

Relational Cultural Reproduction in Migration: Language, Digital Diaspora, and Indian Transnational Families in the Gulf

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ABSTRACT

Migration from India to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries represents one of the most significant and enduring forms of labour migration in the contemporary world. Although existing scholarship on India–Gulf migration has extensively examined labour mobility, remittance economies, migration governance, and transnational economic networks, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to the sociocultural mechanisms through which migrant communities sustain linguistic identity and cultural continuity across borders. This article examines how language among Indian migrants in the Gulf is reproduced through relational networks embedded in transnational families and digitally mediated diaspora formations. Drawing on relational sociology, transnational migration theory, and digital diaspora studies, the paper argues that linguistic continuity in migration contexts is not merely a process of static cultural preservation but a dynamic form of relational cultural reproduction.

Keywords: Relational sociology; Indian migration; Gulf migration; Digital diaspora; Transnational families; Linguistic continuity; Cultural reproduction; Algorithmic diaspora; Transnationalism

INTRODUCTION

International migration has emerged as one of the defining features of contemporary globalization, reshaping economies, societies, cultures, and identities across the world (Castles *et al.*, 2014; Sassen, 2001). Among the major migration systems that have developed in the postcolonial era, migration from India to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries occupies a particularly significant position. Since the oil boom of the 1970s, Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman have relied heavily on migrant labour to sustain rapid economic growth and infrastructural development. Indian migrants today constitute one of the largest expatriate populations in the region, representing diverse linguistic, regional, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Research on India–Gulf migration has predominantly focused on labour markets, remittance economies,

migration governance, and developmental outcomes in migrant-sending regions (Kapiszewski, 2001; Rajan, 2018; Zachariah and Rajan, 2012). Such scholarship has significantly contributed to understanding the structural and economic dimensions of migration. However, the sociocultural dimensions of migrant life, particularly the mechanisms through which migrants sustain language, identity, and cultural continuity across borders, have received comparatively less scholarly attention.

Migration is not merely a movement of labour across geographical spaces; it simultaneously involves the reorganization of social relationships, emotional worlds, and cultural practices. Migrants do not completely detach themselves from their places of origin. Instead, they remain embedded within transnational social networks that connect families, communities, and cultural institutions across borders. These relational ties are especially visible among Indian migrants in the Gulf, where migrants frequently maintain strong emotional and

communicative connections with their home regions in India.

Within this transnational context, language assumes a central role. Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a marker of cultural identity, emotional intimacy, and social belonging. For migrant communities, linguistic continuity becomes intertwined with questions of identity, memory, kinship, and cultural survival. Families often attempt to maintain native languages within domestic environments even while navigating multilingual spaces dominated by English and Arabic.

Traditional approaches to language preservation within migration studies frequently conceptualize linguistic continuity as a conscious process of cultural retention. Such approaches often emphasize community organizations, cultural associations, and educational institutions. While these factors remain important, they do not fully explain how language survives within the everyday lives of migrants. Linguistic continuity is not merely a static act of preservation; rather, it is continuously reproduced through recurring interactions embedded within networks of relationships.

Relational Sociology and Transnational Migration

Relational sociology provides the primary theoretical foundation for this study (Crossley, 2011; Emirbayer, 1997). Unlike substantialist approaches that conceptualize individuals and social structures as fixed entities, relational sociology emphasizes that social reality emerges through dynamic networks of interaction and relationships.

Emirbayer's (1997) "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology" argued that sociological inquiry should move away from viewing actors as isolated units and instead examine the relational processes through which identities, meanings, and social practices are produced. From this perspective, individuals are not autonomous entities existing independently of social relations; rather, they are constituted through ongoing interaction within relational networks.

This relational orientation is highly relevant to migration studies. Migration is often conceptualized as a one-time movement from one place to another, but migrants rarely become detached from their social worlds. Instead, they remain embedded within transnational relational fields connecting origin and destination societies.

Indian migrants in the Gulf maintain relationships

with family members, hometown networks, religious communities, and cultural institutions in India through regular communication and exchange. These transnational interactions shape migrants' identities, emotional attachments, and cultural practices.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction further enriches this relational understanding of migration (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu argued that cultural practices are reproduced through everyday participation within social institutions such as families and educational systems. Within migrant contexts, language may similarly be understood as a form of cultural capital reproduced through recurring interactional practices.

Transnational migration theory complements this relational framework. Scholars such as Glick Schiller *et al.* (1995) conceptualized migrants as operating within "transnational social fields" linking societies of origin and destination. Migrants therefore inhabit multiple social worlds simultaneously.

Relational sociology allows language continuity to be understood not as a static cultural attribute but as an ongoing relational process embedded within networks of communication, emotional attachment, and cultural interaction.

Transnational Families and Linguistic Continuity

Transnational families constitute one of the most important relational infrastructures through which linguistic continuity is reproduced among Indian migrants in the Gulf (Baldassar, 2008; Levitt, 2001). A transnational family refers to a family whose members are geographically dispersed across national borders but remain connected through sustained emotional, economic, and communicative ties.

Indian migration to the Gulf historically involved male labour migration characterized by prolonged family separation. However, contemporary migration increasingly includes family migration, with spouses and children residing together in Gulf countries. Even where separation persists, family relationships continue to operate through regular communication and reciprocal obligations.

Within these family structures, language plays a central role. Native languages are frequently used within domestic environments for everyday conversation, storytelling, religious practices, emotional communication, and intergenerational interaction.

Parents often consciously encourage children to

speak their mother tongue at home in order to maintain cultural continuity. However, linguistic continuity extends beyond deliberate preservation strategies. Language is reproduced through routine participation in family life.

Children growing up in migrant households are exposed to native languages through interactions with parents, grandparents, relatives, and extended kinship networks. Video calls, voice messages, and family WhatsApp groups create continuous communicative interaction between migrants in the Gulf and relatives in India.

Native languages often become associated with emotional authenticity and familial closeness. Migrants may use English or Arabic within workplaces and public institutions while reserving native languages for intimate and emotional interactions.

This affective dimension of language is particularly important. Emotional attachment frequently strengthens linguistic continuity by linking language with comfort, nostalgia, and belonging.

At the same time, linguistic continuity within migrant families remains uneven and dynamic. Educational environments, duration of migration, social class, and patterns of cultural integration influence language use among younger generations. Many second-generation migrants navigate multilingual social worlds where English often becomes the dominant language of education and peer interaction.

Nevertheless, relational attachment to native languages often persists through family interaction. Even partial linguistic retention may sustain broader forms of cultural identity and emotional belonging.

From a relational sociological perspective, language survives because it continues to be actively lived within networks of familial interaction.

Digital Diaspora and Transnational Connectivity

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed transnational migration and diasporic life (Appadurai, 1996; Vertovec, 2009). Contemporary migrants inhabit digitally connected social worlds characterized by continuous communication across borders.

Digital diaspora refers to the ways migrant communities utilize digital technologies to sustain emotional, social, and cultural ties with their homelands. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and regional streaming services enable

migrants to remain immersed within homeland-oriented cultural and linguistic environments. For Indian migrants in the Gulf, digital communication technologies perform multiple functions. They facilitate regular family communication, participation in hometown associations, religious interaction, homeland political engagement, and native-language media consumption.

Digital media plays a particularly important role in sustaining linguistic familiarity. Migrants routinely consume regional films, television programs, music, podcasts, religious sermons and news content in their native languages. This continuous exposure to homeland-oriented linguistic content reinforces language familiarity even in environments dominated by English and Arabic.

Social media platforms also enable the formation of diasporic publics organized around linguistic, regional, and religious identities. Indian migrants participate in Facebook groups, WhatsApp communities, and online forums linked to their villages, districts, states, and linguistic communities. These digital spaces function as extensions of transnational social fields. They allow migrants to participate simultaneously in Gulf social life and homeland cultural worlds.

Importantly, digital communication technologies have transformed the temporal structure of migration itself. Earlier migrant generations often experienced communication delays and episodic contact with home societies. In contrast, contemporary migrants can maintain continuous real-time communication with family members and communities. This immediacy intensifies relational continuity across geographical distance. Digital technologies therefore do not merely facilitate communication; they actively reshape the structure of transnational sociality and cultural reproduction.

Algorithmic Diaspora and Platform-Mediated Identity

One of the most significant transformations in contemporary diasporic life involves the emergence of algorithmically curated digital environments (Bucher, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Digital platforms increasingly shape the cultural experiences of migrants through recommendation systems that personalize content according to user behaviour.

Algorithmic diaspora refers to digitally mediated diasporic environments in which platform algorithms actively reproduce homeland-oriented cultural and linguistic content for migrant users.

Algorithms on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Spotify, and streaming services routinely recommend regional-language content based on users' search histories, location data, viewing patterns, and interaction habits.

For example, a Tamil-speaking migrant in Dubai may continuously encounter: Tamil music videos, regional political discussions, religious content, comedy reels and nostalgic homeland imagery through algorithmic recommendation systems. These digital infrastructures create continuous linguistic immersion regardless of physical distance from the homeland.

Algorithmic mediation has several implications for diasporic identity and linguistic continuity. First, algorithmic systems intensify cultural familiarity by repeatedly circulating homeland-oriented content. Second, they reinforce emotional attachment by amplifying nostalgia and memory. Third, they contribute to the commodification of diasporic identity. Digital platforms monetize migrants' emotional and cultural attachments by generating engagement through personalized content. Diasporic nostalgia thus becomes integrated into platform capitalism. At the same time, algorithmic environments also reshape linguistic practices. Digital content frequently involves hybrid forms of communication combining English with regional languages. Social media cultures often privilege short-form, emotionally engaging, and visually driven communication. As a result, language reproduction within digital spaces becomes simultaneously preservative and transformative.

The concept of algorithmic diaspora therefore highlights how contemporary linguistic continuity is increasingly mediated not only through social relationships but also through digital infrastructures and platform logics.

Second-Generation Migrants and Hybrid Identity

Second-generation migrants occupy particularly complex positions within transnational social fields. Born or raised in Gulf societies, they frequently navigate multilingual environments shaped by English, Arabic, and their parents' native languages. For these younger generations, linguistic identity often becomes hybrid rather than singular. Code-switching between English and native languages is common within migrant households and peer interactions. Many second-generation migrants possess partial fluency in their parents' mother tongue while simultaneously identifying emotionally with regional and cultural traditions.

This challenges simplistic notions of either complete linguistic preservation or total linguistic loss. Hybrid linguistic practices reflect broader processes of identity negotiation within transnational and multicultural environments. Young migrants may consume homeland-oriented digital media while simultaneously participating in globalized youth cultures.

Digital media plays a particularly important role in shaping second-generation identity formation (Van Dijck, 2013). YouTube creators, Instagram influencers, streaming platforms, meme cultures, and regional music industries increasingly target diasporic youth audiences. These digital environments enable younger migrants to engage with homeland culture in new and hybrid forms.

Relational sociology is particularly useful for understanding such identity negotiation because it conceptualizes identity as an emergent outcome of interaction rather than a fixed category. Second-generation migrants continuously negotiate identity through participation in multiple relational environments such as family interaction, peer networks, digital media, educational institutions and transnational communication.

Hybrid identity therefore does not necessarily represent cultural decline. Rather, it reflects the adaptive and dynamic nature of cultural reproduction within migration contexts.

Affective Transnationalism and Emotional Language Practices

Language among migrant communities is deeply intertwined with emotion, memory, and affective attachment (Ahmed, 2004; Baldassar, 2008). Native languages frequently function as emotional infrastructures through which migrants experience intimacy, nostalgia, comfort, and belonging.

Transnational communication often involves emotional labour aimed at maintaining familial closeness despite geographical separation. Voice notes, video calls, festive greetings, family discussions, and everyday conversations become rituals of emotional co-presence. Within these interactions, language acquires affective significance. Migrants may associate native languages with parental affection, childhood memory, regional identity, religious belonging and emotional authenticity.

This emotional attachment contributes significantly to linguistic continuity. Language survives not merely because it is institutionally preserved but because it remains emotionally meaningful.

Digital communication technologies intensify affective transnationalism by enabling constant emotional interaction. WhatsApp voice messages, emojis, visual sharing practices, and video communication help sustain emotional intimacy across borders. During moments of crisis, homesickness, illness, or emotional vulnerability, migrants frequently revert to native languages as forms of emotional grounding.

This affective dimension demonstrates that language among migrant communities cannot be reduced solely to communication. It also constitutes a lived emotional relationship to family, memory, and belonging.

Discussion

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that linguistic continuity among Indian migrants in the Gulf cannot be adequately explained through static notions of cultural preservation alone (Crossley, 2011; Emirbayer, 1997). Instead, language survives through recurring relational interaction embedded within transnational family structures, digital diaspora networks, and algorithmically mediated cultural environments.

The article highlights several points: First, it demonstrates the usefulness of relational sociology for migration and diaspora studies. Relational sociology allows migration to be understood not merely as physical mobility but as the reorganization of social relationships across borders. Second, Digital technologies are not external additions to migrant family life; they are deeply embedded within contemporary transnational relational structures. Third, there is an algorithmic diaspora that explains how digital platforms increasingly shape diasporic identity and linguistic continuity through algorithmically curated homeland-oriented content. Fourth, the study highlights the emotional and affective dimensions of language. Linguistic continuity is sustained not solely through instrumental communication but through emotional attachment, memory, and relational intimacy. Finally, the article demonstrates that cultural reproduction within migration contexts is dynamic rather than static. Migration produces hybrid identities, multilingual practices, and evolving communicative forms. Language continuity should therefore be conceptualized as adaptive relational reproduction rather than fixed preservation.

Conclusion

Moving beyond conventional understandings of language preservation, the study has argued that language

survives in migration contexts through processes of relational cultural reproduction. Migrants continuously reproduce linguistic identity through recurring interactional practices embedded within emotional, familial, and digitally mediated relationships.

Transnational families remain central sites of intergenerational linguistic transmission, while digital communication technologies extend and intensify cultural interaction across borders. Simultaneously, algorithmic media systems increasingly shape diasporic identity by curating homeland-oriented linguistic and cultural content. The linguistic continuity does not imply static cultural preservation. Migration produces hybrid and negotiated forms of identity shaped by multilingual interaction, digital media cultures, and transnational sociality.

Ultimately, the study suggests that contemporary diaspora should be understood not simply as dispersed population but as a relational ecosystem continuously reproduced through interaction across physical and digital spaces. Language among Indian migrants in the Gulf survives not because it is passively remembered, but because it remains actively lived through relationships.

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