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Delusions of grandeur - Why would a skilled worker move to Europe?

By **Esther Bloch**

August 2008

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Europe has started to reflect seriously about such issues as knowledge migration and the demographic challenge of a greying population. A number of OECD reports show that in order to maintain its current welfare level, the European Union will soon have to attract a highly educated labour force from elsewhere. For example, OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría notes that "Migration is part of the solution for labour shortages and population ageing in OECD countries" (press release of the OECD 'International Migration Outlook 2007', 25.06.2007; see also David T. Coe, 12.11.2007). India is one of the very few societies that have such highly educated human resources, willing to relocate to other parts of the world. However, is European society ready to accommodate large numbers of these knowledge immigrants? And what is more, are Indians willing to fill up the shortage of labourers in Europe?

Highly skilled Indians, for example, often do not feel attracted to Europe. This has not only to do with language barriers. Rather, we need to look for an explanation in how they experience Europe. A recent communication from the European Commission shows that, at a time when international relations between Asia and Europe have increased significantly, the mutual awareness between both continents remains unchanged. Stereotypes on both sides still represent Europe as introspective and old fashioned, and Asia as a remote and exotic continent that brings more challenges than opportunities (Commission of the European Communities, 04.09.2001). From the contemporary Indian perspective, Europe remains invisible. Several leading figures from India have made statements like the following: "For Indians, Europe is not a fully-fledged presence in the world" (Lisbonne-de Vergeron, 2006). Many think of Europe, not as the land of milk and honey, but rather as a conservative, socially and culturally protectionist region that is plagued by racism (see for instance David Crossland's *opinion piece* and the subsequent reactions from the readers in *Der Spiegel* Online). In other words, Europe confronts a very negative image in India.

The response that Europe generally offers to this negative perception remains limited to promoting its positive self-image over and over again - Europe as the rich culture that has brought forth the sciences, the Enlightenment, democracy, the principles of equality and tolerance, the Human Rights, etc. However, even though this image contains some truth,

the repetition of this self-characterisation seems to have an adverse effect: the image of Europe as racist, ethnocentric and pretentious is reinforced. We could be shocked by this or dismayed, or merely shrug our shoulders. Nevertheless, this adverse effect emphasises our need to understand the negative perception of Europe in India. Where does it come from and why do attempts at turning it around actually reinforce this image?



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The positive self-image of Europe has been well-known in the world for centuries. It is the same image as the one that the colonial powers spread about Europe. It showed a superior European culture where peace, equality and tolerance ruled, and which should be emulated by the colonised. At the same time, this image of Europe was brutally contradicted by the daily realities in the colonies. Today, Europe still sees itself as an ideal example that should be followed by the rest of the world. It talks about human rights, and toleration, about equality and religious freedom. Even though Europe does have a lot to offer (institutions such as the International Court of Justice, or an independent course of action that can offer a counterweight against the politics of the US or China), this image still does not tally with reality: a general feeling of unease to go about with others is growing in Europe; racism and violence seem to be on the rise; the boundaries of tolerance seem to be narrowing, etc. Examples of these can be found in the newspapers daily: everywhere in Europe, far-right parties and ideas are gaining ground (Het Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the great win of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, the success of the Danish People's Party, the popularity of politician Geert Wilders in The Netherlands); the headscarf and other so-called religious symbols are banned from the public sphere (in France and Belgium); dark-skinned foreigners in general and Muslims in particular are often looked at as potential terrorists (example in case is Geert Wilders' recent film fitna, which equates Islam with violence and terrorism); etc.

At the same time, the image that Europe has of other cultures, such as the Indian, is mostly very negative. The descriptions that we have of India today are often moralising and determined by images of underdevelopment, poverty, superstition, inequality, corruption, the caste system, etc. From these descriptions, it appears as if the Indian culture is still backward and far from being as 'developed' as the West. On the basis of these stories, Europe lectures countries like India about the inequalities of its caste system, or proposes secularism as the solution to India's 'religious conflicts'. Moreover, Europe has never asked the question whether it can learn anything from another culture, such as the Indian. In contrast to this, Indian culture has been learning from Europe for centuries - it learnt to do science, it learnt how to establish a democracy, etc. Is it then so surprising that rising powers like India feel that Europe's self-description sounds quite hollow?

Therefore, if Europe wants to change this negative perception of being racist and pretentious and become an attractive destination for Indians to live and work, it will need to do more than implementing "effective integration policies [...] in the realms of education and the labour market," as OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría proposes (press release of the OECD 'International Migration Outlook 2007', 25.06.2007). Europe will need to challenge the self-representation that it has promoted for centuries. In order to provide an alternative to Europe's unilateral success story, it will have to start to seriously reflect on the 'blemishes on its shining armour,' such as colonisation, intolerance, or the growing 'conflict between civilisations' and finally ask the question: 'What can Europe learn from other cultures?'

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Esther Bloch is doctoral researcher at the Research Centre Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap (Comparative Science of Cultures) at Ghent University, Belgium. The article was written in the framework of the European Commission Asia-Link project DEVHAS ♦ Development of Human resources and Strategies for Education on the Stereotypical Images between Europe and South Asia



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