Imagined mobility: migration and transnationalism among Indian students in Australia
Baas, M.

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Departure: Migration, Transnationalism &
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01. Departure:

Migration, Transnationalism and What Lies In-Between

The Desire to be Transnationally Mobile

In this dissertation I will argue that imagination is crucial in understanding people’s desire to be transnationally mobile. This goes not only for understanding why people decide to migrate but also how they experience the process of leaving one’s country of origin behind and making their way into a new one. In order to investigate this I will focus on the case of Indian overseas students who come to Australia not just to study but also to migrate there. Statistics show (Birrell 2005) that as much as three quarters of the Indians who come to Australia to study, end up successfully applying for permanent residency (PR) afterwards. As my research further shows, for many this was also the plan from the start. Their reason for coming to Australia is often equally about migrating as well as getting a foreign degree. In some cases, studying in Australia is seen simply as a way to get a residency outside India.

Central to my examination of their case is the question: how do Indians experience the process of migrating abroad, aiming for an Australian permanent residency (PR), while being overseas students at the same time? In order to come to an answer to this question, this dissertation will explore three interrelated concepts: imagined mobility, arrival points, and in-betweenness. Imagined mobility, also the title of this dissertation, is about the way young, highly educated migrants imagine themselves being transnationally mobile one day. An Indian passport is often experienced as a limiting factor in this, as crossing borders often involves going through lengthy visa procedures. An Australian PR could be the answer to this problem. In order to better understand where these migrants see themselves ending up by becoming transnationally mobile, the concept of arrival points will be introduced. Arrival points are imaginary moments in the future when migrants imagine themselves as having arrived at where they intended to be by going through a particular migration process. This is when they imagine themselves as having achieved what they set out to. Like a fata morgana it seems clear when this moment will be, but in practice it often turns out that this kind of arrival never quite happens. Thus, arrival points work in the

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2 PR will always mean Permanent Residency in this situation, and thus never public relations or something else.
same way that horizons keep receding. The concept will act as a tool through which we can better understand how migrants experience the migration process they are undergoing as well as how they cope with success and failure along the way.

Migrating, as well as attempting to become transnationally mobile, entails a process. A process ‘to become’ means they are not there yet. This introduces the final concept - in-betweenness. These students are not there yet. They have not arrived yet. They are not transnationally mobile yet. And they have also not reached their imaginary arrival points yet. They have departed though; they have left India with the idea of becoming permanent residents elsewhere. They are in-between leaving and arriving. Above all, the concept of in-betweenness is about being underway, undertaking a process, and thus also a transformation. The notion of in-betweenness is also crucial to understanding how these student-migrants fall in-between many more categories than is symbolized by the hyphen that both separates and connects them as students and migrants. It specifically relates to all other instances of in-betweenness that make up the process of becoming transnationally mobile. It problematizes ideas of leaving and arriving. It questions what it means to be from the East yet to be heading for the West. It makes a point about class structures by showing how coming from the Indian middle class gets slowly reworked into belonging to the migrant/labor/lower class. Assumptions about belonging to particular categories are further challenged by observations on how these Indians are on their way to becoming permanently settled overseas yet at the same time not yet being accepted by the established Indian community in Melbourne. Experiences of failure and success also become more flexible if approached in terms of what happens in-between. By the same token, the idea of in-betweenness criticizes fixed ways of interpreting what is legal and illegal. And then finally it relocates the whole case in a much wider framework where players such as the education and migration industries also appear to struggle with particular instances of in-betweenness.

The Rationality of Migration
The moment Indian students enter Australia they embark on a journey of, on average, two years. This journey is often supposed to result in what could (also) be understood as a permanent stay out of India. From the start this dissertation will problematize the idea of permanency; is the P (of permanent) in PR (permanent residency) a necessary element in the equation? How do Indian students see this themselves? In order to understand their motivations for embarking on this journey it is highly relevant to also understand why they continue on the journey once it has begun. What exactly does a PR mean to them? How do they deal with setbacks along the way? In order

3 I would like to thank Professor Willem van Schendel here for reminding me of the way the concept relates to the idea of receding horizons.
to better understand the way the process of migrating abroad by first becoming overseas students in Australia is experienced (and takes shape over time) I will make use of theoretical engagements that all relate to people on the move. Key terms will be: migration, mobility and transnationalism. It is not for alphabetical reasons that I place mobility in the middle of these three; rather I wish to locate the idea of mobility, of mobile people, in between the two theoretical realms of migration and transnationalism. Where migration often assumes the situation of migrants crossing borders to build new lives in another country, the study of transnationalism typically engages itself with the question of what happens next. Yet how this process takes shape remains under investigated and undertheorized.

Studies of migration frequently deal with the question of ‘why migrate’ and often try to answer this question by engaging (neo-classical) ‘push-pull’ models. Although most migration scholars will agree that the model assumes too much functionality and rationality in migrants’ decisions, it is nevertheless still a popular way of understanding migration; the popularity of the terms ‘economic’ and ‘political’ migrants certainly testifies to this. A push-pull model typically underscores that there might be reasons beyond the economic and political realm for migrating. Even more important is that the model creates the idea of permanency; people leave to stay (somewhere else). The idea of returning home one day is certainly not part of the analysis. Skeptics may remark that issues related to return are an often ‘returning’ feature in migration studies – certainly in the form of a myth where migrants indicate that they will return home one day yet in fact never do (Bolognani 2007; Walton-Roberts 2004) – however, it must be stressed that ultimately the study of migration revolves around the concept of permanency elsewhere. Migrants are not truly expected to return to where they came from, and often this is then framed in terms of it being problematic, hindering integration or assimilation.

The way migrants settle in the country of destination has been the topic of research for years. As Brettell & Hollifield argue, within anthropology one of the dominant paradigms in migration theory is the assimilation model. (2000: 15). The connection with popular discourse on migration, which also increasingly zooms in on questions of assimilation and integration, is easily made in this regard. Political and public debates on this issue often create the idea that once migrants have crossed the border they are basically there to stay. Such understandings of migrants have their roots in neo-classical explanations of migration that are largely about bettering oneself in material respects. (See Arango 2000: 284; Fog & Sorensen 2002; Zoomers

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4 Of course this does not mean that I will not analyse studies that have been produced on studying overseas, overseas students, and the internationalisation and/or commercialisation of education as well. See in particular chapter four.
Rational choice is key here; concepts such as utility maximization and wage differentials are central. It could basically be argued that the reason for migrating can be found in wage rate disparities between countries. “Migration is the result of individual decisions made by rational actors who seek to improve their well-being by moving to places where the reward of their labour will be higher than the one they get at home…” (Arango 2000: 285). Stephen Castles, for instance, argues that the most obvious cause for migration is wage level disparity, employment opportunities and differences in “social well-being” (2000: 272). Yet he also acknowledges that causes of migration are more complex than that.

The neo-classical model was challenged for two main reasons: (1) the inability to answer the question of why so few people migrate and (2) the failure to explain differential migration - why some countries experience much higher rates of out-migration than others (Ibid: 286). Current ideas about migration are much more subtle and have become, at the same time, far more complex, as theories such as ‘dual labor market theory’, ‘world systems theory’, ‘migration networks’, ‘systems approach’, and the theoretical stand of ‘cumulative causation’ suggest (see Arango 2000). The most important observation that can be made here is regarding the obsession of migration theory with explaining migration itself; why people migrate remains one of its most important questions.

The question of why Indians migrate to Australia, and in particular why they do this by first becoming overseas students, certainly features in the background of this dissertation but I find it much more relevant to ask the questions: how do they experience this and what is it ultimately supposed to lead to. Already more than ten years ago Arjun Appadurai argued that more people than ever before are able to imagine that they or their children will live and work in places other than they were born in (1996: 6). He would later also note that: “[m]ore persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did.” (1997: 53). I like to think of his remark as one that urges our attention towards the idea that more and more people are able to imagine, and thus also consider, a (possible) life abroad. Just before the new millennium Appadurai would suggest, in line with his earlier argument, that considering the global workings of the media, imagination is now a critical part of collective, social, everyday life. It had become “the faculty which allows people to consider migration,” (1999: 231). This dissertation builds on these arguments and investigates what this means in terms of the practical realities of making one’s way across the border and subsequently building a new life elsewhere. A specific reason for this is that where one would have expected Appadurai’s arguments to having made the biggest impact, it seems that studies of migration and transnationalism

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– both dealing with people living or attempting to live somewhere other than the
place they were born in – seldom take into account what the role of ‘imagination’ is
in the process of going, and living life, abroad. When we give Appadurai’s claim about
people’s imagination of the abroad further thought it is hard not to wonder what kind
of ideas people with the intention of building a life abroad already have, and where
these ideas then come from. The field of transnationalism, which is typically about life
after migration, would be an excellent place to locate these questions, yet the field
has, so far, barely engaged with these ideas.

The Meaning of Transnationalism
The study of transnationalism was born out of observations that migrants are no
longer simply crossing borders to live elsewhere, but regularly turning crossing
borders into a lifestyle. In theory, being a transnational involves having developed long
lasting ties between locations in both country of origin and destination, sometimes
even incorporating a third location in some other country, then traveling regularly
up and down between these locations, and thus living a life characterized by being
‘neither here nor there’. One could argue that such a life is by definition uprooted
and unconnected. Yet maybe it could also be argued that it is exactly the other way
around: such lives are rooted in and connected with all these different locations in
which this transnational life is said to take place. Studies on transnationalism are
about describing these lifestyles and show in detail how it has become a daily reality
for many migrants and diaspora members all over the world.

Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc-Szanton (1994) defined transnationalism as a
process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that
link together their societies of origin and settlement; a definition which would set
the tone for almost all future research in this particular field. Basch et al emphasized
that many migrants today build social fields that cross geographical, cultural, and
political borders. Important here is to note that these migrants have involvements in
both home and host country (see also Portes, 1997). As Peter Kivisto (2001) explains, it
was their aim to introduce a new approach to understanding current day migration.
Others, working on similar topics, followed quickly. Basch et al appear to recognize a
certain behavior or state of being, which they had observed and which they were now
able to label in (much) clearer terms. This became explicit in studies conducted by Luis
Guarnizo, Peggy Leavitt, Alejandro Portes, Steve Vertovec, and others who worked
with them. This ‘need to identify’ clearly came from experiences in the field that had led to questions about what sort of ‘new’ migrant behavior was being observed.

What is remarkable, especially about the early phases of the study of transnationalism, is that much of the discussion was about what, theoretically speaking, the concept of transnationalism was supposed to signify. Thomas Faist (1999: 2), for instance, elaborating on the multiple ways of describing transnationalism (transnational social spaces, transnational social fields, transnational social formations) understood it as sustained ties of persons, networks and organizations across the borders of multiple nation-states, ranging from weakly or strongly institutionalized forms. He stressed that transnationalism is not about fleeting contacts between migrants and relatively immobile people in the countries of immigration and emigration. “Transnational social spaces and the other names we have given these phenomena are characterized by a high density of interstitial ties on informal or formal (institutional) levels.” Steve Vertovec, putting it in slightly different words, described it as a condition “in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common – however virtual – arena of activity.” (1999: 447).

Locating Agency in Studies on Migration and Transnationalism

Where Basch et al framed transnationalism as a process, and Faist and Vertovec described it as a condition, Guarnizo & Díaz (1999) saw it as a concept which identifies a web of patterned and sustained migration-driven relations and activities that transcend national borders and connect those who live abroad with those who live at home. A process would indicate that transnationalism is something that takes time; that is under development and under construction. The relations that are being formed between migrants and those who are still in the home country are not automatically present; rather they will evolve over time and need to be maintained and sustained. This would also indicate that transnationalism is never truly there – to use a part of the expression ‘neither here nor there’, often used to give a very brief glimpse of transnational life – but always in the process of development. A condition, as Vertovec calls it, which more or less communicates a state of being. Transnationalism then could be pointed at, saying: “there it is!” The process would then, of course, refer to the process of transnationalization, while the condition would be that of transnationality. That leaves us with the concept, which indicates that theoretically it is there, but

6 Studies on Colombian transnational migration (Guarnizo & Díaz, 1999), the Otavalo trade diaspora (Kyle, 1999); Haitian transnational social fields (Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 1999), Dominican transnationalism (Itzigsohn et al, 1999) and Salvadoran transnationalism (Landolt et al, 1999), Guatemalan Mayan migration (Popkin, 1999) and finally Mexican migration to the US (Roberts et al, 1999) all show a relatively similar approach.
we need to prove that it actually exists. It is the merger between condition and the concept that has dominated the study of transnationalism from early on. The illusion of a process was often created; yet in practice the process of transnationalization was oddly missing from the case descriptions that were produced to give weight to the claims made theoretically about this so-called new group of migrants. While I do not wish to assume that scholars such as Leavitt, Portes and Vertovec were not aware of these problems from the start, it does hint at a larger problem: if the study of transnationalism is most of all about labeling groups that either are or aren't transnational, then we run the risk of forgetting about the actual process which triggers and facilitates this in the first place.

Bailey (2001: 416) argued that much of the early work on transnationalism described how transmigrants were able to simultaneously organize daily lives across national borders by maintaining multiple links between two or more places. Although studies published just before the turn of the millennium vastly increased the understanding of what could be labeled as transnationalism, as well as how to approach the topic (what sort of different elements [economical, social, political] there were to be studied), at the same time these studies were fairly one-sided in the sense that in almost all cases migration to the location in question had started long ago and transnationalism was now the new denominator under which these migrants' lifestyles could be headed; largely being the result of economical, social and political changes which had triggered or encouraged the transnationalization of these people's lives. These studies gave the impression of being about the process of transnationalization, yet this process had already produced a finished/end product. They were actually not about people who were in the process of becoming transnationals. Much has been published on the topic since then but the study of transnationalism largely remains one that deals with identifying (labeling) certain ‘migrant behavior’ as ‘transnational’ and subsequently describing this.

When understanding how new migrants make their way into the world, it seems key to ask two questions: how is it experienced and what is it supposed to lead to? Yet the assumption studies of transnationalism appear to work with is that of the ‘transnational’ who has already reached an end-state. How ‘becoming transnational’ was experienced seems to be a matter of looking back. The actual process is assumed to be over. And questions regarding what it is supposed to lead to are deemed irrelevant in light of the supposition that they have reached this end-state. Although they are considered to be highly mobile, this mobility is not seen as leading to something

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7 See for instance: Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela on the transnational family (2002); Helen Sampson on Filipino seafarers (2003); Taiwanese immigrant entrepreneurs in Canada (2004); Robert R. Alvarez Jr. on Mexican business transnationalism (2005); Damián J. Fernández on Cuban transnationalism (2005); Julie Y. Chu on Fuzhou-nese migration (2006); Dalia Abdelhady on Lebanese immigrants (2006); and so on.
else. On the contrary, the mobility studies on transnationalism propose can be traced directly back to ideas that were central to the old the push-and-pull models. They are seen as the unavoidable result of living an economic life on the margins, or because political instability prevents a more definite return home. Being mobile, this label of being a transnational, was never an aspirational affair in the sense of people actually having planned it this way.

Something feels ultimately lacking in both studies on migration and transnationalism. It is perhaps, as Adrian Bailey argues that: “key questions of migrant agency and hybridity remain under-theorized.” (2001: 413). Where does the migrant’s agency fit into the picture? As Hamann (2001: 34) also points out, “[t]he exercise of agency is implicit in transnational movement…” Yet, where exactly can we locate this agency in studies on migration and transnationalism? Looking back at the preoccupation of the study of transnationalism with defending the concept as a truly new one – and that one could actually label migrants as such – it seems that it was, most of all, the researcher who was in charge of understanding life across and between borders as such. How the people who were described in this way perceived this remains a field that has received little to no attention. It is for this reason that this dissertation will examine the way Indian students experience the process they are undergoing (which for many is the underlying reason for having chosen Australia as a study-abroad destination) in light of the finding that studies of transnationalism pay little to no attention to the (individual) process of transnationalization itself.

Indian Overseas Students in Australia
By the end of 2006, there were nearly 350,000 overseas students enrolled across all educational sectors in Australia, making the country one of the biggest players in the world of offering/selling education on a commercial basis. The export education industry is one of Australia’s largest services export industries with an annual turnover of around 7.5 billion Australian dollars (The Australian, 30-10-2006). In 2006 there were 38,700 Indian students studying in Australia. Compared to 27,400 the year before; this meant a considerable increase in enrolments, making India now the second biggest source country of overseas students for Australia (after China). The number continues to grow and is expected to reach new heights by the end of 2008.

This dissertation is the result of being involved in the topic of Indian (overseas) students for over five years. Although the anthropological fieldwork I conducted among them was limited to February 2005-6, my interest and data gathering began in 2003 when I first learned about the phenomenon of Indian students going to Australia.

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8 There are five categories in the Australian education system: higher education, vocational education, school education, ELICOS, and other courses including enabling, foundation and non-award ones. DEST website: http://aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/MIP/Statistics/StudentEnrolmentAndVisaStatistics/Recent_TableE_pdf.pdf
After my return home from fieldwork in Melbourne I remained in contact with many of my informants through e-mail, Facebook and other social network sites such as Hi5 and Linked In. In addition, I was able to visit a number of them in India during various trips. In 2008 I returned to Melbourne again for a couple of weeks and was able to learn of what had become of some of my informants. As I am still in active touch with many of the people who colored my fieldwork I consider my research as ongoing, likely to yield more data in the years to come.

I became interested in the topic of Indian students going to Australia for the first time in the first half of 2003. At the time I was conducting fieldwork among Indian IT professionals living and working in Bangalore. Although I had no particular interest in overseas students, it was a recurring topic in newspapers, interviews and casual conversations. Advertisements for universities and recruiters (mostly from the US, the UK and Australia and to a lesser extent Canada) could regularly be found in the newspapers, trying to attract potential students to apply to their institutions. Such advertisements were often not only about the prestige of a particular institute or the quality of the educational system of the country in question, but also about the location (city or state) where the university was based (or even the country in general). Australia, in that sense, was being promoted as an affordable destination (cheaper than the UK and the US; both in cost of living and tuition fees), a safe destination (hardly any...
crime, happy and friendly multicultural environment) as well as an adventurous place where lots of things were going on all the time (formula one races and the Australia Open in Melbourne, being promoted as the Event City of Australia; surfing in Sydney and the Gold Coast; spectacular scenery and wildlife in the Northern Territories etc). In other portrayals of Australia the country was marketed as a modern one with high-tech industries, high-end research facilities and companies that play an important role on the world markets.

Initially I understood this ‘craze’ for foreign (in this case Australian) degrees as merely another sign of the Indian middle classes becoming wealthier and, in addition, it seemed like a smart idea to add another, and certainly worthwhile, line to one’s resume. In that way it made perfect sense to me to invest a serious amount of money in an overseas degree; yet from what I read in the papers as well as what I picked up from informal conversation, studying in Australia seemed inseparable from migrating there. Apparently Australia offered its overseas students a rather secure way of obtaining a permanent residency after graduation. It was here that I was presented with something that truly puzzled me: why did these young middle class Indians want to leave? Why not stay? This last small question in particular presented itself as an enigma to me. Where in the past India would often be associated with social deprivation, injustice, poverty, natural hazards and environmental pollution (to name just a few), the papers were now full of news on ‘rapidly developing’ India. And this is still going on. Large Indian companies such as Tata, Birla and Mittal are involved in considerable takeovers of companies that have their foundations firmly in the western world. Meanwhile more and more foreign companies (often huge multinationals) are busy setting up shop, or expanding their presence, in India. The Indian economy is supposedly booming and the Indian middle class is seen as one of the fastest growing consumer markets in the world with the kind of ‘new’ spending power that greatly appeals to multinationals such as Nestlé, Procter & Gamble and Unilever. Adding all this good news up, one is indeed left to wonder: why not stay? As young, highly-educated Indians from middle class families, one would expect that now is the time to profit from all these (‘positive’) developments. Yet they were heading for Australia in their thousands and, as it seemed at the time, many of these students were planning on staying on in Australia.

**Anthropological Fieldwork in Melbourne**

In an early phase of my preparations for fieldwork I had decided to base myself in Melbourne. Although Sydney has a slightly higher number of overseas students, Melbourne appeared to have a wider variety of colleges and universities. The number

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9 For a much more detailed account of my fieldwork experiences I refer to appendix I.
of Indian students going to Melbourne also was on the increase. Besides that, the city and its (Indian) students had also been more in the news (something I will discuss in detail in the coming chapters). Melbourne seemed a good choice and I simply took it from there. In fact, the city turned out to be the ideal place to explore the dilemmas of migration and transnationalism as I outlined them earlier. The vast number of overseas students in the city, their physical presence in the public space, and the city’s pride regarding its alleged multiculturality testifies to this.

Melbourne has eight ‘original’ universities and countless educational institutions ranging from high quality ones to those that seemed purely in the market to make a ‘quick buck’ out of the hype for Australian degrees among, especially, Asian, and thus also Indian, students. Of these universities that had been founded in Melbourne, I gathered data on all but one; unfortunately I never met an Indian student attending the Australian Catholic University (though statistics showed that there were Indian students enrolled there). The universities at which I conducted interviews on a regular basis were: Monash University, RMIT, Melbourne University and Victoria University. Less frequently I would visit the campuses of Swinburne, Deakin and Latrobe University. Besides those there were other large educational players operative in the city that had their roots somewhere else. Two important ones were Melbourne Institute of Technology (MIT), which was a private operator tied in with the University of Ballarat (a regional university located in the city of Ballarat, Victoria) and the Melbourne campus of CQU, Central Queensland University, which obviously also had its origins elsewhere. Both MIT and CQU had recently become extremely popular destinations for Indian students, in fact, even giving the impression that they had no other students but those from India (or South Asia10) enrolled.

Melbourne is a large city, not just in terms of population (just under 4 million) but also in terms of it being an extremely spread-out city; rivaled only by Los Angeles in terms of square kilometers. From February 2005-6 I lived in a small apartment on Dandenong Road, not too far from the suburbs of Prahran and South Yarra. The location turned out to be a handy one from which to coordinate my fieldwork, which required me to travel all over Melbourne. I ended up collecting data on, in total, 230 people. 130 of these were students, the majority of whom were full-fee paying students doing a master’s by coursework. The remaining 100 all related to these students lives in one way or another. This group included ex-overseas students, education and migration

10 Although this dissertation deals with Indian students, from the outside it is quite easy to confuse them with, for instance, Bangladeshi or Pakistani students. Campuses with a larger number of Indian students would often also have relatively large numbers of other South Asian students. In terms of absolute numbers though, Indian students were always in the majority. It is important to note though that if such a campus was also popular with Chinese students, the Chinese would probably form the majority. China is by far the largest provider of overseas students in Australia. Although India comes in second place, the difference between the two is still quite large. See also appendix II.
agents, program directors, tutors, lecturers, professors, social workers, student advisors, counselors, student union members, DIMIA and IDP personnel, psychologists, marketing personnel, market analysts, international student recruiters, and Indian community members as well as leaders.

I used anthropological methods to gather data, yet the typical way of doing anthropological research in a small community - actively participating in one’s research populations’ lives - was hardly possible. The city was too large for that; students lived all over the city, either because they had found accommodation in a cheap area or because the campus they needed to be at was located there. Universities would sometimes have no less than five campuses, usually located in completely different parts of the city (and occasionally outside the city). The method I resorted to was meeting students mostly through other students whom I had already met. I would try to become part of their world as much as I could while also making use of other techniques to gather data such as semi-structured interviews and using the Internet. It is the combination of informally gathered data through participation and observation, data coming from semi-structured interviews, information found on websites, in newspapers and magazines, and from brochures and other (paper) sources that make up the bulk of the data that underlies this research.11

Many of the people belonging to my research population I met just once or twice. Single interviews with students usually lasted between two and three hours (on occasion longer), with non-students often shorter. I remained in closer contact with a core group of about 20 students throughout my research. I consider them to be my key informants. They provide me with regular updates of what they had heard or would introduce me to new/other students. I feel that in many ways this is what doing fieldwork in multiple locations in a big city such as Melbourne comes down to. I am reminded of what James Ferguson said in this regard about his own fieldwork among Zambians working in the copper belt: “I knew my informants in the way most urbanites know one another: some quite well, some only in passing, others in special-purpose relationships that gave me a detailed knowledge of some areas of their lives and almost none of others.” (1999: 21). Indeed, for me as well, doing research came down to living life in a big city, knowing some people very well, some of whom I eventually started considering to be ‘friends’, and others whom I would just interview once or twice, sometimes running into them at a later stage, but seeing many never again.

11 The list of references at the end of this dissertation gives an interesting overview of the newspaper and magazine articles that were published during my fieldwork and while writing this dissertation. Though I will not refer to all of them directly in the text, they certainly have informed me in a great way.
The Internal Complexity of the Indian Middle Class

Indian society being very complex, it stands to reason that at least part of this complexity is reflected within a group of 130 students. Among the Indian overseas students I met during my fieldwork there were considerable differences in terms of age, caste, class, place/region of birth, mother language, religious background and sexual orientation. Yet some generalizations are certainly possible. For one, most students were enrolled in so-called masters’ programs, which meant that on average most students were aged somewhere between 21 and 25 years old. This often also meant that they had already concluded a bachelor’s program back in India. Many had also had jobs for a while before coming to Australia. Another easy generalization that can be made is that most hailed from (middle or upper) middle class backgrounds, had educated parents, in the sense that most of their parents had also completed some kind of college degree (and in some cases even their grandparents). These students had often attended so-called ‘convent’ or English medium schools, were used to talking English at home and with their friends, yet were, in almost all cases, multi-lingual as they would speak at least one or two Indian languages (usually Hindi and one other local language) on the side. To complement things, they were usually of an upper-caste background with only a small number hailing from Christian or Muslim families.12

Generalizations ignore internal differences and nuances. Claiming that people are of a middle class background ignores the vast discussions on what the Indian middle class actually constitutes.13 For some families being middle class was a much more recent phenomenon than for others. During interviews students would sometimes make the distinction between ‘lower’, ‘middle’ and ‘upper’ middle class. They would often categorize themselves in the latter two though discussing the meaning of such categorizations would at times reveal how they perceived themselves in relation to others who were undergoing a similar migration process. The Indian middle class is huge in terms of (possible) numbers and to say that the discussion on who can be considered (truly) ‘middle class’ is complex is probably an understatement. In this dissertation I see it as my task to take these complexities with me and have it feature in the background while engaging with students’ narratives on the way they experience the process they are undergoing. What students tell about themselves,

12 This dissertation does not deal with the question why Hindus were in the majority the way they were. The religious backgrounds of the students I gathered data on probably reflects the percentages of Hindus, Muslims and Christians in India, though I must admit that I never made a conscious effort in this regard. It just happened. Having never felt the urge to pay much attention to this probably also shows to a certain extent that it was also not of very high importance to the students themselves. The biggest group usually does set the tone though; I have met Muslim students at the gurdwara, Christians at the temple but never heard of Hindus attending mosques. I will leave it to future research to figure out the internal dynamics of religion in relation to studying/migrating abroad.

13 Scholars such as Fernandes, 2006; Robinson, 2001 (see The Hindu 14-01-2001); Säävälä, 2003; Shurmer-Smith, 2000; and Van Wessel 2004 have all debated this in their work.
their backgrounds (caste, class, education of parents etc.) often stands in direct relation to how they express their experiences in regards to being both students and migrants. It cannot be ignored here that such experiences are infused by certain gender aspects more or less specific to the Indian case at hand. Scholars such as Sharpe (2003), Hartzig (2003), Arya & Roy (2006), Donato et al (2006), Silvey (2006) and others¹⁴ have all reminded us why gender is so important to understanding migration. Migration is a gendered affair where gender influences the way decisions get made, the way the process of going abroad is experienced, as well as how the future is imagined.

Most Indian overseas students in Melbourne are male. Although official statistics confirm this¹⁵, it doesn't take much to come to this conclusion. Any place where Indian students might be encountered (in class, on campuses, at locally organized 'Indian' events, at religious institutions, or even simply in the train heading home) it is clear that there are many more male than female Indian students in Australia. Such a gender ratio is bound to influence the way the two years that most Indian students stay in Australia are understood. Interaction will mostly be with other male students; expectations, impressions, opinions and so on will all be perceived, mostly, through such a mono-gendered lens. But of course there are also female Indian students. And during my fieldwork I made it a special task to map female students’ narratives on migrating abroad. I did this keeping Boucher (2007) in mind who argued that the story of skilled migration has slipped by as a genderless story. The central part seems to be played by that of the androgynous migrant; the overarching narration is mostly taken care of by economists. Hartzig (2003), in this instance, has already called for the introduction of the femina migrans, in order to balance with the all too familiar and classical homo migrans who was always defined in male terms: young, single, independent and unattached, endlessly mobile, in the prime of his physical strength (p. 15, 22). As Sharpe further argues: “feminist research has shown the ways in which women experience social and economic pressures differently from men […]”, and this reflects, for instance, in the reasons they give for migrating (2003: 7-8). Migration, then, is a gendered phenomenon (Donato et al 2006: 4), and dealing with questions that are about understanding migration means that the topic should also be approached from a perspective that takes this into account. Yet in this dissertation I will specifically take Batnitzky et al’s (2008) recent argument to heart about the way gender and


¹⁵ In 2005, 51% of all educational arrivals were female, up from 42% in 1985.” (Linacre 2007: 3) Yet in the case of Indian students the situation was completely different: “…just 20% of all educational arrivals from Indian in 2005 were female.” (Ibid.) It could be argued that studying abroad, at least in the case of Australia, is increasingly becoming a female thing to do. For instance, of the Japanese educational arrivals, 66% were female. (Ibid.) Why this is remains a question as yet unanswered. I suspect that there is also some growth among female Indian students though have no means to further quantify this.
class relate to each other in the world of migration. It is important though to keep constantly in mind that the Indians that take the main stage in this research are not just migrants but also students. They are equally involved in a process of education as well as migration. This may also mean that their identities as students and migrants have different implications regarding class and gender.

Learning to Migrate, Migrating to Learn
This dissertation is structured as a learning process, building on the assumption that students ‘learn’ along the way both in terms of education as well as migration. Because of what they are faced with – the realities of everyday life as students and migrants at the same time – I hypothesize that the way they imagine their own futures gets reworked along the way. This will then also explain how students are actually able to deal with certain realities such as working in jobs that, for instance, in India they would consider beneath themselves (in terms of class) or not fitting (in terms of gender). Both concepts of arrival points and in-betweenness will aid in investigating how young, highly educated and middle class Indians understand and experience going through the education and migration process they have opted and paid for. At the same time it will bring us closer to an understanding of how new forms of migration take shape and how they can be understood in a wider constellation of much bigger bodies that have an interest in, and profit from, people who wish to live in another country than they were born in. This will then result in a much greater shift away from the old push-and-pull models than has so far been the case.

Each chapter in this dissertation corresponds to a phase in the lives of Indian overseas students on the road to permanent residency. The underlying theme is not just the very practical ‘how’ in the sense of how students are moving through these different phases, but often also how they narrate these experiences. I will attempt to locate the way they reason about what they are doing and, more importantly, how they adapt their expectations and imaginations along the way. Referring to the concept of ‘migrancy’ as DeMaria Harney & Baldassar (2007) phrased it, the particular way this dissertation is structured considers the trajectory of experiences of migrants to be extremely relevant since “it focuses on the postmodern subject’s transformation and the creativity of the migrant subject, even within structures that limit the social field.” (2007: 192).

The next chapter in this dissertation (chapter two) will center on the experiences of newly arrived Indian students in Australia; their first semester has just started and thus they are in a very early phase of their journey towards Australian residency. The issues on which this chapter will focus are threefold: leaving, arriving and (then) letting go. Leaving, first of all, will be about leaving a particular country behind. It will be about the exit strategies and how these take shape among young middle class Indians. By examining both the reasons for and the practicalities of the
plan to leave India (for Australia) we will gain insight into with what sort of baggage Indian students arrive with in Australia. Arriving in this sense is very much about what it is like, how it is perceived, to have just arrived in a new country, first of all as a student, but at the same time also as a migrant, probably already having decided that the plan will be to stay. In both sections – leaving and arriving – we will investigate what it takes to leave a country (behind) and make way into a new one. This will allow us, on the one hand, to focus on the practicalities of the plan to leave, and on the other hand on all the aspects of such a plan that still need to be figured out. This then also links to the third section of this chapter, letting go, which hints at those things that have to be let go of when it turns out that certain routes, which were planned to be followed, are no longer an option.

What follows in chapter three is an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Indian overseas students (the ‘newcomers’) and the locally established Indian community. Central to this chapter will be the question: what role does the local Indian community play in the lives of Indian overseas students? Related to this are questions such as: how do they perceive and interact with, as well as profit from, each other. Important here will be the issue of exploitation, a topic which regularly came up while talking with students about the (part-time) they had. In order to better understand where the Indian community itself comes from, we will have to explore the history of this community as well. This will then be connected to the Australian ‘perspective’ on newcomers, migrants, and locally established ‘outcomers’ (here: Indians) and so on in order to complete the multicultural and multi-dimensional picture.

Where chapter two and three are typically descriptive chapters that focus on particular ‘practical’ phases in these students’ lives, it is now time for a summer holiday which in our case means attending a summer school, where attention will be paid to the history of overseas education worldwide in general. The first section of this chapter deals with the very early phase of overseas education; focusing in particular on the 1950s when overseas education started showing the first signs of the mass business it would eventually become. The second section then deals with the decades after schemes such as the Colombo Plan were initiated. It will center on two debates, which dominated studies on overseas students at the time: the issue of non-return and the braindrain phenomenon. Moving on into the 1980s we will discover that the whole debate on overseas students has changed dramatically. Overseas students were rarely just that and the industry itself has also stopped being simply about just that. Overseas students are also tourists, settlers, migrants, and it may even be argued transnational wannabes. The industry changed from being about offering education

16 The Colombo Plan is a joint initiative between (currently) 25 member-states. In short the plan comes down to collective inter-governmental efforts to strengthen economic and social development of member countries in the Asia-Pacific Region. The plan will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 4.
(through schemes such as the Colombo Plan) in order to deal with underdevelopment and spread the positive vibe of capitalism in order to counter the (perceived) appeal of communism, to an industry which is not only supposed to finance research and the higher education of local ('national') students, but on which also thousands of jobs depend and of which many related businesses profit from.

This then also serves as a bridge to the next chapter (the ‘third’ semester), which zooms in on the question what it means to operate in-between legal and illegal spheres. Students regularly admitted working more than 20 hours per week, also finding this quite normal in the sense that on the one hand they were perfectly aware that they were not supposed to do so, but on the other also arguing that it was a necessity and that ‘everybody else’ was doing this as well. In this sense they argued a certain ‘normalcy’ about what they were doing. This normalcy not only related to the financial pressures they were under but also to what they saw as ‘being normal’ for a migrant. Within the education industry similar kinds of reasoning could be heard. It will then be argued that where students bend the rules in order to fit their own situation, the education industry basically does the same.

Chapter six (‘the fourth semester’) is then the final descriptive chapter in this dissertation. A long journey is about to come to an end for many students studying in Australia. This chapter deals then with that ‘last’ semester that leads up to the final application for PR. In the first section the process of applying for PR will be dealt with. The focus will initially be on those who have run into trouble with their applications and who are now going through the various options available to them. These options are also central to the next section of this chapter, in which it will be closely examined how these different options translate into different (‘individual’) strategies. Although for many students getting a PR is their goal, it doesn’t always bring with it the kind of change in (quality of) lives and lifestyles that one would (‘could’) normally expect of it. This then serves as an interesting bridge to the final part of this chapter, the return, in which the camera zooms in on those who now have a PR. How they narrate future expectations as well as experience their own failure and/or success will lead to a conclusion on how to understand those (new PR holders) who already have experienced quite a bit of ‘abroad’ but may dream of experiencing much more of it. This chapter will also pay special attention on how these narrations of experiences can be understood through a gendered/class lens.

In chapter seven, we return to the main topics and issues raised in the previous chapters. In particular the in-between dimensions will be highlighted in order to come to a more precise understanding of what motivates people ‘over the border’, as well as the way new migrants understand the destination(s) they are heading to. The conclusion will make a case for moving away from thinking in terms of migration and transnationalism, and to move on to a field of study that puts the desire to be mobile central. This will enable us much more to think from the perspective of the individual
who is striving for the kind of transnational freedom that studies of transnationalism often see as a starting point for analysis. This will finally create the kind of space to think of such developments as ongoing processes without a clear starting or endpoint.