

Transnational Networks and Skilled Labour Migration

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Since the onset of the 1990s, skilled labour migration has been a burgeoning and ever-developing field of research. Here, skilled migrants – most broadly defined as those in possession of a tertiary degree or extensive specialized work experience – include architects, accountants and financial experts, engineers, technicians, researchers, scientists, chefs, teachers, health professionals, and – increasingly – specialists in information technology (IT, including computing professionals, computing engineers, managers, sales reps, etc.). Social and professional characteristics, industrial needs and strategies and government policies surrounding this field will be addressed by other participants in the workshop. This brief contribution outlines some concepts, patterns and issues surrounding kinds of globally-stretched, or transnational, networks involving highly skilled workers. [The paper does not deal with transfers of personnel within large firms and corporations that are themselves organized as transnational networks.]

Several researchers have pointed out that – particularly with regard to the highly skilled – ‘migration’ may now not be the most accurate term. Instead, ‘movement’ or ‘mobility’ may be more apt terms. This is because migration has connotations of permanency or long-term stay, whereas the movement of many highly skilled persons tends, today, to be intermittent and short-term (cf. Koser and Salt 1997). It is transnational networks that precondition, arise out of, and perpetuate the intermittent and short-term patterns of movement typifying contemporary skilled workers.

The paper is organized into sections highlighting (a) the role of networks in migration, (b) the nature of transnationalism today, and (c) patterns, processes and impacts of transnational networks with regard to the movement of skilled workers. The paper concludes by pointing to a few key issues concerning the future of field.

Networks and Migration

A considerable number of works over the past few decades use, in one way or another, a social networks perspective for the study of international migration (see among others Kearney 1986, Grasmuck and Pessar 1991, Portes 1995, Massey et al. 1999, Vertovec and Cohen 1999, Brettell 2000). This is not surprising since networks, according to a longstanding view, provide channels for the migration process itself.

In his historical overview of immigration into the United States, Tilly (1990) emphasizes that ‘networks migrate’. ‘By and large,’ Tilly (*ibid.*: 84) says, ‘the effective units of migration were (and are) neither individuals nor households but sets of people linked by acquaintance, kinship, and work experience.’ Boyd neatly sums up much of the network approach to migration, stating:

Networks connect migrants across time and space. Once begun, migration flows often become self-sustaining, reflecting the establishment of networks of information, assistance and obligations which develop between migrants in the host society and friends and relatives in the sending area. These networks link populations in origin and receiving countries and ensure that movements are not necessarily limited in time, unidirectional or permanent. (1989: 641)

For migrants, social networks are crucial for finding jobs and accommodation, circulating goods and services, as well as psychological support and continuous social and economic information. Social networks often guide migrants into or through specific places and occupations. Local labour markets can become linked through specific networks of interpersonal and organizational ties surrounding migrants (Poros 2001). By way of example, such patterns and processes of network-conditioned migration were extensively and comparatively examined in nineteen Mexican communities and confirmed by Massey, Goldring and Durand (1994). Indeed, Portes and Bach (1995: 10) propose that migration itself 'can be conceptualized as a process of network building, which depends on and, in turn, reinforces social relationships across space.' Migration is a process that both depends on, and creates, social networks.

Of course, dimensions of social position and power, such as the class profile of the network, have been shown to have considerable conditioning impact on migration processes. This has been demonstrated for instance by Salaff, Fong and Wong (1999). Following the insights of Bott (1957), Salaff and her colleagues demonstrate how middle class emigrants from Hong Kong, in contrast to working class ones, used different kind of networks for different kind of purposes in arranging their movement and resettlement abroad surrounding the period of British hand-over of the colony to China. Such studies, among many, point out the varieties of relational and structural embeddedness in migrants' networks (cf. Portes 1995).

Social ties in pre-migration networks are related to factors affecting which people migrate, the means of migration, the destination (including locality, accommodation and often specific job) and future prospects for physical and occupational mobility.

Connections with earlier migrants provide potential migrants with many resources that they use to diminish the risks and costs of migration: information about procedures (technical as well as legal), financial support, job prospects, administrative assistance, physical attendance, emotional solidarity. (Meyer 2001: 93)

The networks utilized by migrants vary considerably depending on local histories of migration, national conditions and communal socio-cultural traits. There has been shown to be qualitative variation in types of networks used by different occupational classes (Shah and

Menon 1999). High occupational groups, for instance, rely more on networks of colleagues or organizations and less on kin-based networks than unskilled workers. In any case, 'The forms and characteristics of these networks may depend on their composition – friends, relatives, kin, acquaintances, professional colleagues, etc.,' Meyer (2001: 93) observes, 'but the result is similar: most positions are acquired via connections.'

Transnationalism

Researchers on migration have always recognized that migrants maintain contact with people in their places of origin through correspondence and the sending of remittances. Since the early sociology of migration in the 1920s-30s, however, most migration research has focused upon the ways in which migrants adapt themselves to their place of immigration.

The past decade has witnessed the ascendance of a new approach to migration that accents the attachments migrants maintain to people, traditions and causes outside the boundaries of the nation-state to which they have moved (see Glick Schiller et al. 1992, Smith and Guarnizo 1998, Vertovec and Cohen 1999, Portes et al. 1999a). While noting the similarities to long-standing forms of migrant connection to homelands, the new approach underscores the numerous ways how, and the reasons why, today's linkages are different or more intense than earlier forms (Foner 1997, Morawska 1999, Portes et al. 1999b). Present-day national and local state policies, albeit broadly displacing conventional assimilation models with those of multiculturalism, still have not caught up with the new approaches in migration theory that recognize ways in which contemporary migrants live in 'transnational communities'. Such types of migrant community, according to Alejandro Portes (1997: 812), comprise

...dense networks across political borders created by immigrants in their quest for economic advancement and social recognition. Through these networks, an increasing number of people are able to live dual lives. Participants are often bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both.

Newer, cheaper, and more efficient modes of communication and transportation allow migrants to maintain transnationally their home-based relationships and interests. Today, globally 'stretched' patterns of activity affect a variety of migrants' social relations (including friendship, kinship and status hierarchies), modes of economic exchange, processes political mobilization, practices of cultural reproduction (including religious practices, institutions like marriage, images and symbols affecting group identity) forms of information transfer, and nature of professional association. Many observers see remittances as the exemplary forms of migrant transnationalism (Vertovec 2000)

Just as various forms of transnationalism have existed in earlier periods of migration (such as chain migration, regular communications among split families, sending of remittances), transnational labour markets have also existed historically. The movement of medical practitioners within the British Commonwealth in the 1960s is one example. Now, GATS, the WTO and numerous professional associations have guidelines for the 'internationalization' of professions. Yet as Iredale (2001: 21) points out,

Few professional labour markets can be described as truly international at this stage as training, accreditation, ethics and standards continue to be managed mostly at the national level. However, there are distinct trends in this direction. Professional practice has become a transnational matter...

Poros (2001) details how migration networks that are based on personal ties – while being the most common forms – may lead the migrant (a) into a limiting ethnic niche occupation or domain, and/or (b) into a downward occupational trajectory as the migrant, through a specific network, gains a post-migration job incommensurate with his/her level of training. Migration networks based on organizational ties (schools, professional associations, agencies) serve better to match skill levels and jobs, although they are open for competition and therefore less certain in conditioning migration outcomes. Poros also describes the development of migration patterns involving mixed interpersonal and organizational ties – where who-you-know within an organizational framework may lead to successful migratory and occupational processes by way of channelling people into the most appropriate jobs abroad.

Transnational Networks and Skilled Labour

As already mentioned in passing, the networks utilized by skilled migrants often tend to be of a different nature, and may have different migratory outcomes, than those characterizing low or unskilled migrants. In three sub-sections below, various aspects of skilled labour networks are sketched.

Before embarking on a description of such networks, however, it is important to underscore the fact that migration networks – among skilled or unskilled workers – are significantly gendered. Gender and gender relations have much to do with conditioning who one's contacts are, what one's relationship to them is, and how networks are accessed, managed and taken advantage of. This needs highlighting particularly in current discussions of skilled labour, since most recent literature on the topic has been marked by the 'invisibility' of women and gender relations (Kofman 2000).

Recruitment

The differential networks characterizing various kinds of workers influences, first of all, ways in which skilled migrants are recruited. Schools and universities are a foremost source of skilled

migrant networks, especially among people who have completed degrees abroad. Many studies show that the experience of being a foreign student significantly increases the likelihood of being a skilled migrant at a later stage (Li et al. 1996, Salt 1997, Khadria 2001, Hugo 2002). The networks that foreign students develop may also serve subsequently to provide opportunities for colleagues and friends from the home country as well.

Meyer (2001) indicates that general researchers tend to enter the migration stream through their own ad hoc networks of colleagues and project collaborators; engineers and information technologists, for example, tend instead to move through more institutional 'migration channels' such as recruitment and relocation agencies (Findlay 1990). Skilled migration processes have also witnessed an ever-increasing role taken by global professional organizations in providing access to migration channels and jobs abroad.

The role of global professional associations in augmenting migration has, in many occupations, developed alongside regulatory agencies that oversee the accrediting and licensing of professional qualifications and the right to practice in different countries. Such professional and official frameworks provide an important prerequisite – and a kind of guarantee to employers – that importantly facilitates the creation of skilled migration systems.

Other facets of recruitment have globalized, as it were, by way of setting up conditions that simplify and speed up the search for, and employment of, skilled workers from abroad. Within the area of IT, to take one noteworthy example, worldwide opportunities and competition is stimulated by the extension of a kind of common playing field.

The following characteristics prevail within the industry: [it is] highly fluid in terms of skill requirements; international and with little impact of particular cultural contexts; dominated by English language as the basis; on-the-job experience as the most important means of acquiring human capital or becoming multiskilled; a high level of intra- and inter-company and inter-region/country mobility; potential for return migration and investment, and a profession that is largely unregulated by unions or other mechanisms. (Iredale 2001: 13)

Movement and Job Placement

The migration of professionals often necessitates the interaction of several intermediaries involved in: checking immigration rules and procedures, dealing with immigration authorities, ensuring employability and transportability of qualifications, negotiating wages, facilitating travel, arranging accommodation. Today there are numerous specialist agencies that take care of exactly such forests of red tape. 'The recent proliferation of professional international intermediaries of this kind confirms the fact that globalization of the highly skilled labour market does not occur without massive network investments' (Meyer 2001: 102).

A highly notable example, especially within the IT industry, is the agency work known as 'body shopping'. Khadria (2001) points out that while the phenomenon has existed since the

1980s, body shopping is now considerably more organized, more ubiquitous, involves more independent professionals and is often conducted with government sanctions on sending and receiving ends. The basic idea behind body shopping is for local recruiters (in India for instance) to supply on-site, 'just-in-time' labour abroad at an economical price for employers (Aneesh 2001). The rationale follows developments within an industry in which short-term projects predominate; it usually doesn't make sense for IT employers to invest (in terms of money, administration and legal responsibility) in 1-4 year visas for workers when there will suffice a short-term contract overseen, in practically all its parts, by an intermediary agency.

As Xiang (2001) has detailed, agencies which supply firms with short-term IT workers can: address employers' needs quickly, follow labour market trends closely, provide a 'buffer' between the labour market and employer, and relieve both employer and employee of considerable hassles surrounding the administration of immigration (acquiring visas, monitoring rules, filling-out applications, etc.). The agents themselves – whether small, middle or large – are substantially networked transnationally amongst themselves (with smaller agents providing workers for larger ones, who in turn supply industrial firms). On the negative side, many such body shops have been shown to involve various kinds and degrees of fraud, mostly by making claims that workers are needed for jobs which don't exist (in order to bring IT workers into a country to sit 'on the bench' until a specific for a client firms arises) or by falsifying workers' qualifications (see Xiang 2001, Martin 2002).

Circulation

As the concept suggests, transnational networks of skilled workers are not merely bi-national avenues of movement. They regularly entail the mobility of workers throughout an international arena (such as Indian IT workers who work, at one time or another, in Singapore, Australia and the USA as well as in India).

For a number of years, the migration of skilled workers from developing countries was regarded as a problem of 'brain drain.' With the recognition of networks of skilled worker circulation, many social scientists and national policymakers have tended to shift from a discourse of 'brain drain' to notions of the globalization of human capital, brain exchange, brain circulation and the creation of a global mobile workforce. The idea is to accept the fact that skilled persons may want to migrant for personal, familial and career development, while seeking to encourage the skilled migrant's return, mobilization or association with home country development. Indeed, it is transnational networks of professionals that are deemed crucial to realize such goals.

There have emerged a number of schemes and types of transnational networks of expatriate professionals that can be tapped to enable their effective and productive role in a home country's development – even without any physical temporary or permanent return.

These are what Meyer and Brown (1999) call 'distant cooperative work' within an intellectual diaspora. Although such links have existed in one form or another in the past, they are now becoming systematic, dense and multiple. The United Nations Development Programme supports one such, major initiative in this field called TOKTEN (Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals; see www.unops.org). Country-specific TOKTEN programmes involve databases of people and assisted visits of skilled expatriates to engage in various development projects. The TOKTEN program for Lebanon presents one among many cases (see Figure 1 and www.undp.org.lb/tokten).

Figure 1 Home Page, TOKTEN Programme for Lebanon



Meyer and Brown (Ibid.) have identified at least forty-one formal knowledge networks linking thirty countries to their skilled nationals abroad (see Figure 2). The networks range from a few hundred to two thousand members. Meyer and Brown categorize these into five types: student/scholarly networks, local associations of skilled expatriates, expert pool assistance through TOKTEN, and intellectual/scientific diaspora networks. Just as such networks exist to 'tap the diaspora' for home country development, they can also be utilised for skilled labour recruitment and movement outside of the homeland.

Figure 2 Intellectual Diaspora Organizations (Meyer and Brown 1999)

Country	Name of Network	Type of Network
Arab Countries	The Network of Arab Scientists and Technologists Abroad (ASTA)	Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Argentina	Programa para la Vinculacion con Cientificos y Tecnicos Argentinos en el Exterior (Program for the Linkage of Argentine Scientists and Technologists Abroad) (PROCITEXT)	Developing Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Assam	Transfer of Knowledge and Technology to Assam	TOKTEN Programme
China	Chinese Scholars Abroad (CHISA) Society of Chinese Bioscientists in America Chinese American Engineers and Scientists Association of Southern California (CESASC)	Student/Scholarly Network Local Association of Expatriates Local Association of Expatriates
Colombia	The Colombian Network of Researchers and Engineers Abroad (Red Caldas)	Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
El Salvador	Conectandonos al Futuro de El Salvador (Connecting to El Salvador's Future)	Developing Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
France	Frognet	Student/Scholarly Network
India	Silicon Valley Indian Professionals Association (SIPA) Worldwide Indian Network The International Association of Scientists and Engineers and Technologists of Bharatiya Origin Interface for Non Resident Indian Scientists and Technologists Programme (INRIST)	Local Association of Expatriates Intell/Scien Diaspora Network Developing Intell/Scien Diaspora Network Developing Intell/Scien Diaspora Networks
Iran	The Iranian Scholars Scientific Information Network	Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Ireland	The Irish Research Scientists' Association (IRSA)	Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Japan	Japanese Associate Network (JANET)	Student/Scholarly Network
Kenya	Association of Kenyans Abroad (AKA)	Developing Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Korea	Korean Scientists Engineers Association of Sacramento Valley The Global Korean Network	Local Association of Expatriates Intell/Scien Diaspora Network

Latin America	Association Latino-américaine de Scientifiques (Latin American Association of Scientists) (ALAS)	Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Lebanon	TOKTEN for Lebanon	TOKTEN Programme
Morocco	Moroccan Association of Researchers and Scholars Abroad (MARS)	Student/Scholarly Network
Nigeria	Association of Nigerians Abroad (A.N.A)	Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Norway	Association of Norwegian Students	Student/Scholarly Network
Pakistan	Return of Qualified Expatriate Nationals to Pakistan	TOKTEN Programme
Palestine	Programme of Assistance to the Palestine People	TOKTEN Programme
Peru	Red Cientifica Peruana (Peruvian Scientific Network)	Developing Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Philippines	Brain Gain Network (BGN)	Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Poland	The Polish Scientists Abroad	Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Romania	The Forum for Science and Reform (FORS)	Developing Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
South Africa	The South African Network of Skills Abroad (SANSA)	Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Thailand	The Reverse Brain Drain Project(RBD) Association of Thai Professionals in America and Canada (ATPAC) The Association of Thai Professionals in Europe (ATPER) The Association of Thai Professionals in Japan (ATPIJ)	Developing Intell/Scien. Diaspora Network Intell/Scien Diaspora Network Intell/Scien Diaspora Network Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Tunisia	The Tunisian Scientific Consortium (TSC)	Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Uruguay	Red Academica Uruguay (Uruguayan Academic Network)	Developing Intell/Scien Diaspora Network
Venezuela	In Contact with Venezuela El Programa Talento Venezolano en el Exterior (Program of Venezuelan Talents Abroad) (TALVEN)	Developing Intell/Scien Diaspora Networks

* We are aware of the existence of an Ethiopian network, a Croatian network and a Hungarian network. However the information on them is very limited, thus they were not included in the above list.

Another kind of transnational network affecting skilled worker movements are represented by on-line networks for information exchange and recruitment among occupational professionals. Siliconindia.com represents one example for IT workers and businessmen (see Figure 3 and www.siliconindia.com). Among its numerous services and publications, Siliconindia.com provides an extensive directory of individuals and companies interested in 'outsourcing' their IT functions to places like India (see Figure 4).

Figure 3 'Immigration Agent' Page, Siliconindia.com

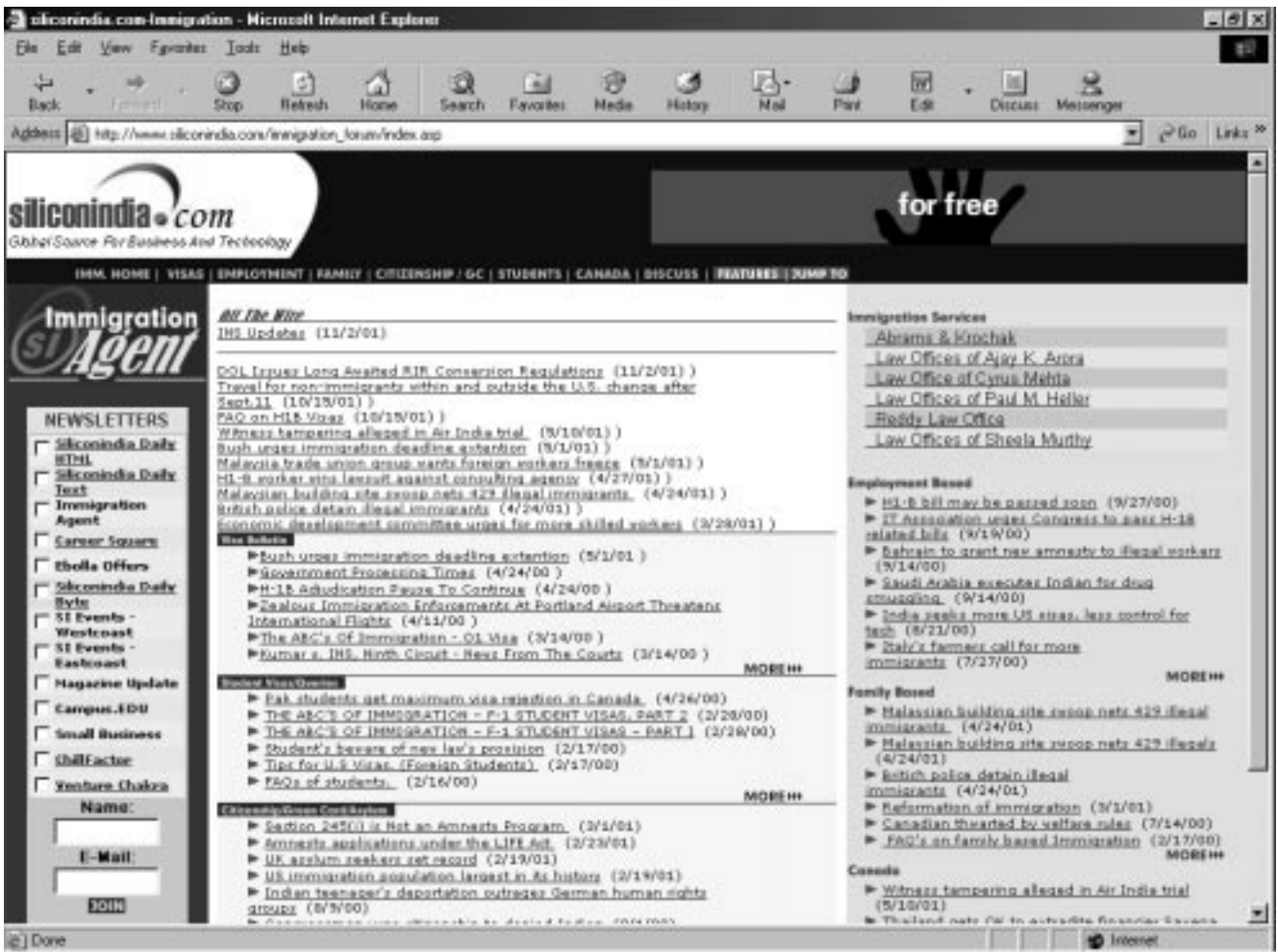
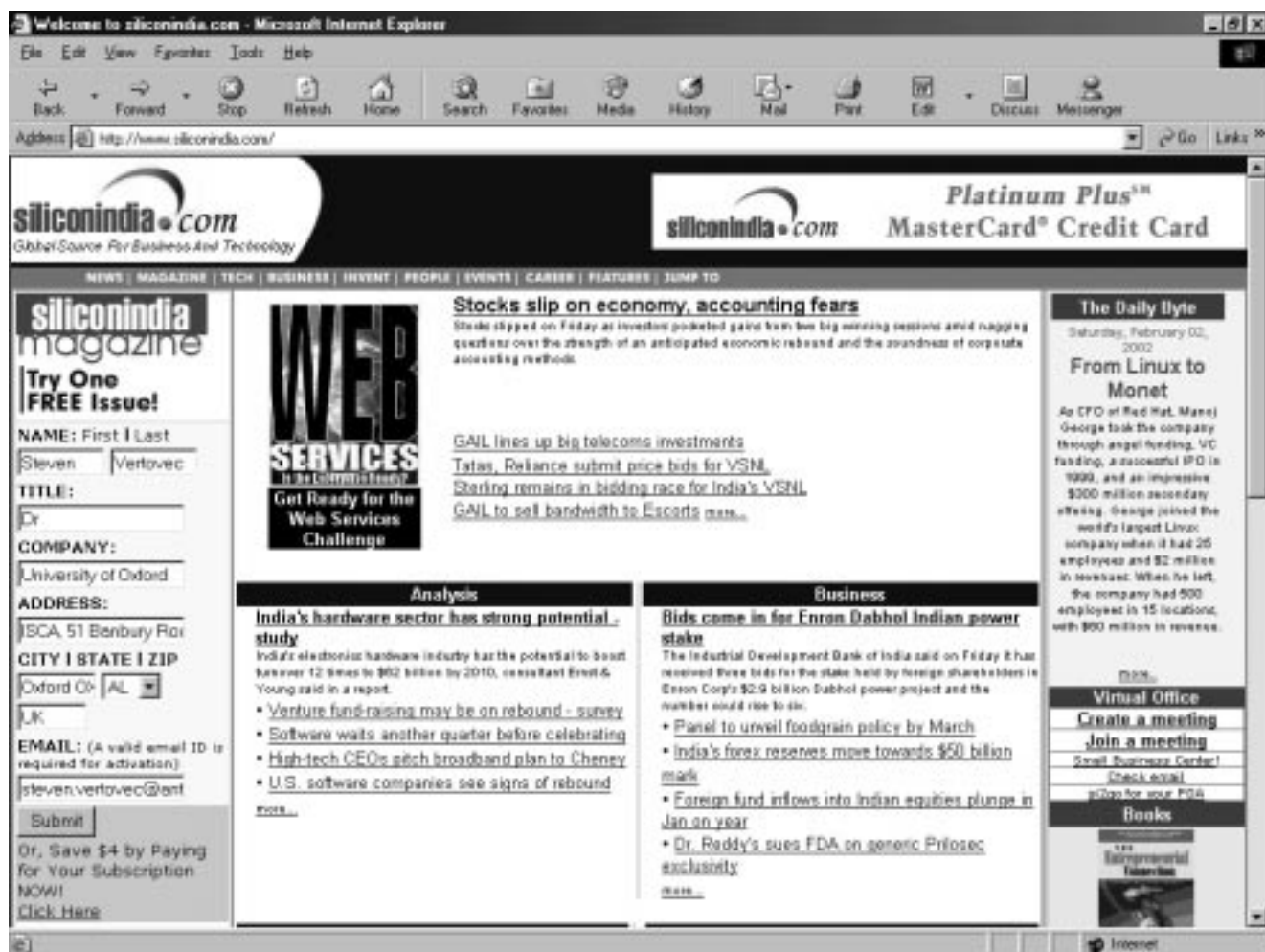


Figure 4 Home Page, Siliconindia.com



‘A promising perspective in such a strategy is that through the expatriates, the country may have access not only to their individual embodied knowledge but also to the socio-professional networks in which they are inserted overseas’ (Meyer and Brown 1999). Transnational networks are thereby used in attempts to build a locally based but far-reaching ‘research and technico-industrial web’ (Ibid.). The resultant long-distance networks among local and foreign-based professionals can provide highly important channels throughout which run flows of capital, skill, managerial know-how and information.

Such networks are not just transnational, but are usually trans-local. Prominent examples exist as networks linking Silicon Valley with the Hsinchu region of Taiwan and Bangalore and Hyderabad in India (Saxenian 1999). Transnational organizations like the Monte Jade Science and Technology Association promote business cooperation and technological transfers between the Valley and Hsinchu, while the alumni associations from the Indian Institutes of Technology or facilities like Siliconindia.com play significant bridging roles between Californian and Indian sites.

To further underline the linkages, the Hsinchu Science-based Industrial Park (HSIP), near Teipei, has 289 companies. Of these, 113 (39%) were started by US-educated Taiwanese engineers with professional experience in Silicon Valley. HSIP company managers have actively recruited friends and contacts from Silicon Valley. Meanwhile, 70 HSIP companies maintain offices in Silicon Valley to obtain not just workers, but new sources of knowledge, technology, capital and business opportunities that their combined networks enable (Yu-Ling and Wei-Jen 2002).

Some Trends and Forward Thinking

There is much to be gained – both in theoretical and policy terms – by recognizing the centrality and extent of transnational networks surrounding skilled labour migration. Significant points to bear in mind include the following:

- networks challenge human capital-focused views surrounding the sources, channels and outcomes of skilled labour migration (cf. Poros 2001, Meyer 2001);
- the movement of students should be seen as an integral part of transnational migration systems, not least because the networks they forge often lay the tracks of future skilled labour circulation (among governments there is growing awareness of this, seen in the increasing incidence of national programmes for student recruitment with a specific view towards longer-term or permanent settlement; cf. Khadria 2001);
- new information technologies – such as high speed/wide band data transfer, tele- and video-conferencing – will have mixed impacts on skilled labour mobility. More frequent but shorter work assignments might result, while more IT work tends to go on-line to specialist firms in countries like India (Aneesh 2001);
- in light of the above developments, companies and countries will be moving toward multiple strategies for acquiring and moving skilled workers. ‘Such strategies,’ suggest Koser and Salt (1997: 299), will combine different forms of physical movement of staff and also include transmission or acquisition of knowledge without a physical presence being required at the destination.’

In sum, an understanding of the multiple roles of transnational networks – what Meyer (2001) calls ‘a connectivist understanding’ – provides an invaluable insight into the functions of, and policy issues (immigration, corporate strategy, development assistance) around the mobility of highly skilled workers.

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