

Sathnam is the author of, most recently, *Empireland*. His other books include *The Boy With The Topknot*, described by JK Rowling as one of her favourite memoirs. I am lucky to be able to boast that I worked alongside Sathnam, when we both wrote features for *The Financial Times*. He subsequently moved to *The Times*, where he has written all kinds of things, often both funny and serious.

# Sathnam Sanghera



## The pandemic denied us the chance to work abroad, and that is a problem

“Some of my time as a junior news reporter was spent working abroad and I struggled. I didn't enjoy contracting a parasite while on assignment and getting violently sick. It wasn't exactly fun breaking up with a girlfriend over the phone and missing the final months of my best friend's life. I hated the evenings when the time difference between the US and UK meant intense homesickness couldn't be salved with a phone call or two.

Another foreign posting was presented as a possibility afterwards and I've never declined an opportunity so quickly. And I've maintained an aversion to all things expat since. I still occasionally get angry correspondence about a piece I wrote a few years ago about Filth, the old acronym/insult for expats (Failed in London, Try Hong Kong). And I seem to have complained in print a few months ago about how too many people on Instagram seem to confuse travel with having a personality.

But the thing is, I'm not sure any more. I might even be coming to the view that everyone should take a foreign posting at some point of their career. And the pandemic is part of the reason why. Not being able to travel for work has made me realise that I might actually need it: going away makes you appreciate home more. Or, as Terry Pratchett once put it in *A Hat Full of Sky*: "Why do you go away? So that you can come back. So that you can see the place you came from with new eyes and extra colours."

The benefits of foreign work postings were also brought home this week when the *Harvard Business Review* tweeted a link to research which has found that international experiences can enhance creativity, "reduce intergroup bias", promote career success and "transform a person's sense of self".

"When people live in their home country, they are often surrounded by others who mostly behave in similar ways," the report concluded. "So they are not compelled to question whether their own behaviours reflect their core values or the values of the culture in which they are embedded. In contrast, when living abroad, our data found that people's exposure to novel cultural values and norms prompts them to repeatedly engage with their



own values and beliefs, which are then either discarded or strengthened."

Needless to say, the five academics (five!) behind the research use too many words to describe something that has been put more eloquently and simply elsewhere, by people like Pratchett. And, needless to say, they only touch upon the issues. It needs to be added that even if a foreign posting is unhappy, it doesn't mean it was not worthwhile: you'll still learn a lot about yourself and what you want from your career. Second, the pandemic is denying lots of people, especially the young, the important experience of working abroad. And third, British people probably feel the absence of foreign assignments most keenly.

After all, as I explain in my book *Empireland*, running the biggest empire in human history has given us

Brits a predilection for relocation. In the early 17th century, the British Isles had a population of fewer than seven million, but 350 years later there were 140 million of their descendants living overseas. The compilers of the census of 1861 remarked that "the people of these islands are more movable than other nations and large numbers of them are always abroad". Until 1984, 20th century Britain was actually a net exporter of people. And this enthusiasm for relocating around the globe remains a fact of life: a recent report found that the UK has the largest number of expatriates within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Not that all expats make the most of the experience, and not that all expat assignments are worthwhile. There's plenty of evidence that when Brits do

relocate abroad, they do so solipsistically. We are famous, for example, for not partaking of foreign food when abroad (almost half of Britons do not try the local cuisine when on holiday, according to one survey); we are notorious for not speaking foreign languages (only 38 per cent of Britons speak at least one foreign language, compared with the European Union average of 56 per cent); and we are known for not integrating when we get there.

According to a 2014 study that questioned 1,000 UK expats about their life overseas, "a quarter of Britons living overseas socialise mainly with fellow expats and have no friends from their adopted country," with those living in Africa and the United Arab Emirates being the least integrated. This contrasts not only with the attitude of foreigners who relocate to Britain for work — according to the HSBC Expat Explorer survey, the UK is the top location for expats to socialise with locals over fellow expats — but it also contrasts with what we expect of immigrants to this country, who are endlessly instructed to integrate.

I guess this is the kind of experience I should have been specific about when complaining about expats in the past. We all know people who go abroad and don't have their minds expanded as a result. As it happens, it's something the authors of the aforementioned report touch upon through subsequent research they conducted on hundreds of MBA students, to discover whether "the depth of international experiences (the total length of time lived abroad) or the breadth of these experiences (the number of countries lived in) boosted self-concept clarity".

Unsurprisingly, they conclude that it's a depth of an expat experience that helps people to see themselves more clearly, rather than the amount of it, though Simon Armitage put it more beautifully and clearly in a poem than these academics or I have done. It's worth looking up if you have a minute today, though the title provides both a summary and a maxim to live by: *It Ain't What You Do, It's What it Does To You*.

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