is a possibility of psychological stress being created as a result of repeated exposure to these stories, even before the migration has taken place.

Psychological stress refers to the emotional and mental pressure that emanates when human beings feel that their environmental demands surpass their coping resources<sup>5</sup>. Migration in itself is considered a stressful life event, which entails uncertainty, loss of social networks and acculturation in new cultural settings<sup>6</sup>. In the event that anti-immigration protests are factored into this situation, they might increase expectations of anticipatory stress by creating anticipations of discrimination, hostility and social rejection.

The intention to migrate is a major factor that predetermines the real migration behaviour. It indicates motivation, planning and willingness of an individual to migrate<sup>7</sup>. Migration intention may be affected by psychological stress in a complicated manner. Increased stress can also lead to decreased migration by making it seem riskier; or can strengthen the motivation to migrate in those who feel that staying in the home country is ontologically constraining. When it comes to stress and migration intention, it is important to consider the subjective meanings and personal interpretation.

### **Pre-Migration Psychological Landscape and Anticipatory Stress**

Migration studies are becoming more aware of the fact that psychological processes are initiated in the determination of migration paths far much earlier than physical mobility takes place. Pre-migration phase involves imagination, expectation formation and risk assessment whereby people are mentally simulating the experiences they are going to have in the countries of destination. These envisioned futures are not solely based on individual desires but also on socially accessible images, media images, and political rhetoric. The anti-immigration demonstrations are instilled in this symbolic space and thus have an effect on how the aspirants perceive their potential position in the host societies.

Anticipatory stress is defined as the psychological anguish that is felt with an anticipation of threats or negative occurrences in the future. To the migration aspirants, anticipatory stress can be in the form of concern over being discriminated, legal vulnerability, economical exclusion, as well as social isolation. When compared to stress that is caused by firsthand experience, anticipatory stress is experienced through the perceived likelihood and envisioned seriousness of injury. Health-psychology studies show that anticipatory stress may be as psychologically detrimental as the one caused by actual exposure because people rehearse worst-case scenarios in their minds repeatedly.

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<sup>3</sup> Mudde, 2007

<sup>4</sup> Esses et al., 2013

<sup>5</sup> Lazarus and Folkman, 1984

<sup>6</sup> Bhugra, 2004

<sup>7</sup> Ajzen, 1991

Considering the situation of Indian migration aspirants, the anticipatory stress can be increased due to the high personal stakes of migration. Applicants often spend a lot of money on language tests, standardized tests, application fees, and consultancy. These investments create a feeling of psychological confinement, whereby people feel obliged to continue with the migration process even when there are increased fears. At the same time, the consciousness of anti-immigration demonstrations can create a contradiction in oneself between the need to have an opportunity and the fear of being denied.

The understanding of this pre-migration psychological environment is critical since it not only determines the migration of people but also the manner in which they migrate. High anticipatory stress aspirants can take more risk-averse strategies, use countries they perceive to be less risky, or wait before they see that the prospects are better. Therefore, anti-immigration demonstrations do not only have a certain impact in the field of national policy but also affect the personal sphere of imagination and emotionality.

Gender is an important factor that has an influence on migration-related experiences. There are unique issues that women are prone to, such as personal safety, gender-based violence, and social isolation<sup>8</sup>. Men, conversely, can have greater pressure to succeed economically and be providers. Such gender demands may have an impact on the experience of stress and the way the decision to migrate is made.

Migration aspirations are not only instrumental intentions that involve the need to enhance the economy; they are also intricately linked to identity formation and self-concept. To a great number of Indian aspirants, the urge to migrate is encoded in the discourse of self-enhancement, self-sufficiency, and self-renewal. Migration is viewed as a passage of test where people are able to show their competency, ambition, and resilience.

These identity projects are disrupted when anti-immigration protests characterise migrants as undesirable or even burdensome. Aspirants can have a discontinuity in the self-perception and the perception of others. This disjunction creates a tension of the psyche and puts the unity of the self in danger.

A number of the participants implicitly defined migration as a way of getting recognition and respect. Anti-immigration demonstrations, though, are an indication of the potential of being socially undermined regardless of qualification and hard work. The symbolic devaluation of such magnitude increases stress levels since it compromises the morality that aspirants give to their migration intentions.

The concept of migration aspirations as identity projects can be used to explain the strong emotional appeal of anti-immigration protests. The protests not only question the external opportunities, but also internal discourses of who the aspirants are and who they would like to be.

Although the scholarly literature on migration and mental health has been increasing, minimal qualitative studies have been conducted on the specific impact of anti-immigration protests on the psychological experience and migration intentions of Indian aspirants. Most research is done on migrants who have already moved hence creating a gap in the pre-migration stage. By filling this gap, the current research investigates the perception of anti-immigration protests by Indian migration aspirants, the way these perceptions create psychological pressure, the influence of the pressure on migration intention and decision-making, and how the aspirants manage to handle these pressures.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The research design used in this study was qualitative research based on an interpretivist paradigm. Qua-

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<sup>8</sup> Donato et al., 2006

litative methods are especially applicable to inquiry into complicated psychological processes, subjective meanings, and contextual effects<sup>9</sup>. The research presented an attempt to encompass lived experiences and interpretations of Indian migration aspirants towards anti-immigration protests and their perceived impacts.

### **Participants**

A total of 20 migration aspirants in India were selected, and half of them were male and half were female. The age of the participants was between 20 and 35 years old and all were about to migrate under education programmes, jobs or skilled immigration programs. They were a diverse student body covering engineering, management, healthcare, and social sciences and a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Purposive sampling was used to select persons who met the inclusion criteria. Additional participants were then recruited with the use of snowball sampling. This mixed approach to recruitment enabled obtaining cases with information-rich content and increased the variety of samples.

### **Data Collection**

The data were collected by using semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on the objectives of the study and the available literature, and was designed based on broad themes, such as awareness and perceptions of anti-immigration protests by the participants, emotional and psychological reactions, perceived threats and insecurities, effects on migration intentions and decision-making, gender-specific issues, and coping mechanisms.

The interviews were carried out in English and Hindi, based on the language preference of the interviewees, and each interview took between 40 and 70 minutes.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

There were clear inclusion and exclusion criteria that led to making sure that participants were directly pertinent to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria were that the participants must be Indian citizens between 20 and 35 years old and were in preparation of international migration. Preparation was operationalised as the involvement in activities like language proficiency testing, application to foreign universities or employers, communication with migration consultants or detailed research on destination countries.

Those who had already migrated and permanently returned to India were not included because their experiences would correspond to post-migration facts and not expectation perceptions. Equally, those who indicated that they were generally interested in the migration process but had not taken any tangible preparatory steps were filtered out to keep the focus on aspirants with a high level of psychological and emotional commitment to the migration process.

The criteria set by the study thus ensured that the participants were well established in the pre-migration phase and thus the studies were able to capture the anticipatory stress and formation of intentions as opposed to retrospective interpretation.

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<sup>9</sup> Creswell & Poth, 2018

### **Ethical Considerations**

The institutional authority was the relevant authority that gave ethical approval. The participants were told about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and the possibility of withdrawal. Informed consent was taken in writing.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done using thematic analysis in line with the six-step model as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006)<sup>10</sup>. The strategy was inductive, in which the themes were derived inductively based on the data as opposed to being imposed a priori. Data analysis and data collection were done simultaneously, and no new themes were identified after repeated review, which indicated data saturation. As a result, a final sample of 20 participants (10 men and 10 women) was adequate to reflect the scope and the depth of views that would be pertinent to the study.

### **Result**

The results of the analysis revealed six key themes, namely perceived threat and insecurity, psychological stress and emotional impact, influence on migration intention and decision-making, Conditional Migration Intentions, Identity Threat and Sense of Belonging, and coping strategies.

#### **Perceived Threat and Insecurity**

The anti-immigration protests were widely understood by the participants as signs of general aggression against migrants. A lot of perceived protests were taken as an indication that migrants would not be accommodated or treated equally. The female respondents often used to highlight their fears of harassment and personal safety, and the male ones were more concerned about discrimination in the work-place and their professional growth.

#### **Psychological Stress and Emotional Impact**

The participants described the feeling of anxiety, fear, helplessness, and frustration. Others talked about intrusive thoughts and constant worry of their future in a foreign country. Some of the participants observed that stress increased with the repetition of protest related news.

#### **Influence on Migration Intention and Decision-Making**

Psychological stress affected the migration decisions in subtle ways. There were those who waited longer before migrating and those who changed their minds about countries to migrate to. A minority complained that stress contributed to their will to migrate as they had few opportunities in India.

#### **Conditional Migration Intentions**

Some of the respondents expressed conditional migration promises as opposed to unequivocal promises. They were ready to migrate only under the condition of meeting some requirements, including the selection of the countries that were deemed to be tolerant, finding substantial institutional sponsorship, or having relatives in the foreign country. Conditional intentions indicate the change of aspirational migration to risk-managed migration. Aspirants were now considering migration as a calculated risk and not an

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<sup>10</sup> Braun & Clarke, 2006

unquestionable objective. This hesitant disposition explains the way anti-immigration demonstrations reverse migration as a promising initiative to a protective action.

### **Identity Threat and Sense of Belonging**

In addition to the short-term anxieties regarding security and job losses, numerous participants reported experiencing a more profound type of the sense of identity threat due to anti-immigration demonstrations. Aspirants were worried that their national, cultural or racial identity would forever identify them as outsiders in the destination societies. This feeling destroyed their feelings of possible belonging. Some of the participants indicated that when they would see protesters chanting against immigrants, they would ask themselves whether they would ever be considered as legitimate members of host communities, irrespective of their education or professional competency. This expected sense of exclusion had turned to depression and low self-esteem. To other aspirants, identity threat was manifested in less emotional attachment to destination countries that they had earlier romanticized. It was no longer true that countries that used to be considered as the place of opportunity were ambivalent or hostile spaces. This change in emotional sense depicts how political symbolism transforms perceived geographies of movement.

### **Coping Strategies**

Problem-oriented and emotion-oriented coping styles were embraced by the participants<sup>11</sup>. These were information seeking, social support, positive reframing, and contingency planning.

### **Discussion**

The results depict that the anti-immigration demonstrations are anticipatory stressors that determine psychological well-being and migration intentions. True to the stress and coping theory, perceived threats result in emotional reactions that impact on cognitive appraisals and behavioural intentions.

The results can be explained by the symbolic violence concept, which means the presence of the hidden types of domination, but they are based on the meanings, representations and cultural norms instead of physical power. Anti-immigration demonstrations represent a symbolic violence because it sends a message to the migrants that they are unwelcome, inferior or dangerous. Although not targeted at aspirants, the effect of such symbolic exclusion has psychological damage.

Symbolic violence is also very potent since it becomes internalised. Aspirants can start doubting their legitimacy as prospective migrants, whether they deserve the opportunity to pursue opportunities in foreign countries, or reduce their expectations of being treated fairly. This internalisation leads to chronic stress and self-surveillance, whereby individuals are always watching their own behaviour in expectation of being judged.

The symbolic violence concept of anti-immigration protests helps to realize that they affect much more than just squares and streets. Their impacts are transnational into the media and into the psychological worlds of the potential migrants. Therefore, the issue of migrant well-being needs to be considered not only through the formal policy but also through the symbolic spaces created by political rhetoric.

Digital media ecosystems heighten the psychological effects of anti-immigration protests. The algorithms used by social media make content with high emotional charge more visible and promote the popularity

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<sup>11</sup> Lazarus & Folkman, 1984

of confrontational photos and sensational stories. Aspirants can therefore be exposed to unpleasant imagery in disproportionate degrees compared to real life.

This exaggeration gives a misguided impression of destination societies, in which aggression seems to be everywhere, even as a minority opinion. This kind of distortion increases fear and strengthens negative anticipations. The concept of media amplification can be used to understand the reasons why aspirants are highly emotionally reactive even when they have no direct experience in a foreign country. Their mental reality is framed not so much by personal experience but by mediated images.

Gendered disparities are in line with the preceding studies that point to the increased safety concerns of women and economic anxiety of men (Donato et al., 2006). The research highlights the need to deal with pre-migration psychological health. The focus on male participants on economic marginalisation is a manifestation of culturally ingrained masculinity and bread-winning expectations. The inability to achieve financial success in foreign countries is not only viewed as the disappointment of an individual but a challenge to masculine identity. The pressures are compounded by anti-immigration protests that imply that migrants can be marginalized in gainful employment in a systematic way. This causes anticipatory shame and social failure fear. The acknowledgement of masculinity as a mediating variable enhances the comprehension of why male applicants complain of being subjected to different kinds of stress that are not similar to, but are in addition to, the female fears of safety.

### Limitations

Qualitative design of the study reduces generalisability. Longitudinal designs and mixed methods could be used in future studies.

### Conclusion

Anti-immigration demonstrations have a strong influence on the psychological stress and migration intentions of Indian migration aspirants. It is crucial to address these issues using the psychosocial support and proper dissemination of information.

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