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Inducing return to Pakistan: ‘voluntary’ return programmes in Germany¹

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Germany welcomed over a million refugees following the so-called ‘long summer of migration’ in 2015. Today, however, seeking asylum in Germany has become ever more difficult. Amongst other ‘undeserving’ economic refugees, the Afghans and Pakistanis are suffering from a shift in the German asylum regime that aims to restrict migration from ‘safe countries.’ As elsewhere in Europe, asylum in Germany is increasingly being defined by narrow ideas of deservingness and humanitarianism to seek out ‘deserving’ political refugees. Simultaneously, two methods for the removal of rejected asylum seekers are being practised to deter ‘undeserving’ refugees: namely, deportations and ‘voluntary’ returns. Focusing on the latter form of removal, I scrutinize the voluntariness and sustainability of ‘voluntary’ returns to Pakistan in this essay. I start by questioning contemporary ideas of deservingness when it comes to the right to be mobile, and provocatively try to blur the alleged humanitarian division between two categories of mobile bodies: the ‘deserving’ political refugee vis-à-vis the ‘underserving’ economic refugee. Then, with the help of ethnographic material from my ongoing research and three measures or scales of assessment (choice, information and assistance), I take a critical look at ‘voluntary’ returns from Germany. In doing so, I discuss the sustainability and ethics of inducing return through such modes of repatriation to Pakistan.

Introduction

Two legalised forms of expulsion are at the disposal of any government that wants to send back displaced populations, irregular migrants or other illegalised ‘undesirables’ (Agier 2011) to ‘safe countries.’ Namely, deportations and ‘voluntary’ returns. The discourse on deportations in Germany is fraught with controversy for various contemporary but also

specific historical reasons — the German word for deportation (*Abschiebung*) comes with particular historical baggage (Estrin 2016, Sökefeld 2019b, Stokes 2019). With this in mind, as well as the fact that there is ample work addressing the issue of deportations in Germany and elsewhere (see De Genova and Peutz 2010, De Genova 2016b, see Peutz 2006,

¹ This paper is an outcome of ongoing anthropological fieldwork for a DFG-Funded research project ‘Return to Pakistan: The Political Economy of the Emotions of Remigration’ at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. I would like to thank Clara Cornaro, Desiree Hetzel and Martin Sökefeld for their valuable input. In addition to Martin’s constructive feedback and review of this paper, I am grateful for his constant support and supervision.

Sökefeld 2019b), this paper will not address this particular form of removal. Instead, the body of text that follows will be focusing on the ‘voluntary’ returns of rejected asylum seekers. Various socio-political reasons, some of them defensible but most of them based on unfounded claims², have led the European Union (EU), and Germany in particular, to take various steps towards ‘migration management’ and border control (Anderson 2019, De Genova 2016a). These steps include an array of arsenal to guard ‘*Fortress Europe*’, from the securitisation of its physical borders to questionable deterrence techniques employed in the countries of origin and transit (Anderson 2014, Meany 2019). Concurrently, based on particular ideas of ‘deservingness’ stricter measures are being taken to control, manage and if necessary remove³ those who have somehow made it into Europe (Sökefeld 2019b, a). In the policy quarters of Europe and beyond, it is being argued that Europe needs protection against exploitation at the hands of ‘bogus’ asylum seekers and economic refugees. A clear difference, it is asserted, needs to be drawn between a *genuine* refugee (henceforth *political* refugee) and a *chancer* migrant (henceforth *economic* refugee) so that the limited capacity to dish out compassion can be effectively employed. Such a vision and form of humanitarianism seems to fuel our collective apathy, even antipathy towards ‘bogus’ asylum seekers, irregular migrants and undocumented citizens today — epitomised in the old German term ‘*Wirtschaftsflüchtling*’ [economic refugee] (Stokes 2019).

² The rhetoric of the alt-right and ultranationalist parties blaming foreigners for the exploitation of state support and for stealing jobs are amongst other unfounded claims.

³ As mentioned above, through deportation or various forms of ‘voluntary’ remigration/return, sometimes also

An ever-narrowing understanding of a victimised ‘deserving’ political refugee and an ever-expanding idea of an exploitative (‘undeserving’) economic refugee are simultaneously defining the difference and vision mentioned above. Somewhat provocatively, however, I would like to blur the distinction between the *political* and the *economic*. Instead of seeing the two through the humanitarian lens, I argue for the treatment of the two categories of people through the lens of social responsibility. It should be quickly pointed out that in no way whatsoever does this argument aim to reduce the suffering of a person — *a refugee* — who flees a war, political and religious persecution or any acute form of violence (Galtung and Fisher 2013). Nevertheless, some profound questions need to be reflected upon. Should ideas of deservingness⁴ be predicated on forms of violence and suffering and be evaluated according to the generalised situation of the country of origin? Where does our collective responsibility start and end? Should we, for example, differentiate between someone who flees from war or acute violence fearing for their life and someone who fears for their life due to economic or structural violence (Farmer 2006, Galtung and Fisher 2013) as far as the right to asylum is concerned? While it is reasonably easy to furnish a *yes* to such a question based upon utilitarian⁵ ideas of pain and suffering, it is perhaps easier to argue for a *no* using the Kantian notion of the categorical imperative (Driver 2014, Rohlf 2018).

In reality, however, such questions rarely make it outside the classrooms of moral

known as assisted voluntary return/repatriation or ‘self-deportation’.

⁴ As dictated by our current regimes of (im)mobility and humanitarian vision and blinded by methodological nationalism.

⁵ Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill would certainly back such a stance (Driver 2014).

philosophy, and political realism seems to be in control when it comes to the topic of migration or refugees. Sökefeld (2019b) for example, shows us how the ‘politics of deportation’ in Germany point out to the thinly veiled attempt at curtailing extreme right-wing support. Parties like *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) have gained considerable electoral ground by positioning themselves in radical opposition to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)’s so-called ‘open door policy’ towards refugees and ‘economic migrants’. Epitomised by the *willkommenskultur* [welcome culture] attitude and *Kein mensch ist illegal* [No human is illegal] movement the German centrist parties feel that their hospitality towards the alien-other may be alienating people at home. The solution seems to lie in the strict differentiation between the economic migrant and the refugee based on ideas of deservingness and humanitarianism. It is worth mentioning that this is a trend that is not unique to the politics of mobility and migration in Germany but resonates with the refugee politics of western Europe since the so-called ‘refugee crisis’. Germany is, however, unique in the sense that it has been in a ‘permanent state of refugee crisis’ as noted by the historian Lauren Stokes (2019). In a recent article Stokes (2019) traces the roots of the current politics of deportations in Germany as far back as the 1950s and 60s. He (ibid) recounts how in 1965 four hundred people were deported from the Zirndorf camp near Nuremberg on account of being ‘economic refugees’. In the preceding years, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) had decided to allow and even encourage people from the socialist East to apply for asylum in order to access the labour market in Germany. However, when people were able to acquire a work permit to move out of refugee camps with relative ease, several experts started to raise questions about the asylum procedure. Stokes

(ibid, 33) quotes the Bavarian Interior Ministry’s ‘foreigner expert’ Werner Kanein who at the time complained that the refugee camp had become ‘a central employment agency for citizens of certain states, and the filing of an application for asylum only a necessary formal requirement’. While the Bavarian Interior Ministry was worried that refugee camps had become ‘labour recruitment agencies’ (ibid) the neighbours of the Zirndorf camp saw its inhabitants not as a pool of labour but as unwanted criminals in their town. Stokes (ibid) notes that the term ‘economic refugee’ appears to have developed around this time. With such competing political interests in and demands from the refugee, the development of a new category was inevitable.

‘Voluntary’ returns: the role of deservingness and deportability

Today, the ideal migrant should be someone who offers excellent human capital to the host nation. Nikesh Shukla (2016) claims that in practice the demand to be a ‘good migrant’ is even more extreme — which only an outstanding athlete, a scientific savant or an artistic prodigy can fulfil. In such times, a refugee not only gets the short end of the stick but seems to be stuck in a paradox. On the one hand, he/she should be able to scarcely function to even claim asylum (see Ticktin 2011). On the other hand, he/she should be ready and eager to integrate and not become a burden on the state’s welfare system. If a person tries to act out of self-interest or employ their human capital, chances are they will be marked as an economic refugee, or someone who ‘deceitfully tries to blur the distinction between the political and the economic out of self-interest’ (Meany 2019). However, if a person is not able to learn the local language or not able to quit social welfare, then they are not trying hard enough to integrate. Apart from drawing a strict

differentiation between the ‘deserving’ refugee⁶ and the ‘undeserving’ economic migrant/refugee⁷ the state simultaneously places one’s efforts to integrate as a caveat (for a detailed discussion on deserving/undeserving see Sökefeld 2019b).

When faced with such a predicament an asylum seeker is bound to think and act out of insecurity. Here, drawing upon Nicholas De Genova’s (2002, 439) idea of ‘deportability’ I argue that the possibility of deportation is not the only source of insecurity and anxiety, so is one’s ubiquitous chance of being considered an ‘undeserving’⁸ refugee. This insecurity as such is not only a legal worry but something that continually affects a refugee’s subjectivity. Whereby an existential fear dictates their actions, choices and decisions in the host country. As such, deportability in the broadest sense of the word is used here to ask the following question: Why is the German state resorting to a strict division between the political and the economic, bringing an ever-increasing number of people into the fold of deportability?

In his essay *Nations Rebound*, Sökefeld (2019b) points out that the very process of limiting the movement of particular foreign bodies and not others is a way to re-territorialise and rebind nations, ironically, to counter the re-emergence of right-wing nationalism. Seemingly, challenges by right-wing nationalists can be nipped in the bud by this logical differentiation between the political and the economic refugee⁹. However, Sökefeld

(ibid, 94) asserts that ‘a neat analytical distinction between ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’ is as impossible as is the distinction between deportation and [voluntary] remigration’. If deportation and ‘voluntary’ return cannot be neatly separated into two distinct categories, it would make sense to question the voluntariness of ‘voluntary’ returns. While political and social activists regularly challenge deportations on various grounds¹⁰, ‘voluntary’ returns seem to be accepted on face value and go mostly unchallenged. In that vein, this essay tries to problematise the issue of ‘voluntary’ returns in Germany. Moreover, it challenges some of the uncritically accepted tenants of such a return to one’s country of origin.

‘Voluntary returns: a better alternative to deportations?’

Apart from being considered more ethical to deportations and politically less divisive, there is an important economic aspect for the propagation of ‘voluntary’ return programs (Schuler and Zacharakis 2016). Deportation infrastructure and processes have cost Germany millions over the last few years (Bundestagdrucksache 2019, Macgregor 2019, Schuler and Zacharakis 2016, Vettori 2019). A single deportation can result in costing tens of thousands of euros in transportation alone. On the 31st of July 2018, for example, a chartered flight carrying only eight Pakistani deportees and fifty members of the security personnel cost Germany €462,685 (Bundestagdrucksache 2019, 48). At the cost of around €60,000 per

⁶ Someone who is worthy of humanitarian aid and refuge.

⁷ Someone who is seen as exploiting and undermining those very humanitarian values.

⁸ For Pakistanis in Germany being considered a deserving refugee is largely based on hope; hopes of a better future that rests on the shoulders of the ‘humanitarian’ German state. Most of my interlocutor’s talked about the ‘*insaniyat*’ [humanity, human kindness] in Germany. They presented me with anecdotal examples, comparing Germany to Pakistan where ‘*koi*

insaniyat nahi’ [there is no humanity] (see the section ‘Three Returnees’ in this paper).

⁹ Sökefeld (2019b) uses the term migrant while I use the term economic refugee.

¹⁰ It is worth mentioning here that more and more deportations are only challenged based on ideas of ‘deservingness’ and integration efforts of the refugee rather than a principled stance one’s right to refuge or better yet to be mobile (Gerver 2018, Peutz 2006, Sökefeld 2019b).

deportee this particular flight was relatively expensive, although even the cheapest chartered flight to Pakistan cost the German state around €10,000 per deportee in 2018 (ibid., 2019, 48-50). In addition to the transportation costs, one must consider the fee of hiring security personnel, the bureaucratic expenses, the policing, the apprehension and detention before deportation, not to mention the cost of all the unsuccessful arrests. Deportees are flown back on chartered flights due to practical and political reasons¹¹. Since pilots and crew on such chartered flights refuse to fly without security, each deportee¹² is accompanied by a minimum of three members of the security personnel, adding considerable transportation costs. In comparison, a ‘voluntary’ return compensation¹³ — or reintegration support/payment as it is called — ranges from a few hundred euros to a couple of thousand, and an economy class airfare on a commercial airline.

There is no doubt that ‘voluntary’ returns are cheaper and politically less divisive as compared to deportations, however, whether they are voluntary is a lot less clear (Mahar 2020a). We know that the ethics of deportation are routinely (and rightly) questioned based on ideas of human agency and freedom to move. Sökefeld (2019a) for example, brings into question ideas of choice, will and agency when he questions whether a ‘deportation is a form of forced migration?’ Should we not hold all forms of return migration — forced or voluntary — accountable to the same standards? On its surface, the term *voluntary* takes care of such doubts in the case of ‘voluntary’ returns. However, reflecting on the assumed voluntariness is not only essential to a

critical understanding of ‘voluntary’ returns but also necessary for this form of repatriation to sustainably function.

The research material and methods

Before proceeding further to what a ‘voluntary’ return entails — as far as the subjects of these returns are concerned — it would make sense to address some methodological concerns. In the absence of an anthropological ‘field site’ in the traditional sense of the word, multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork was carried out around Munich, Germany and various parts of Punjab, Pakistan. Returnees at different (pre- and post-repatriation) stages of the repatriation process were sought after as interlocutors. Other important research partners included individuals and organisations that manage and administer ‘voluntary’ return programs such as, but not only, return counsellors in Germany and reintegration partners in Pakistan.

A mixed-method ethnographic approach was adopted. In addition to a detailed recording of behaviours, witnessing of events and sharing of experiences through participant observation, the ongoing research has already recorded several hours of qualitative interviews with returnees and return counsellors over a six-month period. The gathered research material is further augmented by several semi-structured interviews and focus groups. This included but was not limited to: (1) Listening to the experiences, hopes and aspirations of Pakistani asylum seekers in different settings (in refugee camps as well as return counselling centres); (2) listening to return counsellors and discussing ‘voluntary’ return with them at public forums; (3) spending several days with

¹¹ Apart from the visibility of resistance on the part of the deportee (which had led many passengers to boycott certain airlines), a furtive flight avoids staged protests and activist interruptions.

¹² The deportee is already in handcuffs that are sometimes chained to his/her ankles.

¹³ Below I have given some concrete figures.

returnees and their families at their homes in Pakistan talking about their return and reintegration. Through the use of this material and of three case studies, this essay tries to unpack ‘voluntary’ return as a mode of migration management (Anderson 2014, De Genova 2016a).

Three returnees

Ali R.

After spending four years in Germany, Ali R. recently returned to Pakistan at the age of 55, assisted by a voluntary return counselling centre in Munich. Ali received a letter of deportation once his application for asylum and the subsequent appeal was rejected. However, around the same time, Ali had a bicycle accident and had to go through surgery. Owing to his medical condition Ali was allowed to stay in Germany for another year. Once he had healed and saw no prospect of getting legalised, he approached *Coming Home*, a return counselling centre in Munich. At *Coming Home*, he was promised around €1500 in addition to in-kind assistance of €2000¹⁴ and a flight ticket to Pakistan. Ali accepted and returned to Pakistan within a month.

He is more or less content with how things developed for him. In his hometown of Mandi Bahauddin, Ali shared with me in great detail why he would never be able to forget the German ‘*mehman nawazi*’ [hospitality] and ‘*insaniyat*’ [humanity]. Expanding on this, he explained how he was given a place to stay and a stipend by the Germans. Talking about his accident, he said that even though his asylum was rejected, they made sure he was healthy and fit to return — ‘*wadia log ne*’ [they [Germans] are amazing people] he added. Whereas in Pakistan he had worked for decades, but he could not even ensure a decent living for his family. He explained how he was

able to build a modest house, get his daughter married and is now busy setting up a small corner shop — all with his European savings plus the return assistance.

Jamshed B.

Jamshed B. was ‘advised’ by his district administrative office (*Landsratamt*) handler to visit the same return counselling centre in Munich. Sharing in detail how little agency he had in this process, Jamshed explained how it was more an ultimatum than an advice. As such, the ‘instruction’ to visit the return counselling centre was the only option available to him upon the rejection of his asylum application and his multiple appeals. If he did not want to be deported or take the risk of becoming an absconder by leaving for another country, he should have returned through a ‘voluntary’ return program- he was ‘advised’. Jamshed was told if he tried to leave for Spain (his second choice after Germany) he would be apprehended and returned to Germany where he would face prison as punishment and then deportation. According to Jamshed, only a ‘*sach bolne wala*’ [someone who speaks the truth] and ‘*kanoon ki pasdari kerne wala*’ [someone who abides by the law] would return through a ‘voluntary’ return program. While the rest, according to him, find various ways to cheat the system.

He repeatedly emphasised that he would have never returned was he presented with a real choice. However, with deportation looming over his head, he had no other option. He confided to me that he will be leaving for Dubai soon because it was not safe for him to stay in his village as an ex-leader of a Shia youth-group. He said he would have moved to another part of Pakistan, a bigger city perhaps, only if he had the resources to move his family. He, along with his wife and children currently

¹⁴ And another €1000 after eight months of his return.

live at his in-laws, something which is considered to be a source of shame in Pakistani society. Jamshed's failed migration to Germany and the current effort to move to Dubai is a way to find a solution to get rid of this shame and as well as the sectarian troubles. Jamshed, unlike Ali, regrets coming back.

Jamshed was very clear that he did not trust the Afghan translator yet he had no choice but to go through the process. Moreover, neither did he see the return counsellors as people who cared about his '*razamandi*' [consent]¹⁵ and '*marzi*' [[one's own] accord]. Speaking about 'voluntary' return subjects in general Jamshed said: 'Wouldn't they have tried to help us stay in Germany if they cared about our consent [...] they only wanted us to leave and we had little choice in that [...] if there would have been consent, I would not have returned...'

Hassam. A.

One of my other interlocutors withdrew his asylum appeal before it was processed, in order to return through the same program. Hassam A., like Jamshed, regrets returning to Pakistan and holds social and psychological pressures responsible. These were exacerbated by his father's death — forcing him to take the somewhat risky decision to return to his village in Azad Kashmir¹⁶. He came back with no savings and has yet to receive the money that was promised to him a year ago.

According to one of his friends — a German volunteer who had taken upon himself to help the twenty or so Pakistani asylum seekers in his village of Bad Tölz — Hassam had integrated quite well during his time in Germany. However, it seems that Hassam could not cope with the pressure and precariousness of waiting and the possibility of rejection. In other words, he was not sure if he

would be included into the category of the 'deserving' (a question that his ill father had often asked). When his father passed away, he broke the chain of insecurity (and deportability) by forfeiting his asylum appeal and 'voluntarily' returning.

'Voluntary' returns: assessing voluntariness and sustainability

By taking into consideration return counsellors, facilitators and subjects or so-called 'clients', this section will focus on the methods and practices of 'voluntary' return programs to determine its sustainability as a mode of repatriation. Taking a critical look at some of these practices, voluntariness and sustainability of such returns is put into question. This section starts by introducing three complex and important situations that return facilitators, counsellors and especially returnees face, by placing them on three different scales that I have developed. I have termed these scales as follows (1) The Choice Scale; (2) The Information Scale; and (3) The Assistance Scale.

First and foremost, it is argued that the three scales offer us means to respectively evaluate the role of coercion, information and assistance in 'voluntary' return. At a secondary level, I argue that these situations and their respective scales can help third party observers and host countries determine the voluntariness of 'voluntary' return subjects and hence the sustainability of 'voluntary' return programmes. Furthermore, these scales can help address legitimate ethical concerns around such forms of repatriation. Throughout the course of the text, I draw upon examples and material from my ethnographic fieldwork and in particular to the three cases or stories of 'voluntary' return mentioned above to address

¹⁵ 'Wilful agreement'— from '*razi*' [to agree].

¹⁶ A region which is roughly thirty kilometres from the Line of Control between India and Pakistan.

each of these scales in detail. The concerns brought to the table will not only help in a better understanding of ‘voluntary’ return as a form of repatriation but also show how it affects various stakeholders — from the client (the subject of return) to the counsellor.

Scales of voluntariness

1. *The Choice Scale*

While return counsellors and facilitators¹⁷ are supposed to only advise and assist, they become at times (willingly or unwillingly) part of a system — or, a mobility regime— which wants particular asylum seekers and refugees to re-emigrate to their country of origin. This call to remigration is often based on a very limited understanding¹⁸ of human suffering, deservingness and one’s right to be mobile. When harsh conditions and policies (Christides et al. 2020, Sökefeld 2019a) make the lives of asylum seekers difficult in the host country and lead people to return to their country of origin through ‘voluntary’ return, how can we distinguish choice from coercion? If the decision to return is made out of free will/choice, there should be no coercion on the part of the returning state. If living in a state of insecurity and deportability (De Genova 2002) is a structural part of the refugee condition and a source of humiliation, social isolation and other forms of unfreedom, then it can be argued that the decision to return cannot be based on choice but rather coercion (Mahar 2020a). By removing such pressures as much as possible, policymakers in host nations like Germany are able to ensure that what counsellors are providing is only objective advice, and the returnee’s decision to return is informed mainly by free will and choice.

Another pressure that leads to coercion is the pressure of performance on counsellors and ‘voluntary’ return program coordinators — whose performance is mainly measured by the number of people they can swiftly remove from the host country. Shedding light on this issue, a return-counsellor in Germany shared how one of her colleagues felt guilty, was severely unhappy and left as soon as she was able to get another job. This counsellor was about to leave the return counselling centre herself and was glad that she would leave the [emotional] stress behind. Here, I want to argue that ‘voluntary’ return can only be a sustainable mode of repatriation — in the eyes of facilitators as well as returnees — when coercion is largely if not completely taken out of the equation¹⁹. If it is used as a last resort on the part of the returnee to escape imminent deportation, it is very likely to put the voluntariness of ‘voluntary’ returns in question. The Choice Scale can help us understand how choice or coercion is experienced or deployed by the various stakeholders of such a form of remigration or return.

2. *The Information Scale*

The Information Scale can help us understand the varying levels of *information* and *misinformation* that informs a returnee decision to return. For example, asylum seekers might return due to misinformation when they come to believe that their asylum-application stands little to no chance — which in the case of Pakistanis might be statistically correct. However, that is at best an assumption based on a simplified understanding of deservingness and it needs to be carefully assessed on an individual basis rather than probability. In most

¹⁷ In Germany, Pakistan or elsewhere.

¹⁸ See discussions above on deserving/undeserving, acute/structural violence, political/economic refugee and good/bad migrant.

¹⁹ Amongst other things, deportability or fear of deportation should not inform an asylum seekers decision to return.

instances the pressure on counsellors is so much that they refuse to listen to the stories of their clients. During my observations, the counsellors would stop the clients if they tried to discuss their asylum case. Their stories and asylum applications were irrelevant, they were told far too often. Essential information, like the asylum seeker's religious affiliation (especially important if the client, or the subject of return, belongs to a persecuted minority), was ignored. For instance, during one of my observations, the counsellor was unaware that the client was a Christian, even though it was quite evident from his Pakistani Christian name.

The point here is not whether the returnee will be in any real danger once he/she is back in the country of origin. In most cases, the question of safe return²⁰ has already been decided upon by the time the asylum seeker comes to the return counselling centre. A significant number of prospective returnees only visit a return counselling centre once all other doors have closed — they are likely to be placed on a deportation list if not already on one (see 'The Choice Scale' above). What I hope to inquire here is much more straightforward than the principle of nonrefoulement: how likely is it that the client (potential returnee) is being misinformed by counsellors? With confidence, I can assert that such is indeed the case.

Logic dictates that the information required to make a choice should come before the action of decision making. Yet, clients in the Munich based return counselling centre are provided with most of the necessary information only *after* they have agreed to return. The counselling session only begins once the client has provided the counselling centre with their identity documents. Many

clients try to delay that process to get a concrete understanding of what they might be getting themselves into. However, during such counselling sessions, counsellors carefully manoeuvre themselves not to provide any information that could lead the client to say no to the expected 'voluntary' return. While counsellors see their engagement as 'open and unbiased', Cleton and Schweitzer's (2020) analysis of 'voluntary' return counsellors' strategies resonated with my own. According to them, counsellors use one of three strategies to induce return upon the rejection of asylum: 'Firstly, by identifying existing aspirations [to return] among potential returnees [...]. Secondly, by merely obtaining informed consent to return 'voluntarily' [...]. Thirdly, by actively inducing the wish to return [...]' (ibid 2020).

All the strategies outlined by Cleton and Schweitzer (2020) were observed during my fieldwork at the counselling centres in Munich and Augsburg, with the second strategy being the most practiced. For example, Pakistani returnees have to sign a waiver that they will be fully responsible for whatever happens to them upon return — especially with regards to legal repercussions they may face as a consequence of leaving Pakistan through 'illegal' means. This information is only given to the client once they have signed the 'voluntary' return consent, rather than during the course of the counselling session²¹. At this point, it is quite difficult for the prospective returnees to reassess their decision to return for various reasons. Firstly, due to the absence of a 'firewall' between the different authorities involved, all the information and documentation provided during the return counselling session makes it harder for the

²⁰ Legally speaking, and with regards to Pakistani asylum seekers, refoulement is generally not an issue.

²¹ See 'The Choice Scale' for the types of pressures on counsellors, leading them to use such techniques that I would define misinforming.

client to re-evaluate the situation, legally speaking. At this point, deportability starts to play an even more significant role in how the subjects of return see themselves. ‘Illegality’ and deportation not only seem more probable than before, but the clients also happen to be constantly reminded about this during the counselling session, if they share their reservations about returning. Secondly, by this time, the clients have likely already informed the family that they are returning home²², which is likely to desensitise the effects of information that discourages return. Thirdly, most Pakistani returnees are not only illiterate but have little to no understanding of the kind of legal consequences they may face upon return. To make sure that the clients sign the waiver, they are told that it is a mere ‘formality’ and no-one has ever landed into any trouble. A caveat is sometimes added in the form of a light-hearted joke about the possibility of a corrupt official demanding a bribe. No effort is made to inform the clients about the legal consequences, as that may add to their reservations.

Another form of misinformation is the miscommunication that mostly occurs due to language barriers but also to other kinds of cultural misunderstandings and mistranslations. During my observations, translators rarely spoke the native language²³ of the client and only spoke very basic Urdu. On one occasion, apart from mistranslating, the translator started to diagnose a client who wished to have a medical check-up before departure. ‘You are fine, it’s just stomach gas,’ the translator said to the client who had hoped to get his abdominal pain checked before his prospective return. Although the client was not convinced by the translator’s prognosis, the

translator proceeded to communicate his own intuition to the counsellor instead of the client’s concerns.

3. *The Assistance Scale*

The Assistance Scale helps disentangle necessary financial assistance from questionable financial inducement that may affect the voluntariness of return. As already explained above, returnees receive a ‘reintegration payment’ for returning. In the case of my interlocutors, the EU and Germany, for the most part, such forms of repatriation are funded through various programs. The amount can vary depending on the client’s legal and application status, whether it is pending or processed, accepted or rejected and, it is given in various forms: pre-departure cash in Germany, post-departure cash in Pakistan, as well as in-kind assistance²⁴. Governmental and non-governmental partner organisations are tasked with carrying out this assistance in Germany and Pakistan.

Firstly, I claim that such payments need to be carefully made so that they do not set a bad precedent for the moral imperative attached to giving refuge. The philosopher Micheal Sandel (2012) argues against such an economic approach in his book *The Moral Limits of Markets*. Citing a plethora of examples, he states that money is not the right tool to tackle certain issues. Especially if the issue at hand has a moral or social aspect, monetary payment should be used with utmost caution as it has the propensity to crowd out ethical and social responsibilities. In that vein, I argue that something such as giving refuge or in this case, ensuring reintegration, should be a social responsibility rather than a financial obligation. Mollie Gerver (2018) makes a slightly different

²² Which may also eliminate the collective familial hope of getting legalised in Germany.

²³ Punjabi in most cases.

²⁴ For example, purchase of assets or stock for a business, i.e. not in cash.

but equally valid point in her book on the ethics of refugee repatriation and argues that such payments may reinforce the idea that refugees are unwanted members of society — an idea that is already propagated for various political reasons.

Secondly, monetary incentives may be counterproductive to reintegration. As such, figuring out the right balance between financial assistance and inducement is essential. In other words, fiscal incentives to the point of inducement are not only questionable when it comes to determining voluntariness, but can be detrimental to well-intentioned reintegration support. Like Jamshed, some of my other returnee–interlocutors, are already preparing to leave Pakistan again after their ‘voluntary’ return. In line with Cleton and Schwitzer’s observations (2020), my returnee interlocutors did not want to return but were coerced, misinformed and or induced into taking that decision. Hence, most of them want to leave again and they will probably do so through the very high-risk irregular means that the reintegration support is supposed to discourage!

Conclusions

Deportations and repatriations (whether involuntary or ‘voluntary’) have a chequered history in Germany. At times, the removal, even extinction of the ‘undeserving’, has been legitimised based on nationhood or religion. At other times it was based on a differentiation between the *economic* and the *political* refugee²⁵. The politics of removal in Germany point to a constant negotiation between competing political, economic and social forces. In this process, it seems that the refugee

or the migrant *Other* lacks any real agency or choice.

The recent German law which makes it easier for companies to hire skilled labour from outside Europe is a reflection of this negotiation. While the law aims to boost Germany’s economy through an injection of foreign labour, it simultaneously incorporates obstacles to prevent economic refugees from using the German asylum system as a backdoor. One would assume that the reason would be to deter economic refugees as they might take the place of more ‘deserving’ political refugees, but it is more likely that such measures are intended to counter challenges posed by right-wing parties like the AfD. This is not the first time that economic refugees and migrants are portrayed as chancers and scroungers threatening German prosperity and resources (see Stokes 2019). Amongst others, people affected by such discourses are Afghans and Pakistanis²⁶.

In the text above, I tried to show how a newcomer’s time in Germany is marked by differences and lack of agency in the process of integration. Rather than being seen as a newcomer, the person is seen as an asylum seeker, an economic or political refugee, a migrant worker, an undocumented/irregular migrant or through another category that defines his/her legal status and rights. The legal status, in turn, structures their respective deportability and insecurities — affecting their choices and agency with regards to their potential and actual return (or removal)²⁷. This leaves ample room for a social-responsibility-based debate about mobility and migration. For the purpose of this paper, I tried to problematise the process of removal and in particular the so-called ‘voluntary’ returns. I

²⁵ Often founded upon ideas of deservingness.

²⁶ Most of whom have a job and contribute to the German economy.

²⁷ In addition to the example of Hassam A. above, see the instance of Asif N. provided by Sökefeld (2019b).

took three rather simple concerns and placed each of these concerns on a scale with two opposing factors. The difference in the two factors of each scale, I argue, can help in assessing the voluntariness of return. Moreover, the scales make visible certain practices of ‘voluntary’ return that are integral to understanding a form of repatriation that is being advocated as a sustainable and ethical alternative to unethical deportations. Using examples from my fieldwork and the perspectives of my interlocutors, I first addressed what I called the *Choice Scale* by characterising the difference between choice and coercion in the decision to return. The second scale, namely the *Information Scale*, grappled with the issue of information versus misinformation. The third scale looked at the subtle but vital difference between financial assistance and inducement and it is hence called the *Assistance Scale*. As the names suggest, each of these scales points to a problematic situation that needs to be addressed if returning countries like Germany²⁸ are really interested in voluntary remigration of rejected asylum seekers (for a discussion and examples see Christides et al. 2020, Mahar 2020b, a). A critical assessment of ‘voluntary’ returns keeping in mind the levels of coercion, information and assistance will not only help make such forms of repatriation and remigration more voluntary and sustainable²⁹ but should be the only way to proceed with them if at all.

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²⁸ Perhaps, Pakistan too when it comes to the repatriation of Afghan refugees.

²⁹ ‘Sustainable’ alludes to a dependable/long term solution for the repatriation of rejected asylum seekers.

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