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A Job in Dubai and an Apartment in Bangalore: Transnational dynamics of migrant property in globalizing cities

Aurélie Varrel

Abstract

This article engages migration studies and urban studies to examine the differentiated roles of highly skilled Indian migrants in the metropolitan real estate markets of the UAE and India. It aims at highlighting their transnational engagement in the property market “back home” in the absence of conditions for a real cosmopolitan social fabric in the UAE. Despite the demographic significance of Indian migrants in the UAE, the illiberal politics of migration management prevailing in the UAE have relegated them to transience. Dubai has been at the forefront of certain reforms to encourage foreigners to invest in the local property market, with uncertain results so far. Conversely the Indian real estate sector has developed techniques to capture migrant remittances and channel them into the booming metropolitan property markets of India. I will explore these mechanisms with a focus on the fast-growing South Indian metropolis of Bangalore through a qualitative multi-sited research project conducted in Bangalore and Dubai. It aims at highlighting the importance of transnational connexions between the urban fabric of these two cities, and more generally the significance of international migrations and remittances for urban dynamics in the Global South.

Keywords

Dubai, Bangalore (Bengaluru), migrations, remittances, real estate

Introduction

In their search for post-oil strategies, UAE has identified real estate as one of the avenues for economic diversification. Omar Al Shehabi (2014, 24) blames such a strategy for creating “derooted hubs [...] where the majority of agents that animate these cities are not allowed to develop roots.” Indeed, a fundamental contradiction lies in the urban development model of Gulf cities where foreigners have long been ubiquitous among its workforce, and more recently have been lured as buyers of property. However, they are not allowed to become citizens or even permanent residents. This persistent denial of any permanent status or political rights to foreign residents is a significant limitation to the cosmopolitan image that Dubai has been striving to project internationally for the past two decades (Kanna 2011; Pagès-El Karoui, this issue).

The UAE has the highest share of foreigners in the world, with foreigners accounting for more than 88% of its total population. Considering that Indian migrants comprise the largest foreign national group¹, I would like to examine the paradox and consequences of being tolerated as a highly-skilled migrant and as a property owner, but not more, in Dubai, through the case of the Indian highly skilled migrants that has started to attract attention (Vora 2013). This question needs to be examined at the transnational scale, as Biao Xiang (2007, 30) asserts and illustrates through the case of IT professionals from the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh who “have lands in Andhra, have a house in Hyderabad, and have a job in America.” This article develops on the vision phrased by Chad Haines (2011, 165) in Roy and Ong’s book *Worlding Cities*: “Dubai, where there is deep anxiety over long-term residents, needs to develop global cities in India and Pakistan to attract migrants back home”.

¹ The UAE hosts 8.3 million migrants, out of a total population of 9.4 million. With 3.31 million Indians, it is the country with the largest Indian population abroad, ahead of Saudi Arabia and the USA (United Nations 2018).

Instead of focusing on state or institutional financial flows, we suggest here to look at dynamics from below, fueled by transnational flows generated by migrants themselves. This approach converges with a recent body of urban studies literature documenting financialization of property markets in the Global South: Wijburg, Aalbers and Bono (2020) highlight the role of diasporic community in La Havana urban redevelopment; Halbert and Rouanet (2014) identify foreign direct investments and diasporic remittances as the two major foreign investment routes for the financialization of urban production in India, like Searle (2016). The contribution of Non Resident Indians' (NRI) remittances and investments has been well documented for rural and small town India, especially in the southern state of Kerala (Zachariah and Rajan 2012) and in the northern one of Punjab (Rahman, Yong, and Ullah 2014; Walton-Roberts 2005), but it remains lacking in research on India's rapidly changing metropolitan regions (Upadhyaya and Rutten 2012). Through a situated example, I intend to highlight the role played by NRIs in dynamics that have reshaped Indian metropolitan areas over the past three decades.

Here migration studies can fruitfully be put to dialogue with this body of literature on financialization and urban rescaling dynamics. The state rescaling processes, along with liberalization reforms, have significantly reshaped Indian urban landscapes: the State reduced significantly its ambitions of city planning and urban development has been largely outsourced and privatized, resulting in so-called world class infrastructures and the burgeoning of enclaves (Kennedy 2014; Shatkin 2013; Srivastava 2015). These tremendous changes in the political economy of urban production go along with the financialization of real estate. This article aims to shed light on these dynamics from the transnational

perspective, following Caglar and Glick-Schiller's (2011, 16) invitation to more collaboration between urban and migration studies scholars: "Migrants may also facilitate neoliberal restructuring through their support of localities or institutions in their countries of origin".

Much research on migrants in the city has focused on their role and practices in only one city at a time (Glick-Schiller and Caglar 2011). Adopting a transnational perspective on the role of migrants in the city, this article examines the transnational property acquisition strategies and practices of Indian migrants living in Dubai and back home through a multi-sited approach (Hannerz 2003). I focus only on one city in India to account for the fact that the real estate market in India continues to operate at the scale of the city rather than the nation (Rouanet and Halbert 2016). It also reflects the fact that NRIs usually invest in a city where they have some familiarity with, linguistic proximity to, and relations who can help to purchase and maintain their property (Varrel 2012; Xiang 2007). This article aims at unraveling the role of Gulf migrants in these spatial and economic dynamics as a situated example of transnational connections in the political economy of Indian metropolitan development. Bangalore² has been associated with Silicon Valley and world-travelling software professionals (Upadhyaya and Vasavi 2008). The astonishing growth of this metropolitan region with nearly ten million inhabitants has resulted in piecemeal urban landscapes that coexist uneasily with its worlding aspirations, which are fuelled by Bangalore status in the Indian IT sector (Goldman 2011). But the whole of South India is strongly embedded in the dense web of relations with the Gulf region, an additional dimension to the role of gateway city played by Bangalore for software professionals employed by the IT sector.

² Bangalore was officially renamed Bengaluru in 1996, but here Bangalore functions as an English equivalent for the present official name of the city.

I followed a multi-sited ethnographic methodology to capture the complexity of transnational flows. The Indian formal real estate sector is dominated by a number of large companies that are often listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange. In addition, a myriad of smaller companies in various sizes have flourished with the post-liberalization rush to purchase land and property (Searle 2016). In Bangalore, interviews were conducted with a dozen companies that are representative of this diversity: two out of the ten largest real estate companies of Bangalore, which are listed companies and develop projects across India; and more mid-size and smaller companies that are active either in South Indian cities or in Bangalore region only. Interviews were conducted with high-ranking managers in real estate companies, analysts of consultancy firms, and sales and marketing professionals in the beginning of 2014.³ One month later, a second series of interviews was conducted with professionals who were active in the marketing and sales of Indian property, and to whom I had been introduced by their Bangalore counterparts. Finally, I conducted interviews in 2014 and 2015 with UAE-based highly skilled Indian migrants (corporate executives, media professionals, physicians), accessed again through Bangalore-based networks. These semi-structured interviews addressed their migratory trajectories, with a focus on revenues, savings, and property investment.

First, I will present the specific stakes of property ownership for Indian migrants living in Dubai, then examine the limits of their incorporation into the Dubai real estate market. The third part unravels the transnational *modus operandi* established by Bangalore real estate companies to address the Gulf NRI market. The final part will show the transnational dimension of Bangalore's urban restructuring through the commodification of the traditional migrants' "house back home."

³ These interviews were made possible by a decade-long familiarity with the real estate sector in Bangalore since my PhD fieldwork (2003-2006). Access was facilitated by the collaboration with Ludovic Halbert and Hortense Rouanet, as well as Aarthi Ajit.

Highly skilled Indian migrants in the Gulf: Transient condition and property strategies

In the Gulf, an estimated ten to twenty per cent of the Indian working population—including businessmen—occupy professional or management positions (Sarkar 2014, 69). This situation reflects the early presence of Indian skilled migrants in the Gulf: Since the beginning of the 20th Century, manpower was brought from the Indian subcontinent to fill ~~clerical~~ **lower-rank administrative positions** in the colonial administration and Western oil companies (Bose 2009). By the 1950s, highly skilled Indian professionals such as engineers and medical doctors had filled key positions. Today the Gulf remains a potential destination for young Indian professionals willing to work abroad, as the wages are higher than in India (Jain and Oommen 2016). Such migrants can be entitled, under certain income and visa conditions, to bring in family members. They settle in the Gulf as a family and sometimes become *de facto* long-term residents (Kanchana 2012; Vora 2013). As a consequence, fifteen to twenty-five percent of the total Indian population in the different parts of the UAE qualify as long-term residents (Sarkar 2014). Like all expats in the Gulf, their visas are linked to job contracts, so a migrant and their dependents are supposed to leave the country if a contract is terminated or when they pass the age of sixty. This category of migrants can resort to different strategies to avoid sudden forced returns,⁴ but would avoid staying illegally if they have no choice. These possibilities and their agency distinguish such migrants from the “workers” (i.e. low-skilled migrants) who have little option but to leave their families behind and are more prone to overstaying illegally (Kathiravelu 2016, Baas, this issue).

Yet skilled Indian migrants are still denied access to citizenship or any other form of permanent residency, despite their position in the local economy (see Assaf, this issue). They

⁴ Among highly skilled migrants, a strategy in case of job loss is to resort to personal networks. Becoming temporarily hired on paper by a friend who is in a position to recruit staff buys them time to find another position. For those who reach the age of retirement, they can establish a company in order to sponsor their own visa. These two solutions require having substantial savings, as the costs of supporting a family and establishing a business are expensive.

have no political rights and may be required to leave the country at any point of time. Gardner (2010) argues that this transient status generates a constant anxiety among migrants in the Gulf that cuts across their class positioning. As for Indians, this anxiety has been exacerbated by successive trauma related to regional geopolitical upheavals, from the invasion of Kuwait in 1991 to the Indian army's intervention that rescued thousands of Indian nationals from Yemen in July 2015. The neoliberal nature of the Dubai boom adds to this climate of uncertainty, which was exemplified by the 2009 crisis that led Dubai to the verge of bankruptcy, when thousands of foreign (mostly Western) professionals fled Dubai overnight and many more migrants had to leave because of the economic recession that followed. Host country politics further represent an additional threat to the jobs of Indian migrants, as Gulf governments push for the nationalization of the workforce including the UAE government's recent injunction for Emirati youth to aim for higher education and corporate jobs.

All these factors contribute to the imperious desire to purchase property in India as a double strategy to secure a place to fall back on "just in case," and to invest earnings in a safe place. This decision is also informed by the myth of return (Baas 2015); the perspective of returning to India at some point provides a rationale for investing money in a "house back home." Investing in property back home is considered a must-do, for reasons pertaining to class and prestige, and as testament to a successful migration (Rahman, Yong, and Ullah 2014; Singh 2006). Such investments are made possible by the significant wage difference between India and the UAE. Another distinctive feature of the Gulf is that white-collar professionals possess high purchasing power due to the low rates of interest offered to local salaried persons, which lies in sheer contrast with the high interest rates that prevail in India. According to various Dubai-based Indians, after one to two years of migration, most Indian professionals would be able to apply for a loan in the UAE in order to purchase property in

India. This easy access to credit and loans is related to the drive for economic diversification that aims to transform Dubai into a business-friendly and financial hub and make plenty of capital available for investment (Buckley and Hanieh 2014). For this reason, Dubai has been a source of easy money to fuel the Indian post-reform economic growth, especially for the real estate sector, not to mention a money laundering hotspot for South Asia (Kanna 2011). Before exploring the mechanisms of investment in India, I first examine the possibility of investing in the local property market which may look like a more immediate option to white-collar migrants.

Purchasing property in Dubai, a recent and limited option

Initially, land and property in the UAE were strictly kept under local control, and ownership was restricted to Arab Gulf Council Cooperation nationals. The Emirate of Dubai initiated some changes in 2002, as part of its economic diversification strategy. Article 4 of the freehold law allowed foreigners to acquire residential property in designated areas. These areas consist of newly built property enclaves located in “free zones” (Elsheshtawy 2011). According to Al Shehabi (2014), these legal changes were meant to support the development of “international mega real estate projects” by enlarging their potential customer base, which could have paved the way for a more cosmopolitan urban society. Yet the initial prices of such property were extremely high and targeted the non-resident, frequent-flying, tax-evading elite, not the migrant population already established in Dubai (Buckley and Hanieh 2014). The data on the nationality of property buyers that the Dubai Land Department has been publishing yearly since 2011 boasts of many nationalities investing in Dubai. Nevertheless, there is no evidence whether these foreign owners are actually Dubai residents, as it is not compulsory to be a residency visa holder in Dubai in order to acquire property. Indians consistently top the non-Arab investors’ nationalities. I contend that many Indian owners are

non-resident investors rather than migrants, since Dubai is infamous in South Asia as a place for laundering black money, where celebrities, businessmen, and politicians own property (Kanna 2011).

In 2014, purchasing property in Dubai was not considered an option by most Indian migrants but for a few whom I met. During fieldwork, I met one household who acquired property in Dubai.⁵ Pushpa and her husband were considered an exception in their circle of Indian friends, who came from educated, middle-class backgrounds and had successful professional careers in the UAE for three decades. This double-earning couple in their late fifties acknowledged the oddity of their purchase. Both grew up in families of high-ranking bureaucrats and enjoyed well-paid jobs in Dubai for three decades as an executive in a corporate firm and as a medical doctor. They explained that the free zones policy was introduced after they inherited a family house in Bangalore and their children became financially independent adults. Hence they purchased and stayed in a house that they considered relatively small in The Meadows, a vast landscaped complex of houses located in the hinterland of Palm Jumeirah and Dubai Marina in the western part of Dubai's recent residential developments. When describing the area to me, they described their neighbors' larger houses and luxury cars, and their feeling not very rich in comparison. Owning property in upscale areas of Dubai and Bangalore, they did not intend nor could afford to invest any more in property.

Besides this case, the recent development of less upscale projects, developed further from the shore (e.g. International City), could have enlarged the initially high-profile and exclusive customer base. The neighboring emirate of Sharjah, which has long attracted Indian

⁵ Interview, Dubai, March 2, 2014.

migrant families to rental apartments, also allowed foreign ownership in 2015. Nevertheless, my Indian informants considered purchasing property in the UAE as a major and unusual decision. Indian migrants would rather invest their savings from money earned in the UAE in property in India, both for prestige reasons and as ‘a place to fall back on’ in case of problems, as I have been told several times. As Caglar and Schiller (2011, 15) put it: “Migrants evaluate cities and neighbourhoods, developing their own strategies of places based on the value and prestige of localities within migrant transnational fields.” The mainstream practice of buying property in India is encouraged and largely captured by the Indian real estate sector through a whole set of commercial strategies organizing the financial circulation from Dubai to Bangalore.

Dubai as a marketplace for Bangalorean real estate

While middle-class Indians seem to be *de facto* excluded from the local real estate market, the Indian property market is very active in Dubai itself, through the active commercialization of property in India targeting NRIs. Indian migrants form a demand pool that is addressed locally through various channels, forming an ethnic business niche. Its vibrancy is revealed when attending one of the numerous property fairs and exhibitions that take place almost every month. I visited one of them in March 2014 that took place over the weekend in a hotel near the Dubai airport. It promoted almost exclusively property located in the four southern states of India, mostly in Chennai, Bangalore, and other million-plus cities. Announcements had circulated via local newspapers in English, Internet portals and websites catering to the Indian diaspora, targeted text messages, and emails. There were 25 stalls and all the exhibitors were Indian. Many of them were commercials flown from India for this two-day fair. A fewer number were Dubai-based, either as employees of local “representative offices” of Indian real estate companies, or as independent property agents registered with local authorities.

In 2014 and 2015, I located less than ten such representative offices that commercialized the products of their India-based parent companies under strict local rules. Representative offices are a key component of the extroverted economic model of Dubai as a global business hub: they are meant to showcase the activities and products of foreign companies, but are not supposed to make profit locally as all should be transferred to the parent company abroad. They act as commercial offices for India-based real estate companies, and any transaction immediately goes to the parent company in India. They are primarily meant to attract larger investors and deals, including institutional FDI, but cater often mostly for migrant individuals in this case. Four of them represented Bangalore companies,⁶ including the Brigade group that is among Bangalore's top three developers, which hints at the importance of the Gulf market for Bangalore developers. Indeed, only important companies can afford to run such offices because of the cost and paperwork involved. The agents specializing in the sale of Indian property were half a dozen.⁷ They served as intermediaries for various India-based companies and ran parallel businesses such as event management (organizing property fairs), marketing (with call centers that conducted phone and online marketing to the Indian customers), and sales. Representative offices' salespersons and the teams run by agents would compete as much as collaborate with each other. This is a small world that is also populated by Indian brokers travelling back and forth to commercialize specific projects, especially those developed by smaller developers in secondary cities; there are also commercial teams flown

⁶ Many Indian real estate companies have of course expanded their activities beyond the limits of only one city. Yet they continue to be known by the city where they started operating, thanks to a strong local embeddedness that secures access to various types of resources (financial capital, land, and social networks). Their initial establishment is where their headquarters are located and where they belong to the local developers' "fraternity," which is a strong lobby in the urban political economy (Rouanet and Halbert 2016).

⁷ This is not many, considering that there were altogether 336 agents of Indian nationality registered with the authorities in 2013 (*Khaleej Times*, February 2, 2014). Selling Indian property is less attractive because of the smaller profit and legal risk involved.

in for short periods of intensive marketing by big companies. These different categories of professionals form a fuzzy, labile and competitive milieu.

This small but very active group of professionals and local ventures structures a transnational market between India and the Gulf region. They operated from Dubai, a convenient transport hub where regulations were also seen as more amenable to doing business. Staff would travel every month to other parts of the Gulf where they had to operate differently, since property fairs for example were not allowed in many countries, even in certain emirates of the UAE. Thus, they often had to conduct their activity in a very constrained environment with multiple and often changing rules, flirting with grey zones. For these reasons, Dubai functioned as a marketplace at the scale of the Gulf region for the Indian property market and Indian real estate professionals operating from there can be identified as key intermediaries in the financialization of the Indian property market (Rouanet and Halbert 2014).⁸

Living in Dubai, having property in Bangalore: Building the city from afar

Since the 1980s, the development of the corporate real estate sector in India has dramatically reshaped the landscape in all Indian cities, especially Bangalore. It was previously known for its low-lying, tree-lined, individual house residential neighborhoods (Nair 2005). The real estate sector in Bangalore profited from the introduction of IT parks and residential building enclaves by the mid-1990s, two urban forms that were new to Bangalore then (Stallmeyer 2011). The real estate sector was thus crucial in catalyzing the shift to apartment building as the dominant form of production of new residential areas, and entrenching a new norm for

⁸ In November 2016, Dubai authorities operated a crackdown on these transnational practices: all registered agents and representative offices received a notification that it is forbidden to advertise for investing in property outside of the UAE. This rule had not been enforced vigorously since the 2008 Dubai financial crash. This backlash was part of a political package to revitalize the sluggish local economy, by preventing the departure of revenues generated in the UAE. Its impact is difficult to assess because Indian companies unsurprisingly deliver a “business as usual” narrative that is consistent with the general opacity prevailing in the real estate sector.

middle-class residents (De Neve and Donner 2015). I argue that NRIs were instrumental in this shift, because the real estate sector repackaged the NRI dream of a house back home into flats in residential enclaves as an ideal investment for highly skilled Indian migrants.

The NRI customers figure highly in the discourse of developers, especially when they discuss “demand” with potential financial investors (Searle 2016). Almost all the companies surveyed in Bangalore have had a commercial strategy towards the NRI market since long ago, although how developed such strategies are varies. All have sophisticated websites with customer support, most would send sales teams to Dubai at least occasionally, and a few maintained a legally registered representative office in Dubai.⁹ All converged on estimating that NRI customers may represent at least 10-15% of their total sales of residential property, which has been a stable share for fifteen years (Varrel 2012). This figure is significant as the property sector has faced an overproduction crisis since the beginning of this decade.

Standard flats in residential enclaves, and to a lesser extent houses,¹⁰ meet the requests of white-collar NRIs willing to invest in India in many regards. This standardized residential form largely replicates globally circulated models that prevail in the Gulf too. The “cosmopolitan lifestyle” offered in such places is a common sales pitch (Dupont 2005) that echoes nicely with how highly skilled NRIs see themselves. Major developers also promote their collaborations with international architects and consultants as a strength: this branding and cross-referencing, as well as the reputations of corporate groups, reassure migrants living faraway. It flaunts their middle-class identity and their aspirations to be identified as cosmopolitan subjects commuting between world cities, as described by Srivastava (2015) in

⁹ A few companies are present also in other diaspora hotspots, especially the USA, Singapore, or the UK.

¹⁰ Houses imply a higher investment, and there are fewer available newly built houses, so I will focus on flats that are the common type of property offered and purchased by Gulf NRIs.

his ethnography of Gurgaon, a technoburb located in the southern part of Delhi region. Sophisticated online interfaces, transparent pricing policy, flawless procedures for acquisition and financing, and the aforementioned various techniques to meet customers wherever they are facilitated the purchasing process for distant customers, who hardly have to go to India in order to complete acquisition. The value of a flat located in an enclave developed and maintained by a major company has very little risk of decreasing. For these reasons, it is an ideal turnkey investment product for NRIs that is largely promoted in the Gulf by all the developers.

Certain migrants have purchased several properties through these channels. This is the case for Sarath and his wife who have been in the Gulf as a dual-income couple of executives for three decades.¹¹ They have purchased four land plots and flats in Bangalore since the 1990s. The plots were located in residential enclaves created by major developers, in Bangalore eastern suburbs towards the IT cluster of Whitefield. One was resold while the other was developed into a villa that is rented out to foreign expats. The two flats are located in the southern upscale suburb of Koramangala, in developments built by major local companies (Mantri, Sobha) and were bought to be rented out. Such a customer profile is highly desirable for real estate companies that encourage it: “One flat for their parents, one for revenue, and one more for themselves whenever they visit India,” as a salesperson based in Dubai told me. Interestingly, when they retire, they plan to stay in a family house located nearby and to earn the rental revenues. It is very telling of the difference in the symbolic value attached to a house compared to a flat, that is a commodified version of the “house back home”. It is suitable for investing, but remains less desirable and prestigious than owning and residing in a house that embodies the traditional middle-class dwelling in Bangalore (Nair

¹¹ Interview, Dubai, March 4, 2014.

2005). It turns NRIs into active participants in the formation of residential enclaves that are characteristic of urban rescaling processes.

Conclusion

This article brought together migration studies and urban studies to question and explore the paradoxes of allowing foreigners to purchase property in Dubai without granting them any right to settle in the long-term. This was examined through the lens of the highly skilled Indian migrants' participation in the recently liberalized property market of Dubai. The illiberal migration policy, the structural uncertainty of migrant life in Dubai, and the elitist bias of many developments inform investment decisions that continue to look (back) towards India. This transnational enterprise is largely supported by the presence of ethnic entrepreneurs who organize and structure the sale of Indian property in Dubai. As a result, Indian migrants continue to invest in India although options have slowly opened up in Dubai. I infer from this that the absence of a real political project for a cosmopolitan social fabric in Dubai seems to reinforce transnational dynamics that fuel new urban forms and dynamics in South Asia. The announcement made in May 2018 of the UAE government's intention to create long-term residential visas for investors and highly skilled migrants and their families is a significant move that aims at enhancing the attractiveness of the country in the global talent market. It opens new possibilities for the development of a more cosmopolitan urban fabric, whose impact on property strategies and practices has yet to unfold in a time of economic slowdown and crisis.

Methodologically, the article adopted a transnational approach and related Dubai and Bangalore as two polarities linked by flows of people, capital, and norms. It unraveled the strong connections between these distant property markets' dynamics and more generally the importance of transnational connections between the urban fabrics of these two cities. NRIs

have been a reliable customer base of the Bangalore real estate sector, so I argue that Dubai has funded at least part of Bangalore's metropolitan restructuring, in an indirect and partial manner through Dubai NRIs' investments in Bangalore property market. The latter has especially contributed to the development of generic globalized landscapes that are recognizable attributes of a 'worlding city' in the words of Roy and Ong (2011), which Bangalore has been striving to become (Goldman 2011).

This article highlights migration-related connections between metropolitan cities that contribute directly to globalization processes but have remained largely overlooked. My results converge with the recent call for paying more attention to migrants' investments and remittances by Wijburg, Aalbers and Bono (2020), in their exploration of variegated sources of financialization of housing through the example of Cuba. Migrants are turned into allies of rescaling dynamics as their choices support privatized production of urban space in the context of failed public planning, and most probably also become alibis for more underground and powerful financial flows. The choice of Bangalore, which is an unfamiliar case in existing scholarship on Gulf-India connections, demonstrates that even in such a metropolitan location with a strong and diverse economic basis, it is important to systematically consider the transnational scale and international migrants as actors of the local political economy in global South metropolitan areas.

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