Imagined mobility: migration and transnationalism among Indian students in Australia

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First Semester: Of Leaving & Arriving: From and To a Culture of Migration
02. First Semester:

Of Leaving & Arriving. From and To a Culture of Migration

*Point of Departure*
A quiet Saturday morning early March, summer has entered its final weeks and it is noticeably less warm than a couple of weeks before when the first semester of the New Year officially began. Traditionally students are welcomed (back) on campus with what is commonly referred to as Orientation: a week of picking up booklists, going to introductory sessions and ‘signing up’ for all sorts of clubs and societies which are supposed to make life on campus about more than just studying alone. From the University of Melbourne located in the heart of the city to Latrobe University on the outskirts, all universities have days when these clubs and societies present themselves, often with traditional Australian barbeques, games and lots of beer. Now, a couple of weeks later, classes have begun, and the time of orientation and introductions is supposed to be over. Yuva, the Indian student organization at Monash University’s Caulfield campus, made good use of Orientation to recruit newly arrived Indian students. Earlier, Rohit, one of the organizers of Yuva, had explained to me that they had only recently formed this club. Some of the Indian overseas students on campus had been playing cricket together for some time already and one day one of them had suggested forming a club so that others could join in as well. Rather appropriately then, this particular morning they had their first official club activity planned: a mini-cricket tournament.

Twenty-three year old Ravi, sitting on a chair leaning against a soda machine in the waiting room of the sports hall belonging to Caulfield Campus of Monash University, explained that he had nearly missed Orientation, as his visa had been delayed. One of the many new students that day of the cricket tournament, originally from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, son of a businessman and a housewife, one brother and one sister (both older), he had come to Australia to do a ‘postgrad’ in Business Systems.

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17 The names in this dissertation have been changed. In some cases other minor details have been changed as well, such as: place of origin, details about family or friends (jobs etc.), details about education (course or university), or other details that might make it possible to trace back certain comments to particular persons. It goes without saying that in a study such as this one, where participants would walk a thin line between legal and illegal activities, anonymity and confidentiality had to be guaranteed at all cost. The cases presented in this dissertation always reflect what truly happened or was said. For more information about ethical procedures followed, as well as other discussions regarding confidentiality, please refer to appendix I.
He said it with a sigh and a faintly apologetic smile, as he was already thinking of changing courses, not really being happy with the choice he had made in India. “It is better to do this course when you have some work experience, I think,” he remarked. Pensively nursing his can of Coke, he kept quiet for a while as if reconsidering if that was what he had really wanted to say. He seemed tired. A circle beard and a receding hairline made him look older than he was, accentuated further by his sloppy way of dressing: a button-down checked shirt and loose fitting pants which were out of place with his newly bought pair of Adidas. He gave a rather depressed impression. Earlier one of his friends, Pranav, had told me to talk to him as “he is really homesick, that guy,” adding that “he is really not liking it here.”

Ravi was indeed homesick, and he had been that way since the day he had arrived in Australia. He had already spoken to his father about this but he had simply pressured him to give it some more time, and to “think of how easy your life will be when you have your PR [permanent residency].” He added that his father was convinced that he would actually ‘get PR’, something that was also necessary to pay back the loan the family had taken out to pay for his college fees at Monash. Studying abroad and getting a PR both seemed to be ideas which had not been Ravi’s to begin with. His father had thought it would be a good idea “to get one”, his friends had encouraged him “to go for one” and other family members, even his mother (though not liking the thought of seeing her son leave), had been equally keen on seeing him “have one.” That said, studying abroad had seemed like a “great opportunity” to Ravi, who claimed that it would be hard to get into a university and do a similar course in India. Yet it was clear that he was less sure of everything now that he was actually in Melbourne. He had wanted to study abroad and getting a residency abroad seemed to make sense; however, the reality of being abroad was not the way he had imagined it. Though he sounded disappointed, which I pointed out to him, he also said that it was probably too soon to really ask him how he felt about having arrived in Australia. “We’ll see how things take shape,” he said.

A Culture of Migration

This chapter will be centered on the experiences of newly arrived Indian students in Melbourne, Australia. Their first semester has just started and so they are in the very early phase of their journey towards Australian residency. First and foremost they are of course students and will have to pay attention to their studies. 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. A central role will be played by that what was left behind. For this we will briefly delve into the personal backgrounds of these students. Their Indian middle-classness, it appears, has played, and will continue to play, a rather important role in their exit (-India) strategies. Leaving often triggers questions of why: why leave? By examining both the reasons and the
practicalities of the plan to leave India, we will gain insight into the kind of baggage Indian students arrive with in Australia. The second section, arriving, is very much about how it is perceived to have just arrived in a new country, first of all as a student, but also as a migrant. The way it is imagined, the way ‘the imagined elsewhere’ has taken shape over the years, and the way this led to a particular exit-India strategy, will continue to play a role towards the ultimate arrival point; an imagined point in the future when what was envisioned in the past will actually be realized. And this is where the implied paradox of this chapter will come to the fore. There is a very clear physical point of departure and moment of arrival in the case of Indian students ‘migrating’ to Australia; yet, actually ‘arriving’ is much more an imagined point in the future when the reality will match with the expectations about what this process is supposed to lead to. In this sense we can speak of ‘a myth of arrival’, referring to that moment when all will be achieved as planned. As the next chapter will show though, the way the future is imagined is constantly in flux and renegotiated under ‘current’ circumstances. This renegotiating will start from an early stage in the form of letting go, the focus for the third section of this chapter. After having arrived, having found a place to live, perhaps even a job, the reality of not only being in Australia but also of being more than just students there will sink in. Many students will have come to Australia with migration in mind, but this does not necessarily mean that they do not care about their education. Within the sort of middle class families they come from there is usually a (very) strong focus on higher education. Certainly, not being able to enroll in a quality university in India often contributes to the decision to study abroad. Yet, having arrived in Australia this focus on ‘studying abroad’ will slowly shift and be replaced by an atmosphere which can best be described as a ‘culture of migration’, as these new arrivals come into contact with other students who have been in Australia for much longer and who are constantly talking about the problems of getting residency (dealing with immigration authorities and so on). The feeling and connected behavior of ‘being an overseas student’ are increasingly transformed into that of ‘being a migrant’. However, this culture of migration is paradoxical. Where studies on migration (Ali, 2007; Kandel & Massey, 2002; Deléchat, 2001; Tsuda, 1999; Massey et al, 1994; Gardner, 1993) often speak of such a culture, it almost always refers to the countries migrants came from. Yet, the Indians on which this dissertation focuses do not leave India as migrants but as students. The idea of being a ‘migrant’ is something which only really develops upon arrival in Australia.

During this semester the camera will zoom in on three specific students: Pranav, Ravi and Sujit, whom I met for the first time at the mini cricket tournament, organized by Indian student organization Yuva. They had all just arrived in Australia and although all three had the intention of applying for permanent residency after graduation, each talked differently about this. Pranav and Ravi were both doing their masters at Monash, while Sujit was enrolled at the city campus of Central Queensland
University (CQU) for a Masters in professional accounting. The way they narrate their reasons for leaving India, studying abroad, and their expectations about what this experience will lead to will offer a starting point to analyze in more detail the way a migration process such as this one takes shape. It will show the ambivalence, the imagination and also the doubts and disappointments that come with it.

LEAVING

The Importance of Education

“Why spend so much money,” I asked, referring to the large student loans all three had taken out to fund their Australian education. “Actually,” Pranav said “he is spending a lot less money,” pointing at Sujit, who had just joined us as the cricket tournament was about to start. Sujit smiled and said to Pranav: “you should have done the same man, why spend so much money when you can get it for less?!” When I asked what he meant with ‘it’, he quickly said “PR of course,” adding “why else would you come here?” Pranav was looking at him with a faint but slightly disapproving smile. We had been talking about what it had been like for them so far, in Melbourne, and Pranav was quick to point out that he had not seen much of the city yet, as he had been too busy looking for a job. This job was necessary as he was planning on earning enough to pay for at least a couple of semesters himself. Although Sujit was planning on doing the same, he would have to make a lot less money to pay for his semester fees.

Pranav had kept quiet when Sujit proudly exclaimed that he should have chosen CQU since their college fees were so much lower. When we met up for a more formal interview, a couple of weeks later, Pranav explained that it had embarrassed him to talk so openly about PR. “We are not all like that you know,” Pranav pointed out. PR may be on everybody’s mind but he had come to Australia, first and foremost, to study. Studying abroad had been a dream of his since he was young. Now doing a Masters in Business (Banking and Finance), he had specifically chosen this course because of his interest in the banking sector, a sector in which he already had some experience, having had a call center job back in India. Doing the two-year variant for which the total course fee in 2006 was $43,200, he was well aware of the considerable

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18 About three quarters of the students I met during my fieldwork had come to Australia on so-called student-or educational loans. These loans varied from two, three to thirteen, fourteen lakh rupees. The size of the loan depended both on the financial means of the family as well, of course, on the course and university chosen. A trend which had started around the time of my fieldwork was to enrol in colleges that were seen as price fighters, aiming for the bottom of the market. This was particularly the case among students for whom permanent residency was the prime reason for coming to Australia. Loans typically had to be paid off in five to seven years after graduation, starting from the first year after graduation or from the moment employment had been found. Especially those with the higher loans felt a PR was absolutely necessary to pay a loan back.

19 Dollars mentioned in this dissertation are always Australian. One Australian dollar is about 0.85 American dollars or 0.58 Euros.
financial burden he had taken on. Having taken out a loan of 14 lakhs\textsuperscript{20}, for which the
family home had been mortgaged, and with the knowledge that both his parents were
planning on retiring within a few years, he had embarked on a journey with huge
financial responsibilities. “I know that that loan is high,” he said “yet I really think
I can make it here you know.” When I asked him how he was actually planning on
staying in Australia, knowing that the course he had chosen would only fetch him 50
points on the skill test\textsuperscript{21}, he couldn’t hide his irritation. “From the moment I came here
this is all everybody seems to talk about,” he sighed. “I want PR, true, but not just like
that. I also came here to study.” He was adamant about this, stressing this point on
several occasions during the interview; as if he was also trying to convince himself
that he was in Australia to study (not just for a PR). He was also concerned to convince
me, the outsider, the one who should not get the wrong impression of ‘us Indians’.

Those students studying at supposedly quality universities such as Monash
and RMIT were often rather particular about stressing the importance of education
for them, even though their plans were also clearly oriented towards migration.
Pranav wanted to make sure that I did not put him in the same bracket to which he
felt Sujit belonged to. Yet the way Pranav talked about education in relation to his
own background also made clear that his family placed a great deal of value on high
quality education. Both his mother and father had studied and his parents had always
sent him to so-called English medium schools. Sujit was different; he clearly belonged
to a different class, and although Pranav would never say it in so many words, he
considered Sujit lower middle class whereas he saw himself as upper middle class.
The distinction that he made here was as subtle one, one that was hardly based on
financial considerations. It was clear from the way both talked about their homes and
the jobs their fathers had that in terms of income both families were on a par. Instead,
it had much more to do with the way both presented themselves. The boldness of
Sujit’s claims and the education-choices he had made evidently were not ones Pranav
considered fitting for him and the class he came from.

Conflicting and ambivalent opinions on and reactions to ideas about the
importance of quality of education, make clear that performing a double role of being
both student and migrant is not something which can be understood by simply placing
them at opposite ends of each other. It is not the case that if a student’s primary
motivation for coming to Australia is to migrate, he will not care about the quality of
the education he receives. As the following section will also show, even having chosen

\textsuperscript{20} 14 lakhs (1,400,000 rupees) is about 24,000 euros or 34,000 Australian dollars.
\textsuperscript{21} Australia works with a so-called skills test to assess whether or not an immigrant meets the requirements for
permanent residency. Age, education and skills all generate points. The system will be dealt with in much more
detail in the following chapters.
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a ‘cheaper’ institute with a ‘lesser’ reputation doesn’t always mean this is because the education itself doesn’t matter.

**Being a Serious Student**

The idea of being a serious student, attending a good college, of graduating with high marks and going on to do a post-grad course at a reputable institution, is an often-repeated desire among Indians coming from the (upper) middle classes. The high number of applicants for a limited number of places in good colleges, as well as reservation policies22 (which often make it harder for the upper-caste dominated (upper) middle classes); means it can be a real challenge to fulfill this desire. According to Henry A.S. Ledlie, the India director of IDP Education Australia, Australia’s leading recruiter of overseas students world-wide (jointly owned by 38 Australian universities), there is a simple explanation for why so many Indian students want to study in Australia: getting a place in a good Indian university is no easy task. When asked about the reason why Indian students go to Australia, he told a reporter of The Hindu: “Because we have very few world class institutions in India and how many people get into the IITs and IIMs? If you want to study in St. Stephen’s College, Delhi, you need a cut-off of 95 per cent in Class 12 results. So what happens if you get 90? Or 85? Where will you go?” (The Hindu, March 18, 2006)

It is often suggested that studying abroad is a way to get a quality education if you are not able to enroll in one of the better Indian universities. It’s certainly true that getting a high-quality education at one of the top institutions is not easy. Applying for an undergraduate admission through JEE (Joint Entrance Examination) to an IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) is almost bound to fail as only one out of every 60 applicants is accepted. For the 200,000 annual test takers a fewer than 3,900 places are available.23 Although figures differ slightly when it comes to the various under- or postgraduate programs, most agree that the acceptance rate for IITs is somewhere between one and three per cent. (Kanta, 2003) Besides seven IITs24, there are hundreds of other colleges and universities in India; some that are known to offer very high quality education, and some which are little more than degree shops.

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22 Reservation policies or, as they are commonly called: ‘reservations’ refer to an ongoing process of giving deprived castes and tribes better chances to improve themselves. Basically this comes down to reserved places in universities and government jobs. The reservation policies are a highly political topic in India and particularly the upper classes vehemently oppose them. In this dissertation I will make no further effort to go into the details of the policy; what is relevant here is that most Indian students who come to Australia have upper caste backgrounds and feel disadvantaged or discriminated by the policies. Although I do not agree with them, it is important to take their opinion into account when understanding what might motivate them to leave India.


24 Kharagpur, Mumbai, Chennai, New Delhi, Kanpur, Guwahati and Roorkee.
With continuous proposals to overhaul the system of reservations and to allocate even more places to lower castes it is not surprising that the obvious conclusions are reached. The Hindustan Times was, for instance, quick to point out the following: “Call it a coincidence, but there appears to be a surge in the number of applicants for universities abroad especially to institutes in the US and the UK.” Many other articles conclude the same, among them one from The Hindu Times, which printed a picture of an international campus with the caption: “Frustrated and pained by the reservation system, many meritorious students will surely turn their back at their motherland.” A little further in the article, reporter Candice Zachariahs concludes that “as student protests rally around the importance of merit over all else, members of the education export community are rubbing their hands in glee.” (Hindustan Times 23 April, 2006)

As it has become tougher for upper-caste Hindus to get into the better universities, it only makes sense to conclude that this might indeed trigger many more to consider going abroad for higher education, though this was something almost none of the 130 Indian students I interviewed in Melbourne ever brought to the table when talking about reasons and motivations for coming to Australia. Considering that 94 of the 118 students in my research on which I gathered caste data identified themselves as upper-caste Hindus, it is self-evident that in almost all cases the reservation policy would have meant they would be excluded from a certain number of places or would have to score relatively higher to get into certain universities. Although many did say it had become harder to get into the better universities in India, they tended to put this down to the difficulty of the entrance tests and the sheer number of people applying. Only when I mentioned the reservation policies myself would they voice their discontent; even then they were careful to do so in a way that made it seem as though it had little to do with them. It was this paradox, or should I say: riddle, which would guide me in the early phases of my fieldwork when I talked with students such as Pranav and Sujit. What were the real factors behind their decision to go to Australia?

A Narration of Reasons
Pranav could not have been clearer when he argued that ‘not all of us are like that’, meaning that not all Indian students are in Australia solely for PR. This suggests that he had been confronted with this issue a number of times before. Pranav had only recently arrived in Melbourne. Now living with a group of other Indian students, some of whom had been in Australia quite a bit longer, he had been exposed to others talk of PR. Some had apparently given the impression that they had no interest in their

25 See appendix II for more detail.
studies, while others thought differently about this. Pranav, for one, had chosen a
course that would not directly lead to a PR, whereas Sujit had done exactly that. There
was a certain level of ambiguity at play: Some students were utterly clear on why they
had come to Australia (for a PR only), while others were much less outspoken - and
at times even embarrassed - about the assumption that they might fall into the same
category. That said, PR, at least in the financial sense of offering an opportunity to pay
back a student loan, was equally important to almost all my informants.

Pranav had done his ‘schooling’ at an English medium convent school in New
Delhi. His parents always valued quality education highly, he explained, and so he was
sent to a “good school.” His father is a manager working in the government sector, his
mother works fulltime in a similar position in a different government owned company.
“The training I received in school was always in English.” He had communicated in
English all his life. He was not alone in this respect; almost none of the Indian students
I met had been educated in schools which taught in vernacular languages. This sets
them apart, in a certain respect, from the more up-coming, formerly lower, but now
middle class, communities that rely more heavily on locally rooted culture and give
more importance to vernacular languages26. Almost all of Pranav’s family members
have some kind of degree, even his grandfather from father’s side, something that
underlines even more that Pranav is typically a product of the older established middle
class groups in India.

After having completed his schooling, Pranav went on to study ‘business
admin’ at a city college also located in Delhi. He then found a job with Convergys, an
American outsourcing company. “We represented Citibank there. I was in customer
care, as a customer care and sales representative.” The job gave him some direction in
terms of what industry he wanted to be in. Monash was the only university in Australia
that offered the type of banking program that matched his wishes. “So that is how I
ended up here.” The story was cut short here. For Pranav coming to Australia had first
and foremost been about education, a way of accessing a career in banking. This was
the reason why he had come to Australia. He had gone to various schools, then had
had a job for a while, and meanwhile discovered where his ambitions lay. Knowing

26 This is a difficult discussion which will be dealt with in more detail in the coming chapters. It links directly
with the historic development of the Indian middle class (see for instance Pavan Varma’s The Great Indian Middle
Class, 1998). Interviews I conducted in both India and Australia showed that those who consider themselves
belonging to the older (and upper-) middle class often base this on the education history of their families (for
instance if parents or even grandparents had also completed their (post-) graduations in some field), and whether
or not they regularly speak (and spoke) English at home (with family and friends) besides their local language.
Those who considered themselves new middle class (or, for instance, talked about their class as upwardly mobile,
or upcoming) had often received schooling in a vernacular/local language, hardly ever spoke English except when
necessary (for instance on the work floor) and were the first generation to have graduated in a particular field.
Although not necessarily, the older (and upper-) middle classes seemed to be primarily of higher ranking castes
(Brahmins, Kshatriya’s or prominent business castes).
about the stiff competition for the better jobs in banking, Pranav had learned about
the course at Monash University, one of the more prestigious universities in Australia.
It was simple: Doing a course there seemed like the right career choice.

I wondered why Pranav had not pursued a career with his former employer
Convergys. In 2004, when Pranav was working for them, the company ranked third
on the list of largest BPO’s (call centers) in India, and was America’s largest call centre
company (The Economic Times, September 29, 2004). He explained that while he was
doing his bachelor’s degree he came to the conclusion that he would also have to do a
masters. “Only then you can get a really good job.” He continued: “You need to create
an edge for yourself.” In Pranav’s case this was to be an ‘overseas edge’, as he put it
himself. His explanation matched with the idea of an overseas degree being added
value when applying for the ‘right’ jobs. Pranav also mentioned something else of
interest when talking about the ‘in-between’ period of his life when he had completed
a bachelor’s and was working for Convergys: “I was working, but meanwhile I was
also preparing for these entrance exams.” He had been studying for the entrance test
for IIM (Indian Institute of Management), as well as for some other exams, but was
quick to point out that IIM “was also a dream.” IIM’s (there are seven) are among
the toughest institutions in the field of business/management studies to get into in
India. They award post-graduate diplomas in various specializations of management,
which are considered equivalent to MBAs. In order to be admitted into an IIM, one
has to ‘take CAT’ - the Common Admission Test - which is extremely competitive, with
less than one in a hundred actually getting through. Pranav, who had a quite decent
score, did not get a call for the second round (of four in total) of interviews. He had
rationalized this by stating that even if you do quite well, you still don’t stand much
of a chance, given the admission rates.

Here Pranav started to deviate a little from the story he had been telling up
to this point, namely one that had been about creating an ‘overseas edge’. It appeared
he had also explored other routes to get a competitive edge on his resume. Trying
to get into IIM fitted in perfectly with such a strategy and, considering what he had
told me about his family (how ‘serious’ they were about education), the role his class
background played in this (although he himself would hesitate to speak of class
this way), it is perhaps not surprising that he felt ambivalent about the importance
migration was playing in his plans. Yet it would be too easy to assume that within this
hierarchy of various options he also considered himself capable of actually getting into
IIM. He had even joined a specialized coaching centre, but that was mostly because
he had to give it a try “at least once.” In total Pranav spent more than 10,000 rupees
on a venture he had never really believed in from the start. “My parents would have
loved it had I made it,” he offered as an explanation, “but I knew I did not stand much
of a chance.”
Pranav’s ambitions, meanwhile, had taken shape more clearly. He had decided on a career “in banking”, and wanted to find a course that would further his education in this field. “While I was sitting for those entrance exams I also studied for my GMAT\textsuperscript{27} which I could use for the US and Canada,” he explained. Keeping his options open, he also decided to take the IELTS exam\textsuperscript{28}, claiming that IELTS was more widely accepted outside the US. “I just wanted to keep all doors open. Even if I had not gone abroad it would have been beneficial to do this.” This kind of planning - “spreading risks” as he called it – suggests that for a long time Pranav’s post-graduation plans involved multiple options, all of which appeared mutually interchangeable.

Yet, there was a clear hierarchy in his plans. His first choice had been IIM, but he knew from the start that it was highly unlikely that he would get in. His second choice had been to go to the US. However, knowing from others that the chance of getting a student visa for the US was slim, he began developing yet further alternatives. One such plan involved Canada, which he claimed to have seriously considered. “They are close to the US, you know.” The idea had been that by studying there he would also be able to find a job there and thus be allowed to stay on. From Canada it only seemed like a small step to the US. The idea was that he would choose a Canadian university near the border and from there he would be able to orient himself further on his chances in the US itself. “Most of the MNCs [multi-national corporations] are in the US. You always wanted to be part of that,” he said.

Without realising it himself, Pranav’s narration about how he had ended up in Australia had slowly become about strategies to find a more permanent stay outside India. The option of studying in Canada, for example, had been put aside as it did not seem to guarantee this. Whereas at first he had only been talking about alternative plans for studying in India, slowly his ideas about staying abroad had become more pronounced. When I pointed this out to him, he stayed silent for a while. “I always had this interest in going abroad. These MNCs were never there so much in India. The US is where you wanted to be for that.” He admitted that even during his bachelor’s he had often discussed studying abroad, not only with his friends, but also with his family. “Then also people had said how nice it would be if I could stay on there.” Why then bother to study for entrance tests for IIM and similar institutions? “Just to see how far I would get.” But what if you had actually been accepted? Would you have enrolled? I asked. “Yeah, probably.” But then what about this dream of going abroad? “Oh with such a degree it is quite easy to get a job in the US. These IIM and IIT guys are very popular in the US.”

\textsuperscript{27} GMAT = Graduate Management Admission Test. It is a standardized test for determining aptitude to succeed academically in graduate business studies. Most business schools (offering MBAs) usually ask for one.

\textsuperscript{28} IELTS = International English Learning Testing System. This test is jointly managed by the University of Cambridge (ESOL Examinations), British Council and IDP Education.
So the US had been dismissed as being too hard to get into; and Canada did not offer the right solution to the problem of how to stay out of India and eventually get into the US. Suddenly Australia seemed an attractive option. Pranav had learned that the programs Australia offered were quite competitive with the ones offered by universities in Canada and the UK. A common way that Australian institutions market themselves in India, for instance, is by showing that not only the course fees are lower in Australia compared to the UK, but also living expenses. IDP, Australia’s biggest recruiter of overseas students, even hands out flyers with ‘statistics’ showing this. Furthermore, Australia is promoted as a clean and safe country, making it a nice place to live. This kindles feelings of wanting to be there and further triggers imaginations of life abroad (contrasting with India’s apparently lower quality of life). Thus, Pranav became more and more interested in what he was hearing. It seemed that Australia, unlike the US, also had a very efficient way of handling student visa applications, with very clear and easy-to-follow steps. The most important thing about Australia though was that it seemed relatively clear how one could stay there after graduation.

Pranav was just one of the many students I would meet that day at the cricket tournament. He was clearly ill at ease with the fact that studying in Australia had become linked to the whole business of migration. Yet his narrative also showed that migration had been part of his own plans as well. Where his case seemed to differ from, for instance, Sujit’s, was that he was adamant that migration was secondary. As I would come to realize in later interviews with other students, Pranav was not alone in emphasising study as the main motivating factor for being in Australia. Yet, as the rest of this chapter will also show, it was often difficult, for a variety of reasons, to maintain this position.

Finding the Right Destination

Questions in literature about leaving (see for instance Helweg 1986, 1992) are often about the more general process of detaching yourself from a particular location, moving on and then attaching yourself to another location abroad. Leaving, in this sense, is a long process. In the case of Pranav, the whole process of leaving India had taken a number of years. It is important to note that this desire to go abroad was something that developed over time, while other alternatives had also been examined. When analysing these narrations of motivations it does not always make sense to think about these processes (of deciding to go abroad) in purely rational terms. Decisions are not made in a purely rational, logical way. Equally, information on how the whole plan will work out in practice, what the end result will be, is not always examined in such a way that it leads to clear, (thought to be) fool-proof plans. This is perhaps surprising, given the financial risks involved. As Ravi’s story will show, the imagined outcome of the plan conceived does not always match with reality.
Ravi’s wish to go abroad mostly stemmed from a life-long exposure to countless Indian movies with their idealized images of the West neatly woven into them. “The West always seemed so glamorous there. Like a place you would want to be,” he said, plucking his circle beard in a pensive way. He clicked his tongue and shook his head as if to say that he should have known better. Yet, most of what he told me that afternoon at the cricket tournament was about his desire to go abroad, and how for a long time he had not really known how he could go abroad, and also where to. For some reason the US had never appealed to him very much, he explained, referring to how other students often talked about failed US student visa applications. “I don’t know, everybody always seems to be going there.” In fact, studying in the US had never been a realistic option to begin with. “Too expensive,” he explained. He had learned of Australia from seniors in his college who were planning on going there when he was still studying for his final exams. He had stayed in touch with a number of them and had learned that the opportunities were good in Australia. “They made it sound real easy, you know,” he told me. “Like it would be no trouble at all to get a PR.” Pushing him on this, it turned out that Ravi had actually never met these ‘guys’ but one of his batch mates had once told him about them. This ‘staying in touch’ Ravi talked about mostly meant that he had stayed posted on how they were doing. When asked about it he replied that he thought they had ended up “in the Gold Coast, or something”; they were not in Melbourne, he knew that for sure. But he also hadn’t heard from them in a long while. He had once sent them a mail but they had never bothered to reply.

In Ravi’s case, leaving India was an idea that had initially come from ‘others’. Friends in college had been talking about it; when the family would come together references were made to people of Ravi’s age who had been married off to people living abroad; movies had shown desirable images of the abroad; and besides that there had just seemed to be this general buzz about ‘going abroad’ present all the time. It was hard to put his finger on, he agreed. “It was just there a lot,” he said. And then one day, “after a lot of trouble getting all the necessary documents”, he had found himself at the airport, surrounded by at least 30 relatives who all wanted to give him some “extremely important last advice,” which had annoyed him immensely. “I was so nervous for what was to come,” he explained. “I just wanted to get on that plane and leave.” And he did. His flight took him from Chennai to Singapore and then on to Melbourne. “I was constantly thinking am I doing the right thing? I still don’t know actually.” I heard the same doubts from many other students when narrating how they had to come to the decision to leave India, to study abroad, meanwhile keeping certain migration (though by no means very solid) strategies in the back of their minds. Ravi did not have a clear-cut plan when I met him in the waiting lounge of the sports center where the cricket matches were to take place. Two years lay ahead of him and he, like Pranav, had
figured that a lot could change in this time. On the one hand a more permanent stay out of India seemed necessary because of financial obligations, yet on the other hand there were two years ahead of them during which a lot of other practicalities such as finding a job and studying itself would have to be dealt with.

The way leaving is experienced is often relative to the reasons students have for doing so in the first place. Leaving is first of all about leaving home, leaving family behind, and it often means not being very clear about when one will come back. Yet this same leaving is also about the idea of arriving somewhere else, not just stepping off the plane and going through customs, but also arriving as a successful migrant - with an Australian permanent residency in one’s hand. In that sense, leaving also becomes about leaving the times behind when one could only dream of such a thing. Yet the reality of now – making it happen – would often sink in far deeper, and far quicker, than expected on arrival.

**ARRIVING**

_The Myth of Arrival_

Another quiet Saturday morning, one week after the cricket tournament, and Caulfield campus looks abandoned. It not turned nine yet, the doors of the gym are still closed and it will take at least an hour before the campus library sees its first visitors. Near the bus stop, where the bus that shuttles between the Clayton and Caulfield campuses leaves, Rohit is busy putting all sorts of things in a rented mini-van. A week earlier he had invited me to join him and the other Yuva members on a trip to the Hindu temple located on the outskirts of Melbourne. “We are going to play Holi,” he had cheerfully explained, and advised me not to bring any clothes that I was very attached too. Giving him a hand putting some of the boxes in the van, he told me that they had been up all night, preparing dishes such as _pani puri_29, which they were planning to sell from a market stall on the temple grounds. Meanwhile Ravi had already taken a seat in the mini-van, and so had Sujit, both laughing about something and busy with the CD-player, getting it to play the right Bollywood song to get everyone into a festive mood for Holi.

Once everything is loaded into the van we slowly make our way out of Melbourne’s inner suburbs and into the outer ones. For Ravi, it is the first time he’s been anywhere other than Melbourne’s Central Business District and the immediate surroundings of the Caulfield and Clayton campuses. Staring out of the window he comments: “This is what I don’t like about Melbourne,” he said. “There is nothing there,” he added.

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29 Also known as _gol gappas_. The snack is usually associated with Maharashtrian coastal areas and Mumbai.
“After a while you stop noticing it,” a friend offers in consolation. Ravi did not seem convinced though, still staring out of the window, seeing row after row of the same type of bungalows disappear into the horizon, only interrupted by the occasional Safeway, MacDonald’s or petrol station. Later that day he would explain how, in his first week, he had gone outside one evening and had discovered that all the streets were empty. He had wondered where everybody was, a question quickly answered by one of the guys he was staying with who had explained that they were all inside, watching television. Although this was something he had done back in India too - spending most evenings in front of the television watching Tamil soaps and movies - somehow he had expected more of life in a western country. In India the streets were always crowded, he explained. He had liked that. “It is more lively than here,” he said. “Less quiet, less death.” Interestingly this contrasted markedly with one of the reasons he had given for wanting to “go for an Australian residency,” which had to do with the perceived quality of life in Australia. The quality of water was thought to be better, the roads and the infrastructure in general better organized, less air pollution, rules less negotiable, more orderly, and generally quieter, just not as noisy and busy as India.

Community ‘Under Construction’

After we had arrived at the Lord Shiva Vishnu Temple and the stall had been set up, all the pots and pans taken out of the van, and the Holi celebrations could begin. The temple grounds, normally empty but for a couple of parked cars, quickly filled up with people, and most of the stalls were doing good business. Food was widely available, from masala dosas to Banarasi paan, and most of the Mehendi stalls were drawing considerable crowds. Editors from local Indian newspapers such as Indian Voice and South Asia Times could be found handing out the latest editions. A DJ was playing Bollywood hits and Punjabi style songs, and a mass of people had formed in the center of the field, dancing enthusiastically to his choice of music. In front of the temple itself things were a little quieter, with families walking in and out, some taking pictures, others catching up on the latest gossip. Inside priests were busy taking care of the various rituals and accepting devotees offers for the God.

Previously, Pranav had told me that he did not have any family members living abroad, other than some distant cousins in the US, but he was not really in contact with any of them. When he arrived a friend was waiting for him at the airport though. “He is a PR holder. He came here as a student,” Pranav explained. He stayed with this friend for the first two or three weeks, after which he moved into a house with other Indian students. When asked how he knew these people he said they were simply friends who had been introduced to him by a colleague from his work in India. “See,
one of the girls on my team had this boyfriend in Australia. So she introduced me to
him and he then let me stay at his place.” By asking around, Pranav had then learned
of a room available in a large house not too far from Caulfield campus. All those who
were staying there were Indian students, something which had comforted him in a
way, although he hesitated a little to admit this. “I did not come here only to interact
with other Indians you know,” he explained. “I also want that foreign experience, of
meeting new people.” So far he had not had much luck with that though, he admitted.
“ Australians do not seem to want to talk to Indians much. I don’t know why that is.”

Besides Ravi, Pranav already had some connections in Australia (friends of his
former colleague’s boyfriend), yet he had not stayed in touch with them. Once he had
moved he had found himself “way too busy with uni” and finding a job, and similarly
“these guys also had their own lives to think about”, and were working “quite hard”
most of the time. “We just drifted apart,” he added. “I am not even sure if I still have
their phone numbers.” Many students would tell similar tales, often characterized by
a lack of ties with the more established Indian community. Some, like Pranav, did stay
with Indians who had arrived in Australia earlier, and who were now PR holders, but
this had not led to becoming part of the what one might call ‘the Indian community’.
Chatting with those who came to Australia often more than 20 years ago, and who had
obtained Australian passports long ago, I quickly understood why; their opinions of
these newcomers were often very harsh. Many appeared to perceive Indian students as
profiteers, using the ‘system’ for something it was not designed for. ‘They’ on the other
hand had come to Australia under skilled migration programs and saw themselves as
genuine migrants. Many also seemed to be of the opinion that these students simply
bought their way into Australia. A prominent community leader even remarked that:
“these guys go to these cheap universities; it is no surprise that they all end up as taxi
drivers.” It seemed to be ‘common knowledge’ among Indian community members
that the majority of Indian overseas students were enrolled in low-ranking universities
and colleges. Many said that they would never let their own children study there, let
alone encourage them to mingle with students going there. The general image of
such students was that they came from the new Indian middle classes who now have
the money to study abroad, though cannot afford to send their children to the better
Australian universities such as University of Melbourne or Monash University. Indian
overseas students were often equally aware of how they were seen by these Indian
members. This tension was certainly present during the Holi festivities where the two
groups hardly seemed to mingle.

Back to Playing Holi
While sitting behind the Yuva market stall, watching some of the club’s members fill
pani puris and sell them to passersby, making quick conversation and trying to avoid
spilling colored powder in the rest of the food they were trying to sell, Sujit sat down
next to me. His clothes were still clean and he was busy talking into his cell phone. When he hung up he asked me why I was not playing Holi like the others, pointing in the direction of the center of the temple grounds where many could be found dancing and singing. I returned the question by asking why he was not doing the very same thing. He shrugged and kept quiet for a while, the happy yells from the children in the mini Ferris wheel coming from behind us, mixing with the deep bass of the music being played by the Punjabi DJ. “This is not for me man,” he said. “Holi in India is very different. I would celebrate it with my friends.” Weren’t these then his friends? I wanted to know. Earlier he had told me how he was sharing a house with some Monash students and he had actually referred to them as friends. “That’s not what I mean. I mean, my real friends. I have just met these guys. We don’t share anything with each other.” Weren’t they all here as Indian students, was that not something they shared? “Yeah but you all come here with your own worries. You don’t share that with each other.” He remained vague about what the worries he was talking about were. He had only arrived in Australia about six weeks earlier and had just started his first semester at CQU. When I asked him if PR was part of the worries, he repeated again that he probably wouldn’t have any problems getting one with his masters in accounting. “It is not that, man. PR I will get, I think. It is about now most of all. I need a job. Money is running out.” The job search had been going on for a couple of weeks now and meanwhile he had seen the money which his father had given him for living expenses dwindle. It was these things that were on his mind most of the time now. Things he felt he could not really share with the other guys he lived with. True, they were in a similar situation, but they too were busy finding jobs, or actually having one, and, of course, studying. Yet recalling the argument that migration is a gendered affair, perhaps sheds light on the situation Sujit found himself in. What he was experiencing heavily depended on how he was sharing his life with other male Indians. Being sons, having grown up in middle class families, expectations were high. Admitting that one was not meeting these ‘high expectations’ (however temporarily this might be) would also cause loss of face. Moreover there was always the risk of such news traveling back to India, causing embarrassment for the family back home.

And now he was sitting on a stretch of grass behind a market stall selling Indian snacks to raise money for an Indian student club he admitted to not even being a member of. Meanwhile the Holi celebrations were in full swing and we were regularly interrupted as Indian students from other universities came to the Monash stand to wish everybody a “Happy Holi” by smearing marigold yellow, bright pink, or an almost poisonous looking green on people’s faces and hair. The local Indian
papers, of which there are at least six in English\textsuperscript{31}, would later report that some 20,000 people had visited the Holi festivities. Talking about it afterwards the opinions on how the day had gone differed greatly between the two groups, community members and students. Whereas the community members had seen it as a day of Indian culture, being among Indians, and celebrating an Indian festival, the students had mostly commented on how different Holi celebrations were in India, and how Australian the whole day had felt. This last remark referred to the way the local Indian community had organized the festivities and behaved during the day. Although the students had taken part in the day just like all the others, the Indian community remained a group of people to which they could not see themselves belonging. Although most of the Indian students had come to Australia with the idea of obtaining an Australian residency at some point, during the day there had been a clear divide between the ‘Indians’, and the ‘Australians’ - the local Indian community. While the students could imagine themselves becoming these ‘Indians’, for the time being they still had a long way ahead of them. Moreover, although they could see themselves becoming NRI’s (Non Resident Indians), perhaps even with a foreign passport, it was by no means sure if Australia would be the country in which they would finally settle. These feelings of ambivalence about their own imagined future as well as their current role and place colored the day just as the Holi powder did.

\textit{The Most Liveable City (Melbourne) Is (Not) New York}

One of the most frequent responses students would give when asked why they had come to Melbourne was that they had heard that the city had recently been voted as ‘most liveable city’\textsuperscript{32} and they had expected Melbourne to be like New York. Ravi, for one, had quickly concluded that it was not New York. Having already spent some time in the Melbournian suburbs he was convinced the city was nowhere near the way New York was. Interestingly though, almost none of the students I met had ever been to New York, nor did they have friends or family living there. When asked about what they knew of New York they mostly claimed to have heard about it “from other people’s stories,” and of course they had seen things about it on TV. How then had they come to equate Melbourne with New York? When I asked this question to Rohit later on, he said: “The biggest shock for most [of us] who come here from India is that

\textsuperscript{31} Most Indian papers appear once in a month. Popular are: Indian Voice, Bharat Times, Indian Link, South Asia Times, Indo Times (also available in Punjabi) and Indus Age. Other papers are also available, though printed in smaller numbers. Besides Indian papers there are also a number of local Sri Lankan papers such as Eelamurasa Fortnightly and Uthayam. Papers are usually available in Indian grocery shops and shops selling South Asian movies and music.

\textsuperscript{32} According to the Economist Intelligence Unit. Every year a list of most liveable cities is published. In 2004 this was Melbourne, in 2005 Vancouver. Other cities such Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane also score high in the top ten.
Melbourne is so slow. This is something they had not expected of a western city.” Apparently, the archetypal western city is New York. “This is something you grow to expect when you leave India. That is the thing,” Sujit had said. But the reality turns out to be different, not so lively, not so fast. Basically, it turned out not to be the way it was imagined. “These students, they find that hard here. Newcomers experience that as problematic,” Rohit also explained.

Although Melbourne had been a little disappointing to Sujit, this was not something he was very bothered about at the time we met. He was too preoccupied with finding a job. His father had paid for his first semester fees and although they had “shown to the visa people” that the family could also afford to pay for the subsequent three semesters, in reality the situation was somewhat different. Students like Pranav, Ravi and Sujit come from middle class families that in a local Indian context may be considered well-off in the sense that they are home-owners, highly educated, English speaking, able to afford modern conveniences such as computers, TV’s, cars, and even, at times, trips abroad. Yet, they usually do not have the ‘cash’ to simply pay for two-years worth of college fees and the additional the living costs a student will incur staying abroad. They are, however, able to take out student loans by giving the bank enough guarantees in the form of fixed assets (houses, land titles, gold) and thus convince DIMIA (the migration authorities) to grant a student visa. Often, however, the guarantees given are based on an over-estimation of the value of these assets. The idea is often that once the student visa has been granted, the student will find a way to take care of matters abroad himself.

It is then important to realize that Indian students do not arrive with just carefully packed suitcases but also with the type of heavy mental baggage that airlines do not charge for. As sketched at the beginning of this section, the Indian students have ‘arrived’ in the sense that after carefully having planned their ways out India, they are now in Australia, about to start their first semesters. Yet, arriving also means being confronted with the reality of now being in a place which previously only existed in the imagination. In addition the reality of having to make it work is also there. Many students admitted to having convinced their parents of letting them go abroad, taking out high student loans, mortgaging family assets or property, based on the idea that they would get a residency in Australia. Yet, many were also aware that they did not quite meet the criteria, and some had not bothered to inform their parents of this, knowing that it would just worry them. Whereas most students in the first few months after having arrived in Australia give themselves time to get used to the place, often not working in the first semester at all, for our overseas Indian students (pocket) money often runs out fast. Playing Holi was in this sense not only an opportunity to celebrate an Indian festival, but also a watershed moment when the settling into Australia period came to an end.
LETTING GO

The Symptomatic Indian Middle Class
The Indian students on whose life-strategies we have zoomed in here are typically products of the (established) Indian middle class. When it comes to the Indian middle class, the general opinion seems to be that they must be the ones that profit the most from the economic changes that India has undergone since the liberalizations of 1991. As Salim Lakha (1999: 251) writes: “To foreign investors and government officials, the middle class is a potential market and a testimony to the country’s economic progress.” Not only is the idea very much alive that this is a group of people that profits considerably from these developments, but also that others (most of all foreign investors) will profit from the way this class seems to benefit from the economic growth. Newspaper and other articles that have been written on this often give a rather fleeting impression of how this class lives and how simultaneously India slowly seems to be reinventing itself because of this.

The new India is a very different place. Walk into the dazzling shopping malls in Hyderabad or any other Indian city and the signs of a transformation in the lifestyle, spending habits and mentality of an entire class are etched into the landscape – busy roads, bright street lighting (even Delhi roads were Stygian a few years ago), neon lights, huge billboards and hordes of frenzied shoppers. (The Times, February 4, 2004)

It is clear that global flows influence the way the Indian middle classes live their lives. A visit to the newly built malls in Koramangala, one of Bangalore’s more popular neighbourhoods for the (new) middle class, confirms just how much these ‘middle class lifestyles’ are influenced by global (read ‘western’) styles of clothing, eating and drinking. Yet there seems to be something explicitly simplistic about this notion of how global/western oriented these lifestyles are. And many studies hint at just that. When debating such malls, full of western outlet stores and fast-food restaurants, articles will describe how they are filled with women in ‘traditional’ sari’s, and how, for instance, such fast-food restaurants serve Mudaliar snacks and Kerala appams. This hybridity of various styles that compete, mix and mingle with each other produce a peculiar narrative on the way Indians deal with modernity and globalization. For the media it has become a popular way of dealing with questions regarding the ‘modern Indian’. As Leela Fernandes argues: “media representations increasingly depict India’s shifting relationship with the world economy through images of a productive hybrid relation between the national and the global.” (2000: 612)
Implicit in most of these representations is that we are dealing with a group of people who are riding the waves of economic development, profiting from the new opportunities that come with it, and how this has given them access to products and ideas from outside India. Such representations contrast rather effectively with large groups of people who very clearly do not seem to profit from these very same developments, who do not have access to expensive (foreign/new) products and who are perhaps used/exploited by the Indian middle classes for their own benefits. This contrast is sometimes depicted as ‘islands of prosperity, oceans of poverty’. As Gadgil and Guha (1995) already argued 10 years ago, “there is a direct relationship between ‘the obesity clinics’ that sprout up in Madras, and the fully one-third of the Indian people who cannot afford to buy enough food to keep their body and soul together.” (see Mawdsley 2004: 88) Many articles dealing with the Indian middle class seem rather preoccupied with making similar points.

This ‘contrasting’ (rich-poor, developed-underdeveloped, clean-dirty, new-old) is an often-returning feature when discussing the Indian middle class. And in a way this is not surprising, as there does indeed appear to be a huge gap between the different classes in India. Walking down MG Road in Bangalore towards the corner where three five-star hotels are located (The Taj, Oberoi and Park Hotel), turning left towards Ulsoor Lake, one would end up at the Philips campus where thousands of IT professionals work in a highly modern environment. The office overlooks a large slum area where there are no proper sanitary facilities, the residents of which use the sidewalk across the road passing by Philips as an area to defecate. It is this paradox of having a rather chic office building, where most employees make at least 20,000 per month, on one side of the road, and a sidewalk where people defecate, on the other side, that colours many descriptions of the ‘reality’ of the so-called new India.

The Strength of Weak Ties

While it is often shown that the Indian middle class is a minority group profiting from developments that do not seem to help other larger groups of people (and in fact often seem to make their lives even worse, see, for example, Jan Breman [2004, 2001, 2000]), Indian middle class modernity is also contested, as many writers argue that it is this group in particular that holds on to old conservative Hindu values, including caste. Taking such commentary into account, one ends up with a rather confusing mix of images that has also coloured the daily lives of the Indian students who have come to Australia. They originate from the Indian middle class that is supposed to profit the most from the economic liberalizations and growth. They are also the ones who are the most ‘visible’ in the sense of the lifestyles that come with such economic progress; and as William Mazzarella (2006) also concluded, Indian middle class visibility often also leads to rather archetypical images of modernity of the type that most academics and also journalists feel the need to correct. “Middle class behaviour is figured as
Pictures 3, 4 & 5: Examples of how the global and local is imagined in popular media.
symptomatic of the social contradictions that beset Indian modernity. The severity of the diagnosis is only heightened by the implications that precisely the middle classes should know better."\(^{33}\)

One contradiction that is often poorly acknowledged in all of this is the highly present desire among young middle class Indians to leave India and start a new life somewhere else. As Johanna Lessinger (2003: 171) writes, “today a great many young people in the middle-class families of urban India begin to strategize in their early teens, manoeuvring to acquire the kind of training which will permit them to emigrate successfully and mobilizing the networks connecting them to previous immigrants wherever possible.” Looking back at the case studies presented so far, guys such as Pranav, Ravi and Sujit, certainly belong to the group Lessinger brings to the fore. Yet where she presents it as a rather normal and accepted thing to do, I hesitate in doing so. What are we to do then with these images that are presented to us of the Indian middle classes elsewhere: that of a successful group of people profiting from the economic boom? In order to understand this apparent contradiction better, it is necessary to further investigate the way they make their way into the world and to question the particular emigration strategy they finally choose. The following chapters will certainly add further to our understanding of this.

A Culture of Arriving

Indian students are looking for a permanent stay abroad yet none of what the students had brought to the table so far had to do with intentions to live permanently in Australia. This further questions the permanency of ‘permanent’, and leads us to ask if they attach ideas of temporariness to the way they imagine profiting from their future PR’s. In this sense, the situation is highly complex: although the students would sometimes refer to an undefined point in the future when they might return to India again (a common theme in migration literature, often framed in terms such as ‘myth of return’, see for instance Cohen & Gold 1997), the motivation for doing so was first and foremost about getting a residency outside India. An Australian residency, they believe, will not only give them a residency in a ‘western’ or ‘developed’ country, but also a way into the rest of the world. Where an Indian passport is seen as limiting in terms of traveling to other countries, an Australian residency is perceived to be a solution to this problem, giving easier access to other countries such as the UK and the US. Often the students had never seriously considered doing their masters in India from the start. Although many had sat certain entrance tests, either they had done this because their parents had wanted them to, or simply because friends were also doing so. The way these students saw their futures was somehow, oddly, disconnected

\(^{33}\) Paper available online. No date mentioned. Checked on 30\(^{th}\) of May 2006.
from opportunities in India. Although many had actually taken a job after graduation - and in some cases even made quite a decent salary (certainly by Indian standards) - they talked about this period as if it was a temporary phase in which they were busy figuring out where their true futures lay. Often this did not seem to have to do with a sense of belonging in terms of what they had ‘known’ all their lives, but more with a ‘desired’ and/or ‘aspired’ sense of belonging, of wanting to be somewhere else. And this directly linked to their ‘middle classness’, where being in the middle of things certainly felt like a daily reality. Although India was growing economically and the job market was developing in a positive way, they were still a large group, competition for seats in the better universities was high and the long application processes for jobs in the most desired IT companies wearing.

When talking about their motivations for leaving India, the students would regularly mention that their imagined life abroad was largely based on communications with people to whom they were only marginally connected. Yet, they talk as if the concept of ‘abroad’ had always been present in their lives. They were not only influenced in their desire to go abroad by rather obvious impulses generated by Bollywood or other media images (by no means limited to India as for instance Wanning Sun (2002) shows for China), but also simply by the fact that ‘other’ people were, they perceived, constantly talking about life abroad. These ‘other’ people formed a very broad category to which not only people they knew personally belonged (friends, family, college mates) but also a wider network of acquaintances who were known to these people (of which they had heard etc.). This ‘culture of migration’ is less the result of direct migration from one location to another, and much more of the various notions about life abroad which come to the fore during daily interactions.
In an article on Mexican migration, William Kandel and Douglas S. Massey speak of a culture of migration in the sense of international migration becoming so deeply rooted that “the prospect of transnational movement becomes normative: young people “expect” to live and work in the U.S. at some point in their lives.” (2002: 981) Other studies, such as the one conducted by Katy Gardner (1993, 1995) on Sylheti (Bangladeshi) migration and previously mentioned studies on Japanese-Brazilian immigrant workers in Japan by Tsuda (1999), show something similar. Using a stochastic sequential choice framework, Deléchat further analyses some of the concepts introduced (network theory, cumulative causation) by Massey et al. Based on this analysis she concludes that: “the decision of Mexican household heads to work in the USA is influenced mostly by the impact of previous migration experience, family network, and prevalence of migration in the origin community on the costs and benefits of labor market entry…” (2001: 475-6). Even “individual heterogeneity” does not make much of an impact on the overall results.

It is studies such as these that further help our understanding of why people leave home for a new destination. Who and what influences this? Yet in the case of Indian students we are faced with another problem. A culture of migration may be present in India, one that influences young Indians to think about migration, about life abroad, yet this is a much less ‘clear’ and easily definable culture as the one described by the aforementioned scholars. For one, as stated before, these (family) networks are not as strongly present as some seem to argue. The families these students come from do know people abroad but they don’t form clearly traceable networks with them. And perhaps this is less necessary as there is a much more professional network (of migration and education agents) available which will gladly help out in this field (at a price of course).

Lessinger argues that virtually every urban, Indian middle class family now has some members living permanently abroad. Yet there are certainly some question marks that can be added here. As the previous section showed, the Indian middle class and its development is often depicted in a less nuanced way than is the reality. I will argue that it is also in this context that we should read the presumed transnational character of the Indian middle class. As my own research shows many Indian students do ‘know’ people in Australia, yet these are often people with whom they only stay in touch with for a very brief period, usually only at the beginning of their journey. Furthermore, ‘Family’ as Lessinger posits, should be understood in the loosest possible terms. Family, in the Indian sense, is often a rather loosely and broadly defined concept, in which even distant cousins are included. Yet it is clear that such linkages, however brief and weak they may be, certainly do play a part in the whole process of leaving India. Lessinger’s remarks in this regard deserve refining by examining further how networks such as these actually work. The argument small-worlds theorists (Urry 2004) make provides us with the tools to do just this. As the cases I presented in this
and other chapters show, it is not that difficult to ‘know’ somebody, through somebody else, somewhere else, and to utilize such acquaintances in one’s strategy to go or make it abroad. Most relevant here are Granovetter’s (1983) ‘strength of weak ties’ conclusions which showed that firm and strong networks are not always necessary to achieve a particular goal. In his research he showed that 84% of those people looking for a job found one through persons they only saw occasionally and did not know very well. I argue that we should interpret Lessinger’s remarks in a similar way: most middle class Indians know people abroad, yet they do not know all of them in the same way and connections are made and lost along the way.

And Then Letting Go

It is yet another Saturday morning. I am about to meet Pranav for an interview at the library on Caulfield campus. The semester break is approaching and most of the students are busy studying. The campus library is full of students finishing up projects or simply reading, making notes. We sit down and Pranav says he actually can’t talk long as he has to do a lot of studying himself this weekend. He just found a job in a call center and will be working a full 20 hours there this week. He will be in Sales, he explains, making calls to customers asking them if they are interested in changing energy providers. The job is far from appealing, he agrees, but better than working in some restaurant waiting tables as many of his friends do. We talk about general things (studying, finding a job, how it is to live with other students) and then suddenly Pranav announces that he has decided to change courses. “I found out that I won’t be able to get a PR with this course,” he says. I ask him how he had discovered this now. “I went to see this immigration agent in the city,” Pranav offers as an explanation. But at Holi you still thought it was not going to be a problem, I say. “Yeah, I did, but I also thought it would be easier you know.” Very simply put, Pranav thought that once he arrived in Australia, the rules would change and his course (Banking and Finance) would earn him enough points. But you have only completed one semester, I suggest, isn’t there still plenty of time for that to happen? “Who knows, nobody can give me that guarantee,” he sighs. Some of his housemates had told him the same, he said, and had suggested that he visit an agent. He had thought of nothing else for weeks, he said, finally making the decision to make an appointment with someone recommended by his friends. They had, in fact, all gone to see the same agent, whose name was familiar to me, as he had been mentioned by other students on a number of occasions. “He is really good that man,” Pranav added. “He will really help you,” at least that is the impression he had got from friends. The agent in question had given him free advice and suggested that he should change his course to a masters in accounting. He was now trying to arrange this with the university. It would mean having to do some extra units, which would cost extra money, but he had decided to spare his parents this news for now. They were still under the impression that he
would obtain a PR with his old masters and he did not want to worry them, he added. When he had asked his parents for permission to study in Australia, part of the plan to convince them had been to tell them about the prospect of getting a residency abroad. He had decided not to tell them, though, that he did not completely qualify for such a residency (at this stage). He had now decided to change courses, and once he had a PR he would finish his course in Banking and Finance, and realize his dream. The problem, though, was that the extra subjects he needed to take meant extra money, and for this Pranav decided to use his loan, hoping to make enough with his part-time job to pay for subsequent semesters.

Aside from the practical implications of his plan, what interested me most about his story was the remark that other students had suggested that he should visit an agent to determine his strategies regarding PR. The way he described it, the subject had come up on numerous occasions and other students had often asked him how he thought he would get a PR, since the course he was following would not lead to one. Slowly this had convinced Pranav that just hoping that things would work out was probably a mistake. Whereas earlier the suggestion of PR had irritated him, believing that this was something to worry about at a later date – “I am here for my education” – being among people who had far clearer plans had started to impact on his own strategies.

A couple of days later I ran into Sujit, busy shopping for groceries at the supermarket in the Caulfield shopping mall. He had just finished his exams and seemed to think they had all gone well. Meanwhile he had been busy looking for a job and had very recently managed to find one. He was now selling burgers at MacDonald’s, but he was unhappy with the limited number of hours he was able to work. He was hoping for a cash-in-hand job, which would allow him to work more, but so far without success. I noticed he was busy loading packs of Minute Noodles in his shopping basket. “I only like the ones with curry flavour,” he explained when he noticed me looking at him stocking up. “I usually have them with some chopped tomatoes,” he added. Such a ‘dinner’ would cost barely a dollar, and this way he would be able to save some more to pay for his next semester fees. He did not want his parents to pay for another semester, as it had been his own choice to come ‘here’.

These days he was not really in touch with any of the people he had met at the cricket tournament or Holi. He was still living at the same place but did not see his housemates much either, he explained. “They are equally busy man,” he remarked cheerfully. “They all have their own worries and things to do.” It did not seem to bother him much. He usually spent his free time chatting online with his family back in India. He had not been out of Melbourne yet, but would probably do so when he got his PR. “I am not here to enjoy myself man, first PR, then I will enjoy.” Ravi he barely remembered. In the weeks before I had tried getting in touch with him again but to no avail; he seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. Sujit had heard that
he had left for India some time ago but couldn’t really remember from whom he had heard this. I had heard similar rumors and it was around this time that I had them confirmed by one of his ‘closer’ friends. His homesickness had got the better of him, but apparently this was just a question of him missing his family a lot. His friends had suggested that it was probably a combination of a number of things: homesickness, not doing well in his studies, and also the financial pressure of the investment he had made. There was still time to take a loss and leave, so it seemed. Although it had clearly been a big decision for Ravi to make, others (his ‘friends’) had quickly moved on. There was something about his failure that others who had known him did not particularly feel comfortable discussing. It was almost as if by doing so, they would have to admit that most of them were taking similar risks too.

More Arriving Yet to Come

In this chapter we have followed a number of students in their narrations of reasons why they decided to leave India and how they ended up in Australia. We met them when they had just arrived and followed them during their first semester. It became clear that while many Indian students do end up applying for PR, not all come with very clear-cut plans about how to make this happen. Although the financial risks they run are considerable, the length of the process often creates a feeling of having plenty of time. Even if a degree does not lead directly to a PR, circumstances could easily change, students would reason. Yet, having arrived in Australia appears that their optimism about the future is not always justified, certainly if those who had already been there for a while were to be believed. Many would tell me how from the moment they got off the plane on Melbourne airport; the ‘buzz’ of PR had constantly been there. I was actually at a student house the day a newcomer arrived. His bags were not even unpacked before the conversation turned to PR. Although the student in question had enrolled himself in a ‘cookery’ course, a course providing a direct route to PR, it was still topic of discussion. The general debate appeared to be regarding how one could be sure that two years from now one would still be able to apply for PR. Similarly, an informant once remarked over coffee that the first thing his fellow housemates had asked him the day he arrived was: “what the hell are you doing there?” after they had learned that he had enrolled himself in an IT course at RMIT, which would offer no guarantee of a PR.

Letting go, the title of the final section of this chapter, very clearly refers to what is to come in the following chapters. Central to this dissertation are the ways the future is imagined among young Indian migrants who arrive as students in Australia. We have already seen some of their ideas change. They left India with ideas about how an Australian residency might be obtained, and what opportunities this PR might lead to. This came down to, on the one hand, a residency which provides a permanent stay out of India, enabling them to pay back their student loans, and on the other hand, an
entry ticket for (the rest of) the developed world, and of course hopefully (‘ultimately’) the US. Yet the road to Australian residency is long. Not least because overseas students are required to study for a minimum of two years before the points for having studied in Australia can be claimed. Arriving, the previous section, showed what happens in that very early phase when these students are newly arrived in Australia. Where a culture of migration influenced them to leave, a culture of migration was also waiting for them at the gate upon arrival. At home, in India, this culture of migration appears to have been very much about gaining a better ‘quality of life’, superior ‘lifestyles’, and living in the most ‘liveable city’. In Melbourne, however, they quickly found themselves in a much more negative culture which was largely the result of tensions and pressures generated by the long and winding road towards residency. It is on this road that we will follow them through the next semesters and summer holidays. Ideas of letting go will continue to play a part in this, as ideas about ultimate arrival will continuously be tested.

In the following chapter we will see what happens when newcomers (the Indian students) meet with ‘old-comers’, the local Indian community. How do they see each other and what expectations do they have of each other? In particular, the concept of ‘arrival’ will face an important reality check. The local Indian community is typically a product of skilled migration programs that were set up in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet the most visible section of the Indian community are shop and restaurant owners, as well as taxi drivers and others involved in jobs for which little education is required. How do students deal with this? It will undoubtedly raise questions about why one has left, and it will almost certainly mean that the idea of ultimate arrival will have to be reworked again.