

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

**Research Paper No. 170**

## **Testing migration hypotheses: the movement of people from Pakistan to Catalonia**

**Montserrat Feixas Vihé**

Chief of Mission,  
UNHCR,  
New Delhi

E-mail: [feixas@unhcr.org](mailto:feixas@unhcr.org)

February 2009



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency

**Policy Development and Evaluation Service**

**Policy Development and Evaluation Service  
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
P.O. Box 2500, 1211 Geneva 2  
Switzerland**

**E-mail: [hqpd00@unhcr.org](mailto:hqpd00@unhcr.org)  
Web Site: [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)**

These papers provide a means for UNHCR staff, consultants, interns and associates, as well as external researchers, to publish the preliminary results of their research on refugee-related issues. The papers do not represent the official views of UNHCR. They are also available online under 'publications' at <[www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)>.

ISSN 1020-7473

## **Introduction**

The migration of Pakistanis to Catalonia, Spain, constitutes an interesting case study of international migration because the movement takes place in the absence of cultural, historical or linguistic links between Pakistan and Catalonia and because of its rapid expansion. Both Pakistan and Catalonia have experienced and continue to experience inward and outward migration for a variety of reasons. It is therefore not the migration of Pakistanis to Catalonia itself that is remarkable, but the context of this migration and its swift growth.

Although some Pakistani individuals arrived in Catalonia as early as the 1950s, sizeable numbers only moved to the area in the 1990s. According to data from the Spanish Statistical Institute based on municipal registers (the *Padró Municipal*), the total number of Pakistanis in Catalonia in 1991 was 436, of whom 427 lived in the province of Barcelona. This figure had practically doubled five years later and by 2000 it had more than doubled again. By 2004, it was six times larger than in 2000.

This migratory phenomenon was the focus of my doctoral research, undertaken between 2003 and 2005 at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in the Research Group on Migration (*Grup de Recerca sobre les Migracions*) and presented in December 2007. The research aimed to clarify how the movement of Pakistanis to Catalonia started, the reasons behind it, the current situation of the migrants and the short- and medium-term patterns of growth. It also aimed to provide a voice for the participants in the research and, through them, for their families and communities of origin and the Pakistani community in Catalonia.

Research for the dissertation included analysis of the relevance of prevailing migration theories to this movement as well as extensive fieldwork in both Catalonia and Pakistan. The research focused on Pakistani citizens living in Catalonia, on their own or with their families, some of whom had been in Catalonia for many years and others who had arrived recently, and the networks they have established to consolidate and expand their presence. The research also explored the situation of the migrants' families and communities in Pakistan in order to clarify the processes behind this migratory phenomenon, the movement itself, its impact on those who stayed behind and the likelihood of further migration.

The research process consisted firstly of an assessment of Pakistani migration to Catalonia in terms of the causes behind it and the networks that sustain its continuing expansion. It also included an assessment of the short- and medium-term development of this movement based on trends to date and of the plans and expectations of Pakistanis already in Catalonia and their relatives in Pakistan. The research also examined the existence of transnational links and their role in fostering further migration from Pakistan to Catalonia.

## **Aspects of Pakistani migration to Catalonia**

Different theories and concepts of international migration contain elements that help to clarify this migratory movement, shedding light on one or more of its determinants and characteristics and assisting in making predictions about its magnitude, duration and nature. However, no single theory can provide a comprehensive explanation. This paper will examine hypotheses against the evidence collected and make predictions concerning the future of Pakistani migration to Catalonia.

### *Economic differentials and low costs and risks*

The first hypothesis is that – in line with neo-classical or equilibrium theory – Pakistanis migrate to Catalonia due to the economic differentials in terms of wages and employment conditions between the two countries and the perceived low risks and costs attached to migration to this area.

The results of the research appear to corroborate this hypothesis, with the wage differential between Pakistan and Catalonia being key. The research indicates that the choice of Spain/Catalonia as a specific migration destination was made on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis: Pakistanis selected the destination which was the least costly and which brought the greatest benefits in the short term. They concluded that the costs and risks associated with entering the country, either illegally or legally, and then of overstaying their visas, were and continue to be lower than in many other European destinations.

In particular, the different regularization processes in Spain have offered the opportunity to most of the Pakistani migrants in an irregular situation to obtain work and residence permits. The fact that there have been several regularization processes in recent years has created the expectation that there will be more in future. It is thus seen as just a matter of time, perseverance and keeping a low profile to avoid being noticed by the police until then. Once status has been regularized, the potential for accessing better jobs, better pay and better conditions increases. This translates in turn into greater possibilities for self-employment and for family reunification.

At the same time, most of the participants in the study had practically no knowledge of Catalonia before arriving there, although they had heard from friends and relatives that it was a good place to make a living. It is unclear whether they were fully informed of the risks and constraints awaiting them. For many, the travails suffered during their trip and the difficulties of surviving in a new place, including finding a job and obtaining a work/residence permit, seem to have been underplayed prior to their departure.

### *Migration as a family decision*

A second hypothesis is that the nature of Pakistani society precludes the possibility of migration as an individual decision. Rather, migration follows a pattern of strategic

behaviour undertaken by families and households. Thus, the decision to migrate is made by the family, not the individual, as part of a family survival and development strategy and using a cost-benefit analysis. The migratory costs are borne by the family as a whole, as a joint investment.

This hypothesis was confirmed by the research findings. In a few cases the decision to migrate was initiated by the individual who later migrated, but in all cases it was sanctioned by the whole family. The choice of destination is made on the basis of information provided by migrants in Catalonia and in other locations.

The costs related to the migration were also borne by the family and not by the individual. These costs include travelling expenses – both fare and the fees for the ‘helpers’ – and taking care of the migrant’s direct family in Pakistan until he is in a position to start sending remittances. The family as a whole takes responsibility for the children’s upbringing, as well as for preserving the reputation and the honour of the absent husband by ensuring that the wife observes the traditional behaviour that is expected of her. In return, the resources sent to Pakistan by the migrant in the form of remittances also benefit the whole family, in that resources are pooled under the management of the eldest male family member. The migrant may also facilitate the subsequent migration of younger relatives.

#### *The choice of the migrant*

Assuming that the previous hypothesis is correct, it is suggested that the choice of the family member who migrates initially is made on the basis of the individual’s ability/capacity to travel and establish himself abroad and to generate income to share with the family members remaining in Pakistan.

This hypothesis was also corroborated by the research. It seems that it is always a man who first migrates. There is a common belief that women are too fragile and too susceptible to exploitation to go abroad, a belief reflected in Pakistani legislation on migration, which prohibits women under 35 years of age from migrating on their own. In addition, it is the family member who is most likely to succeed because of his status, education and physical condition who migrates. Thus neither young boys nor older men initially travel abroad. Older and younger male relatives, as well as wives, daughters and mothers, travel only when the original migrant is settled and can provide suitable living conditions.

When sending a second family member abroad to join the first, the choice falls generally on a younger sibling, cousin or nephew, again always a man. This young man will benefit directly from the social capital accrued by his relative in Catalonia and will help him both to recover the initial investment and to send money to support the extended family in Pakistan.

### *Migration networks*

A third hypothesis is that the existing migratory flow continues to expand on the basis of networks where kinship and other social relations play a major role. These networks constitute a social capital that offsets risks and costs. This is in accordance with cumulative causation theory, which suggests that each migratory movement makes subsequent movements more likely, in that each migrant is part of a network of relations for whom the relative costs and risks related to migration have been reduced.

Discussions with the participants in the study revealed the existence of migratory networks. It could not be determined whether these networks 'prompt' migration. However, it was established that the networks act as a source of social capital and are used by potential migrants and migrants already in Catalonia to reduce the costs and risks involved in the migratory process. The research found that the great majority of Pakistani migrants in Catalonia had a friend, relative or even acquaintance already there who was crucial to facilitating their arrival and initial introduction.

Although it would be an exaggeration to say that all Pakistanis in Catalonia are related to one another, it is no coincidence that the great majority of them come from one province, Punjab, and that many of them originate from the same district (Gujarat) or nearby. It would be difficult to find anyone among those who have been in Catalonia for a long time who has no relatives – brothers, cousins or in-laws – also living there. A sense of shared identity exists even among those who are not related and the migrants tend to refer to each other as '*paisano*' (countrymen).

It is worth noting that these networks do not provide limitless assistance for Pakistanis in Catalonia or for potential migrants. Assistance is primarily extended to relatives and takes the form of help with finding accommodation, securing a job or contract (real or fake), or accessing services, etc. This assistance also often comes at a price and in some cases the purported 'aid' may be close to exploitation. This is particularly the case where Pakistani entrepreneurs offer genuine contracts or casual employment to other Pakistanis following clan or tribal patterns and with no regard for the laws of Catalonia.

As suggested by proponents of transnationalism, Pakistani immigrants have developed multi-stranded social relations that link Pakistan and Catalonia and they maintain very strong social connections with Pakistan. Furthermore, Pakistanis do travel to Catalonia to respond to the needs of investors and employers there, and they do not undertake traditional immigrant adaptation, though the term 'adaptation' needs to be properly defined: there is very little adjustment.

However, it would be far-fetched to claim (as transnationalist theory does) that the transnational links established by Pakistani immigrants constitute an autonomous population initiative to deal with the depredations of world-roaming capital. Rather, the evidence collected indicates that these links are used as a tool to reproduce a capitalist system of production for the benefit of the immigrants themselves and their families and communities.

At the same time, Pakistani immigrants undoubtedly possess substantial social capital in terms of their networks of social relationships. They use this capital to identify and appropriate job opportunities in Catalonia, and to pool their resources to lower consumption costs and generate savings for business or real estate acquisition, informal credit associations and the creation of transnational enterprises. The government of Pakistan also plays a key role in the development of transnationalism through the establishment of policies designed to maintain the loyalty of expatriates and to ensure a steady flow of remittances. It is not clear whether these transnational practices hinder successful integration, as transnationalism theorists' claim.

### *The objectives of migration*

It has been hypothesized that migrants' aims in moving to Catalonia are: to send remittances to their families in Pakistan; to accumulate sufficient resources to bring other family members to Catalonia; and, if required, to provide assistance to other Pakistani migrants and/or to facilitate their arrival and settlement.

This hypothesis was partially confirmed by the research. It seems that while the overall objective of Pakistani migrants is to provide more and better for their families, this is a medium- or long-term objective. Initially, most of them need to recoup their or their family's initial investment in sending them abroad and only once this has been achieved can they start saving for their families. The issue of the migrants paying to come to Spain was rarely brought up openly in discussions. Rather, it would be hinted at, just as the existence of traffickers was considered a given, something that everybody knows about but that is too unpleasant, and possibly too dangerous, to discuss.

In addition, since the employment migrants can access is generally poorly paid, they simply do not have very much money, despite their efforts to save by living very humble and simple lives. The process of sending remittances therefore appears to follow a curve, with a soft upward slope in the beginning, increasing sharply after the individual has obtained regular papers and accessed relatively well-paid employment and gradually decreasing as the family joins the head of household and the number of dependants in Pakistan declines.

Most migrants do intend to bring their families over once they obtain the required permits and have accumulated the necessary resources. However, there are some exceptions due to economic and family reasons, as well as cultural and religious concerns. These are outlined below.

The third objective of providing assistance and facilitating the arrival and settlement of other Pakistanis does not appear to be an objective per se, at least not initially. It may well become one, albeit one only applicable to close relatives. This should not be seen as contradictory of the earlier discussion about networks. These networks do exist and are used by the Pakistani community in facilitating migration, but they do not constitute an objective for migration in themselves.

### *The positive impact of remittances*

It has been suggested that the income generated by family member(s) abroad has a significant impact on the well-being of the family in Pakistan in terms of housing, consumer goods, education, business and so on.

This hypothesis is confirmed at the macro level by the total amount of remittances that Pakistan receives annually and at the micro level by the findings of the research. However, not all of the migrants send remittances. Those who have been in Catalonia less than five years and those who do not have regular status are frequently not in a position to save and send money. Those remittances that are received by relatives appear to be used primarily to buy consumer goods and for educational purposes. They are sometimes used to purchase land but more as an investment than to start or develop a business. This is clearly at odds with the Pakistani government's desire to channel remittances towards productive investment and long-term development and explains the efforts deployed by the government to influence the use of migrants' savings.

Interestingly, while most of the families which participated in the study and which received money from Catalonia claim that this money is welcome and they are grateful for it, they insist that their level of well-being has not been particularly affected. They state, for example, that children were attending private schools before their father migrated or that the house already belonged to the family, etc. Taking these statements at face value implies that the migrants moved abroad on a whim rather than to respond to the needs of the family. It would be interesting to undertake sociological research to look into this reluctance to admit to the positive impact of remittances. It may be that families feel guilty about enjoying the fruits of the migrants' labour, knowing the difficulties they face.

### *Increases in migration*

It is also suggested that, as time goes by and the networks expand and become stronger, the migratory movement will grow exponentially, leading to a rapid and significant increase of the Pakistani population in Catalonia. Population figures bear witness to this hypothesis. The Pakistani community in Catalonia is definitely growing very rapidly, and could grow even more rapidly if or when the men who have arrived since 2000 begin to bring their families to Spain.

If Pakistanis come to Catalonia because of economic differentials and low risks and costs attached to the migratory movement, the more Pakistani immigrants there are, the bigger the networks and the lower the risks and costs. In addition, given the present economic trends, the wage differential between the two locations will probably increase. It may therefore safely be concluded that the Pakistani community in Catalonia will continue to grow, and that it will do so very rapidly, provided that the political and economic conditions remain roughly the same.



### *Family reunification*

The movement of a family member abroad may be viewed as a first step in the movement of the whole family or a significant part of it. Again, this hypothesis was supported by the research evidence, albeit with some qualifications. It should be noted that in Pakistani society the family includes married brothers and sisters, cousins and their descendants, the links being reinforced by the common practice of intermarriage. In addition, living alone is considered an anomalous state and being apart from the family is undesirable. Pakistanis will go to great lengths to ensure the unity of the family and, if possible, of the extended family. Where migration separates family members, they will make immense efforts to reunite.

However, economic constraints and the need to recover the family investment mean that in many cases saving money takes precedence over family reunification. In addition, migrants are not prepared to put their families through the dangers of irregular travel and the difficulties of settling in Catalonia. Bringing their families to Spain is therefore conditional upon obtaining regular status and the authorization to have their family join them. Once these have been granted, family reunification depends on the migrant's ability to provide single-handedly for his family, since for the time being the majority of Pakistani migrants are not prepared for their female relatives to join the workforce.

With regard to this issue, although some migrants claim that they will keep their female relatives in Pakistan to protect them, it is likely that with time most of the immigrants will relent. The proliferation of Pakistani enclaves, which have started to reproduce a social and cultural environment comparable to that in Pakistan and in the eyes of Pakistani men provide a safer environment for the women in their families, therefore plays a very important role in facilitating family reunification.

### *Spain as a country of transition*

Another hypothesis is that Catalonia is not a final destination for Pakistanis and that after reaching Catalonia they continue to be attracted by 'traditional' destinations such as the UK and the USA. In the medium and long terms, they plan to move on to those locations and eventually return to Pakistan.

It would be incorrect to say that Pakistanis in Catalonia feel so settled that they would not like to move elsewhere, especially to a country where Pakistani communities have already been established. Catalonia remains alien territory: there is no shared language or religion and no cultural affinity. Given the choice, the majority of the Pakistani community would prefer to be closer to home, geographically and culturally, or at least living in a larger Pakistani community. However, they are very much aware of the costs and risks involved in moving to a new destination. Many of them are still in the early stages of their settlement in Catalonia and the prospect of going anywhere else at present is too daunting.

However, returning to Pakistan is the ultimate goal for the great majority of Pakistani migrants in Catalonia. There is a strong migratory culture in Pakistan and successful migrants who eventually return to spend their old age among their people, symbolised by huge empty houses in the middle of Kashmir or on the Punjabi plains, provide an example. This is no doubt a source of inspiration and an ideal to which most migrants and would-be migrants aspire

### *The drawbacks of migration*

Finally, it has been suggested that while the decision to facilitate a family member's movement takes into account economic costs, it often ignores related costs such as emotional upheaval and the potential disruption of the family. The research indicated that it might be more accurate to say that such costs are underestimated rather than ignored.

In addition, these emotional costs are not borne equally by all family member. Mothers of migrants probably admit to suffering because of the absence of their sons the most. Children are also affected, but might not be as aware of emotional impacts as they are ensconced within large and nurturing families. Wives bear the impact of their husbands' absence in diverse ways that are probably related to the nature of their relationship with their husbands.

Perhaps because of the size and characteristics of the extended family system, there were no obvious signs of family disruption in the families that participated in the study. Rather, they seemed to have adjusted well to the temporary absence of one or several of their members by establishing new family dynamics that to a great extent filled the vacuum left by the migrant(s).

Some Pakistani academics have carried out research on this aspect of international migration and highlighted the potential moral dangers involved. They are particularly concerned that the absence of husbands may encourage wives to indulge in extramarital relationships. Interestingly, they do not dwell on the possibility that husbands may be establishing new relationships abroad which, given Pakistan's social characteristics, is actually much more likely.

### **Conclusion**

As long as economic and political conditions remain the same, or experience only minor variations, Pakistani migration to Catalonia will certainly continue and will probably grow exponentially. This growth will lead to the strengthening of existing Pakistani enclaves in the city of Barcelona and to the emergence of new enclaves not only in Barcelona and in its Metropolitan Area but also in other areas of Catalonia. The existence of these enclaves will in turn attract more Pakistanis to Catalonia.

The research findings outlined above and the experience of Pakistani migratory movements to other European destinations indicate that Pakistani immigrants are likely to

remain separate from the local population. Their desire to integrate will focus on the economic sphere and only a few, better educated, individuals, will establish and develop cultural and social links with the Catalan society. There is likely to be strong resistance on the part of Pakistanis to adopting any mores of Catalan society and, particularly, to merging with it.

The Pakistani community as a whole will maintain very strong links with Pakistan through a variety of channels, but particularly through intra-family marriages with relatives in Pakistan. The majority of Pakistani women will establish most of their social relations within the Pakistani community and within the Pakistani enclaves. At the same time, and despite their longing for Pakistan and Pakistani society, the majority of migrants will settle in Catalonia, thus sustaining the Pakistani migratory movement and contributing to its expansion.

The presence of Pakistanis in Catalonia is an irreversible fact. From the point of view of Catalonia, the integration of Pakistanis into Catalan society will be a huge challenge. It would therefore be useful to conduct studies that identify ways to facilitate dialogue between the Pakistani migrants and Catalan society and to promote mutual acceptance.