Imagined mobility: migration and transnationalism among Indian students in Australia

Baas, M.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter 3:
Second Semester: Some History Lessons, As well as Learning the Hard Way
03. Second Semester:

Some History Lessons, as well as Learning the Hard Way

Lessons to be Learned and Understood
In the previous chapter it was described how for many Indian students, newly arrived in Australia, the first opportunity to meet the local Indian community came at the Holi celebrations held at the temple at Carrum Downs. Having arrived in Australia matters such as finding a place to live, looking for jobs et cetera have to be taken care of. Those students with contacts (family, friends or acquaintances) in Australia often lost touch with them once they had found a place to live. Reasons varied from being too busy with ‘other’ things to simply not being interested in maintaining the contact. Aside from these reasons though, it also appeared as if this was never supposed to be the case anyway. These contacts were never meant to remain long-lasting ones, something that was inherently understood from the start. This is rather surprising. The way international discourses and narratives on issues such as assimilation and integration take shape, one could argue that, in general, migrants are understood not only to have strong ties with people still living in the place of origin but to further strengthen these ties once they have migrated. Newcomers are imagined to quickly integrate in already locally established groups of migrants with whom they share a similar national/cultural background. Why then does this not appear to happen in the Australian case?

Central to this chapter will be the question of what role the local Indian community plays in the lives of Indian overseas students. Related to this are questions such as how the two groups perceive and interact with each other, as well as how they profit from each other. Important here will be the issue of exploitation, which regularly came up while talking about (part-time) jobs students had. In order to better understand where the Indian community itself originates from, we will have to explore the history of this community as well. It will be shown that although Indians could already be found in Australia at the beginning of the 19th century, the Indian

---

34 I am aware that the community as I present it here, and also in the previous chapter, could typically be understood to be a Hindu community. Yet, the FIAV (Federation of Indian Associations of Victoria) is not a purely Hindu organization and nor were all the participants of the Holi festivities Hindu. Among the Yuva students there were several Christians and Muslims. Festivities such as Holi are generally seen as a day when all Indians come together, irrespective of beliefs. It must of course be noted that there will also be Christian and Muslim Indians who will not attend such days since they do associate it with religious belief which they do not share.
A community that is visible today in Australia is actually the product of more recent developments; mainly skilled migration policies which were adopted in Australia in the 1960s and 70s. Community leaders, for instance, cannot generally trace back their family’s history in Australia beyond those years. The community prides itself in the fact that it was formed as the result of skilled migration programs that specifically targeted the higher educated foreigner. It will be argued that Indian students threaten this image the community has of itself; an image that they also ‘imagine’ (white/Anglo-Saxon) Australians to have of them. Although Indian students generally come to Australia to do their masters degree, which would certainly entitle them to the label of being ‘higher educated’, the fact that the majority undertake their degrees at lower ranking universities makes them ‘suspect’ in the eyes of the community. 

The local community is also aware of the high number of students who apply for PR after graduation, something which is underlined by the countless advertisements for migration and education agents in the local community papers. This, apparent migration industry further threatens the image the local Indian community has of itself and the way they imagine others see to them.

The Australian perspective on all this can also not be ignored here. Australia prides itself on being a multicultural nation in which numerous communities live together in harmony. Such celebrations take a very literal form on Harmony Day, held every year on the 21st of March. As the website describes, this day: “celebrates Australia’s success as a diverse society united as one family by a common set of values.” The site proudly explains that since 1945 over six million people have settled in Australia, and that more than 200 languages are spoken in Australia, ranging from English to Mandarin. Yet, Australians seem oddly absent from Indian students’ day-to-day lives. The masters courses they are enrolled are generally dominated by overseas students from other nationalities, mainly East and South East Asian countries. Being among other Indians, living with them, often also working for them, confirms their Australia experience as one of Indians-among-Indians-abroad. That said, they are in Australia, faced with Australian rules and regulations, studying at Australian universities, and they are part of daily life in a country where the majority is still (Anglo-Saxon/white) Australian. In order to better understand the relative place Australia (and Australians) take(s) up in this process towards PR, a broader perspective of Australian migration history and multiculturalism will be introduced.

---

35 http://www.harmony.gov.au/what-is-hd/index.htm It must be added that many Australians I met had never heard of Harmony Day. Although the day might not be a very well known one, the way the website presented it fitted in very well with the very visible country days held, for instance, on Federation Square, located in the heart of Melbourne. On such days a particular country or community would present itself with festivities and market stalls. India had such a day there once a year.
OUTSIDE THE COMMUNITY

Not Yet Non-Resident Indians

“We have all been in their shoes. We understand their awe, apprehension and nervousness.” So begins a short article published in the November (2005) edition of the local community paper *India Link*. The author, Sunil Gautam, continues: “But even after we have stepped out of their sneakers, it is still immensely fascinating to watch the next batch in action as they go about getting their bearings in a new place.” What Gautam is talking about are NAIs: Newly Arrived Indians, whom he describes as “an interesting bunch of wide-eyed young and not-so-young people who descend on our shores regularly.” NAIs are not yet NRIs (Non-Resident Indians), a category developed by the Indian government for taxation and related purposes. Officially an Indian is only considered NRI if he has been away from India for 183 days – roughly half a year – a status newly arrived Indians cannot yet claim. Although the term NAI is not commonly used, it does say something about the way the Indian community of Melbourne sees newcomers. They are not immediately considered part of the community; they must first go through some liminal phase during which they will find themselves in-between being resident- and non-resident Indians. In a way this period can be seen as a trial period; it will take time before others will see them as settlers; as people who will stay. Indian students form an odd category when it comes to this as, for one, they have at least two years to go before they can claim the much desired residency status. Besides that, students are not seen as ‘intentional’ migrants per se; in the eyes of the Australian government they are first and foremost temporary residents who will return to their homeland after graduation. That many of them end up becoming

---

36 Talking about something called the Indian community is problematic as, in practice, it does not exist. Not least because among Indians are there many differences in language (Hindu, Kannada, Malayalam, Punjabi, Tamil etc), places of origin (different cities, states, rural-urban, north-south), religion (Jain, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh) etc., that divide the community. It is also because of this that the FIAV (Federation of Indian Associations of Victoria) has so many member organizations that cater to specific groups within the larger community. Furthermore, an unknown number of Indians are not member of any of these specific organizations, may not even interact with other Indians in Australia on a regular basis, and might find the whole idea of being seen as belonging to a particular ‘community’ absurd. The way membership to a particular community is experienced warrants a dissertation by itself; yet it cannot be denied that from the outside - for instance, from the perspective of the Australian government - there is such an identifiable thing as an Indian community. My use of the word ‘Indian community’ first and foremost refers to the visible community of Indians in Australia. This, though, needs to be understood in light of a context-based situation. Indian students define the Indian community in terms of its visibility: shop and restaurant owners, taxi drivers, members of specific community based organizations etc. For the Indian community itself though, the perspective is more that of an insider. They simply understand the community to mean those people who are active in community based organizations. I will problematize this further at the end of this chapter.
Some History Lessons, as well as Learning the Hard Way

permanent residents is not ‘official’ policy. In interviews and discussions Indian community members will often suggest that Indian students are not supposed to stay, and some would even add that they are actually meant to return. Such remarks are, of course, made in light of the fact that the Indian community is well aware of the high number of Indian students who stay on after graduation.

The India Link was one of a number of Indian community papers that I regularly picked up from Indian shops that can be found all over Melbourne. One of these shops was located near the apartment I stayed in during my fieldwork. Regularly going there for groceries myself, I would often chat with the girls behind the counter; most of whom were also overseas students. One such girl was Sham, a 23 years old Punjabi Sikh, originally from the city of Ludhiana, now doing her masters in IT with Swinburne University. Having taken out an eight-lakh rupees loan, getting a PR was important for her. Falling short on points, though, it was by no means sure if her plan would actually come to fruition. This was one of the main reasons she was working “quite a lot”, seeing it as a way to pay for the next semester fees without having to use the loan.

The shop Sham worked in sells all the usual Indian articles available in hundreds of similar stores across the city. A whole range of spices and ready-made pastes from brands such as Gits, MDH and Patak; different types of rice ranging from Basmati to Andhra Ponni; paneer either imported from India or some local Australian variety; vegetables, deep frozen paratha’s, roti’s, idli’s; as well as cigarettes, magazines and the ever-present variety of international calling cards. As with most other such shops, there is also a section with non-food items such as Bollywood DVDs, religious items (statues and pictures of the Gods, incense, candles), and even Indian-style pressure and rice cookers.

As I walk into the shop one evening I notice a fresh pile of local Indian community papers such as the South Asian Times and the Indian Voice lying on the freezer. As I browse through them, Sham chats about her latest assignments and how well they have gone. Previously she had told me that she will have to take the subject again because she had been failed after being caught for plagiarism. In need of more money (about 2,500 dollars), and not willing to tell her parents about what had happened, she had applied for another job which was supposed to be TFN, meaning

---

37 The reason I have put official between quotation marks is because the Australian government’s policy in this regard is somewhat vague. On the one hand Australia is one of the few countries, with a large number of overseas students, that makes it possible to apply directly for PR after graduation, yet at the same time it often treats the phenomenon of students becoming residents as a problem. For instance, much is made of these students not ending up in the professions for which they had the skills (at least on paper). When Bob Birrell (2005) showed that nearly three quarters of Indian students manage to get a PR after graduation, this was certainly not seen as a successful outcome of official policy.

38 TFN stands for Tax File Number. When asked about their part-time jobs, students would usually make the distinction between cash-in-hand jobs and TFN jobs. They would either say “it’s a cash-in-hand job” or “I go on TFN.”
that she would have to pay taxes on the money she earned. Sham told me that she
would try to work her legal 20 hours there, but that she would try to keep her job with
the Indian store too, for which she was paid cash-in-hand.

Working for the Local Indian Community
Local Indian grocery stores, Seven-Elevens (often run by Indians or Chinese), as well
as Indian restaurants, petrol stations and car washes often employ Indian students to
work for them in the evenings. Sham, in that sense, was one of many. In the Indian
shop in question I met about five of them over the period of one year. Some only stayed
for a while, others had worked there for much longer and one had actually already
completed her degree and was now working there next to her job at Coles, a nearby
supermarket part of a much larger chain. A job in the grocery store is paid cash-in-
hand and thus (though not necessarily) less than minimum wage. But knowing that
there are plenty of ‘other’ students who would happily take on the job for that amount
of money is usually enough of an incentive to keep it on. The work isn’t very stressful
and the store is located in a rather fashionable suburb; all things considered, the girls
I met there were generally happy with their jobs. As the account, below, of another
student called Nandesh suggests though, cash-in-hand jobs are often the result of
unequal power relations. Employers are often aware of the financial situation students
are in and make use of this knowledge. Students themselves often realize that they are
being exploited and that this happens for this very reason. When trying to understand
the ambivalent relationship Indian students and Indian community members have
with each other, it is important to keep this in mind.

Nandesh Rao, a mature student (early thirties), doing his masters with RMIT,
had arrived in Melbourne not knowing much about his destination. His first job had
been as a kitchen hand. He got it not long after he had arrived in Melbourne. It had not
been a happy experience though. “I was warned not to work for Indian restaurants
but I did that anyway.” In total he worked there for two days, being paid eight dollars
an hour. “They really exploit you. They fully understand that you don’t have any other
choice.” By this he meant that as an Indian student you simply need a job not just to
pay back (part of) your student loan but also to take care of living expenses. “They
did not pay me for the first day because they were afraid I might not come back the
second day.” Unsurprisingly, the job was cash-in-hand which had given the restaurant
the option to pay less than minimum wages. The restaurant in question had been
located in Dandenong, a suburb known for its large South Asian presence. “The work
was hard. I never thought I would do such a job. They give you a small sink with two
faucets and you have to do that work for five hours.” In between he had not been
allowed to go for a break, also not if there were no dishes to be washed. “Lots of people
want that job so they know they can behave that way.”
In need of money Nandesh moved on to a carwash where he started as a ‘trainee’. The carwash was part of a petrol station, not too far from Victoria Park. He only worked there once though. “Indians run that petrol station. So what else can you expect?” Nandesh said without a hint of irony. It was very hard and tiring work and it was unclear how much or when he would get paid. “These experiences tell you what not to do in life.” After that all his jobs were in call centers, which usually meant selling something over the phone. As these jobs were all tax-paying ones, he was not able to work more than the allowed 20 hours, but as such companies would at least pay minimum wages, he would make more than working in a restaurant or car wash.

Nandesh was telling me all this while drinking a steaming cup of chocolate milk that he had just purchased from a machine along the corridor. Having finished his classes for the day, he was planning on going to the ‘computer lab’ after the interview so that he could work on an assignment. In the evening he would have to go to his job again which involved calling customers to get them to donate money to a charity fund. The little free time he had he usually spent reading, watching TV and chatting online with family and friends, a place where he was also hoping to meet his future girlfriend; preferably one with an Australian residency so that she could sponsor his. He wasn’t sure how great his chances of this were though. Having worked for local Indian companies, the image he now had of the local community was hardly positive. He had heard others’ stories of similar experiences and it did not strike him that he would receive a warm welcome from a local Indian family if he were to introduce himself as the future partner of one of their daughters. In spite of this, Nandesh was focused on getting an Australian residency and, at least for the time being, establishing himself in Australia. No longer residing in India, and also no longer newly arrived, but by no means anywhere near to being a non-resident Indian, he was now finding himself in a phase where he was in-between all those things.

In the Area of Migrants
Nandesh, like many other Indian students, had found accommodation in a low cost area of the city. Often these were suburbs with a high number of immigrants and associated businesses. Footscray was one such suburb that I got to know quite well during my fieldwork. It was not just an area where many students had found accommodation; Footscray is clearly a ‘migrant area’. Asian and African grocery shops dominate the street scene, and generally Melbournians associate this image with the neighborhood. A part of the inner western suburbs, the area has never been particular appealing, not least due to the presence of heavy industry nearby. In the 1950s and 1960s Greek, Italian and Croatian migrants started arriving here. The Vietnamese followed in the 1970s and 1980s. Recently the area has become more popular with Algerian, Ethiopian, Moroccan
and Sudanese migrants. In many ways Footscray comes across as the stereotypical area where migrants end up, set up shop and start living their ‘migrant’ lives; lives which now, according to many studies, are characterized by transnationalism because of the many, regularly maintained, linkages between home and host-land. Travel agents take care of the tickets to facilitate this traveling in a practical sense, while grocery shops selling cheap calling cards (besides ‘products from home’), take care of maintaining contact on a day-to-day basis.

Although, on the one hand, clearly a place of settlement, the suburb of Footscray is certainly not part of how Indian students imagine their futures in Australia. As became clear in the previous chapter, even in that very early stage of arrival ideas about the imagined future are adapted to fit in more with the perceived reality of a situation, yet Footscray hardly fits the picture. Still the area plays an interesting role in the way the imagined future takes shape or gets reshaped. While it is, on the one hand, a well-known immigrant suburb where Indians have also moved to and set up shop, it is, on the other hand, referred to as an area where one does not want to live precisely because of what it is known for. Footscray, in many ways, is synonymous with a failure to make it and, similarly, the notion of having settled for something that was not supposed to be.

Students would describe neighborhoods such as Footscray and Dandenong as areas where in the past Indians had settled but where they did not see themselves belonging. These Indians had set up restaurants and shops there and although they would often make use of such shops (to buy Indian spices, movies or simply pick up one of the local Indian newspapers), they equated these businesses with an ‘older version’ of migration. They saw themselves as being highly qualified, globally in demand, having come to Australia to study at Australian universities and subsequently apply for residency, which would, in turn, open up the rest of the world to them. Running a shop or restaurant was simply not something they saw themselves doing. Yet, as mentioned earlier, many students actually had jobs in these very restaurants and shops; jobs which also colored the image they had of the local Indian community. Given that stories of exploitation often made it into narrations on these part-time jobs, it is unsurprising that this was often a rather negative image.

In order to get a better understanding of the relationship between the Indian community and Indian overseas students, a closer look at the history of Indians settling in Australia is necessary. It will be important to note from the start that this history does not always connect well with the current make-up of the locally established Indian community in bigger cities such as Melbourne and Sydney. It is not my intention therefore to imply a linear traceable process of Indian migration to Australia. On the
Some History Lessons, as well as Learning the Hard Way

contrary, the history of Indian arrivals in Australia knows many ruptures and even full stops as incoming numbers were put on hold for long periods, sometimes decades long. In many ways the early migration of Indians to Australia is a forgotten one, replaced by images of more recent arrivals who only trace their origins back to the 1960s and no further. The essential point is that although there may be a longer history of Indian migration to Australia; it is not necessarily something recent migrants can relate to. Even though the established Indian community talks about the arrival of the student-migrant as a recent phenomenon, in the context of the history of Indians in Australia, they themselves are also a fairly recent happening. More specifically, we will see that the previously mentioned discontent about Indian students studying at universities and colleges with poor reputations, allegedly harming the perceived image others have of the Indian community (highly educated, working as professionals, successful), contrasts in a rather puzzling way with the actual, and long-held, image Australians have of the Indian community.

A COMMUNITY HISTORY

The Convict Remark

Australia, in the international imagination, is usually portrayed as a white, Anglo-Saxon nation. It is usually in the context of this ‘portrait’ that Australian policy makers and social scientists celebrate the alleged harmonious functioning of its multiculturality. As Marika Vicziany, Director of the Monash Asia Institute writes, talking about how much has changed since the 1950s when Australian immigration was still colored by the White Australia policy:

It [Australian society] is multicultural rather than assimilationist. It gives public prominence to people of merit regardless of ethnic origins: for example the current mayor of Melbourne is a member of Melbourne’s large Chinese community. It sees the appointment to high office of people from a variety of backgrounds: for example Neville Roach, an Indian expatriate with a degree from the Mumbai University, was one of the advisors to the prime minister until he resigned over the Tampa issue. Ordinary Australians today value the relationship on the ground between Australia and Asia in thousands of different ways – we enjoy Asian food, travel to Asia, encourage Asian tourists to come Australia, we have a large Asian student population in our universities and colleges and we teach Asian studies at all levels of the Australian educational system. In particular the love for Asian food is an important symbol of multiculturalism. I say this because much of the community tension in large British cities like
Birmingham involves disputes and complaints about the sounds and smells coming from Asian households. And I have my own memories of pork versus mutton cultural conflict in Perth during the fifties and sixties. What we eat does not matter. (Vicziany, 2004: 181).

The ordinary Australians Vicziany speaks of here are, of course, Anglo-Saxons; descendents of the first new inhabitants to arrive on Australian shores. Anglo-Saxons, in similar portrayals of multicultural success, are usually seen as ‘true blue’ Australians – and the rest as newcomers, migrants, guests and so on. Apart from the fact that this ignores that Australia was of course inhabited before it became a British colony, it also manages to cloud the fact that the British were immigrants themselves. As Anglo-Aussies are commonly not perceived to be (have been) migrants themselves, this creates the illusion that others, who cannot be called Anglo-Aussies, arrived (much) later; at least long after they themselves had settled and built their lives in this new land. Although Asians were not part of Captain Cook’s ‘First Fleet’, bringing the initial settlers to Australian shores, Indians and other Asians were certainly not far behind them, as for instance Gopal (2004: 320) shows. This Anglo-Saxon Australian image of being-there-first is closely connected to another interesting construct. As many will have it, and Indians (community members and students alike) regularly mentioned during interviews, Anglo-Aussies are closely connected to a ‘convict past’. Australia started as a penal colony at the end of the 19th century, a situation which came to an end in 1868 when the final groups of convicts arrived. Remarks about this convict past usually came up when discussing issues such as racism, exclusion and other instances where Australian Anglo-Aussie hegemony was experienced by members of the established Indian community. For instance, remarks that you could not expect much from a group that was descended from convicts were not uncommon.

Indians generally equate Australia with a high standard of living, a safe and clean environment and good business opportunities. Australians themselves are seen as hard working, fair and open-minded. Asked point blank, the opinions on Australia and Australians tend to be fairly positive. The ‘convict remark’ would only come up when I, as a researcher, specifically asked about negative experiences with Australians, or when I was simply taking part in a conversation where life-as-a-migrant was topic of conversation, and my role of researcher was not taken into account. At times, the topic of work would come up, or issues with a landlord (or something else which had to do with daily life), and then suddenly the ‘convict remark’ would be made. This was usually done half-jokingly in order to play down its all too negative air. Although the remark was not meant seriously – I never had the idea that people really believed

40 ‘True blue’ is slang for totally Australian, also meaning ‘patriotic’. Originally true blue simply meant: genuine.
that this was the root of the alleged (bad, racist, untrustworthy) behavior they had experienced - the remark clearly tried to contest a perceived hegemonic situation by mocking it. I raised this once with one of my informants (Deepa) and she painted a rather illuminating picture, giving the example of her own sister and her husband, also living in Melbourne. Deepa’s sister had come to Melbourne as an international student herself years ago and was now a PR holder. She had married somebody from her own hometown Nagpur, who had already come to Australia as a skilled migrant. Originally, Deepa had no interest in becoming an Australian permanent resident. Her boyfriend was waiting for her in Nagpur where he had a good job, and she had never come to Australia with the idea of PR in mind. Financially it was also not very important to the family because they could well afford to pay for their daughters’ studies abroad. The issue of PR had come up regularly at her sister’s house though. In particular her brother-in-law failed to understand why she was not interested in PR. “He thinks I am making a big mistake. For him Australia is the best place to be in.” It was not that she did not enjoy being in Australia, she was just not that convinced that her sister and husband were living a much better life than they could back in India. But the discussions she had had with her brother-in-law about this had showed her something important: “you see once you make that decision to go for that [PR], you can’t really go back, and you can’t also understand why others would not want the same thing.” When she failed to see his arguments for staying in Australia, her brother-in-law had almost become angry. “You see, they cannot relate to my opinion on this because once they do that they have to start reviewing their own position in Australia. They can’t allow that because that just creates doubt. They need to believe in this”.

Many students who discussed their desire for PR with me would also hesitate to criticize Australia directly even though many of their stories on daily life clearly spoke of situations in which they had felt disadvantaged. This went beyond, for instance, the fact that as overseas students they were not eligible for the concessions on public transportation that ‘regular’ Australian students received. It was much more about situations where they had experienced either direct racist remarks or questions, or more subtle situations where they had felt excluded and perceived Australians to have been included. Similar tensions also came to the fore during discussions and conversation with members of the local Indian community. Despite many of them actually being Australians themselves, carrying Australians passports and having received ‘citizenship status’ years ago, in such narrations on Australia and Australians they would clearly acknowledge certain hegemony. Yet at the same time they would be sure to stress that they were, in fact, Australians and that this was ‘their country’. Such arguments were usually made when discussing newcomers such as Indian students applying for permanent residency. Compared to them, they had been there ‘first’, it was ‘their country’, and they were in fact ‘Australians’; something which these students were, in their eyes, clearly not.
There are a number of different layers to be dissected here. Whereas for Indian students it is about criticizing a group which they desire to become part of, as equals (legal residents of Australia), for the established community this is not the issue. They are already legal residents of Australia. Yet in these narrations where Australians are connected with a convict past, certain hegemony is acknowledged; one that shows that Indians (whether India or Australia born, yet legal residents of Australia all the same) believe they are looked down on by white, Anglo-Saxon (‘true blue’) Australians. It should be noted though that where Anglo-Saxon or British arrival in Australia can be traced back to the very first days of the colony, the history of Indian migration to Australia is about as long. Even more overlooked is the fact that among the convicts that arrived in Australia, there were Indians from British India. Yet where the story differs is that while British migration to Australia can generally be portrayed as an ongoing affair from start till present, Indian migration to Australia has been subject to a number of clear breaks and ruptures. This led the BIMPR\(^{41}\) report (1995) for instance, to structure this history into three distinct periods: 1800-1860, 1861-1901 and 1901-to date. In the context of this dissertation though it is more important to highlight how, during the history of Indians in Australia, they have been perceived and understood. Although this history is not actively reproduced among Indian community members, it will further add to our understanding of Australia as a migration destination and the history of the Indian community in general.

Of Coolies, Dhangars and Ghans
Whereas British migrants were indisputably the first new settlers (colonists) of what, of course, was already an inhabited place, Asians - including Indians - were also a part of this first wave of immigration, though in rather limited numbers. In the first fleets of settlers and convicts that came to Terra Australis (from 1787 to 1823) there were a few Indians, and others followed in subsequent convict ships. (Bilimoria & Ganguly-Scrase, 1988: 7) As de Lepervanche writes, in 1800 Governor Hunter corresponded with the Duke of Portland about the Indian government’s request that convicts from India be admitted. “Hunter did not disapprove the scheme: he had no doubt that the Indians ‘might be usefully employ’d here, and wou’d probably be far more manageable than most of those [convicts] we have now’.” (1984: 36) Officers and settlers (Anglo-Saxon) already present were hoping to be able to ‘employ’ these offenders as servants. For some years afterwards, de Lepervanche writes, Indian convicts appeared on passenger lists of arrivals in New South Wales, which came to an end in 1816, as the aforementioned BIMPR report (1995: 2) also confirms.

The first true free immigration probably occurred in 1816 when William

\(^{41}\) Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research.
Browne, a large landholder in New South Wales, brought a group of nine Indian laborers to work in Australia. (BIMPR, 1995: 2) As early as 1792, though, there had already been trade between India and Australia, as a result of which a number of Indians (mostly from ‘Calcutta’ and ‘Madras’) had ended up in Australia. But, as one can imagine, the numbers were small. From the beginning of the 19th century onwards trading ships delivered more and more Indian and Chinese goods to Australia, and it is also around this time that the first Indians arrived in the country for work. Not much is known about this period though. The abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1834-1835 certainly marked a turning point in the way and manner Indians went overseas. The time of ‘indentured labor’ could begin, and although thousands made it to the plantations of Fiji, British Guyana, Mauritius, Trinidad, East Africa, and so on, only a relatively small number were recruited for work in Australia.

Studies, such as the one conducted by de Lepervanche (1984), generally paint a depressing and harsh picture of these early days of ‘indentured labor’ schemes through which many Indians migrated to new destinations. Slavery may have been abolished but the schemes for which these men were recruited often turned them into a new type of slaves, ones who were still very much ‘bonded’ to their employers. The Indians John Mackay ‘imported’ in 1837 certainly testify to this. Having been distributed on arrival, 15 of them absconded which meant that Mackay lost, among other things, his right to import more the following year. “The escapees were apprehended and when they appeared before a Bench of magistrates complained of insufficient food and clothing and having received no wages.” (de Lepervanche, 1984: 40) The no-wages claim was dismissed by Mackay who said it had been agreed upon that the price of the fare, as well as some other advance payments, first had to be paid back before monthly wages would be received. The men allegedly returned to work but not before having received guarantees that they would have enough to eat and be paid in the end.

Accounts such as these probably influenced Governor Bourke who was far from enthusiastic about importing more Indian laborers. Equally reluctant was Lord Glenelg who wrote to Gipps, Bourke’s successor, that this would “have prejudicial effect both on the interests of the Colony and on British Emigration”. The fear was that Australia would end up with an “inferior and servile class of persons subject to restrictions not generally imposed.” (de Lepervanche, 1984: 40) The Indian Emigration Act, adopted in 1839, was supposed to further prevent “the uncontrollable recruitment of coolie labourers from the subcontinent.” (Bilimoria and Ganguly-Scrase, 1988: 19) Yet demand from Australia did not get any less “and suggestions of limited indenture that required assurance of return passage to Calcutta were proposed”(Ibid). This did not mean that there were no ‘settlers’ from India at all. In 1840, for instance, a small number of couples (with a maximum of two children) were allowed in under a sponsored migration scheme. Yet the recruitment of laborers in India to work in Australia remained a matter of debate. The Legislative Council Committee on Immigration, for
one, reexamined ‘the whole coolie issue’ again in 1841, and the aforementioned John Mackay reiterated his support for the idea to import laborers from India.

Meanwhile the first ‘Afghans’ had also started to arrive in Australia. They were mostly Pathans (from the Punjab) or originally from the Northwestern frontier of Baluchistan. They were supposed to fill the demand for camel drivers, as Australia had started to import camels. More would follow and most were given the choice to either stay in Australia or to return to India. Although Indians had previously been simply called ‘Indians’, coolies or even Dhangars, they were now increasingly identified as Afghans or simply: Ghans. They were not the only group to fall under this catch-all term. Aside from people from Afghanistan and India, people from Egypt, Iran, Syria and Turkey were also called Ghans. A simple explanation for this was that most of them, according to colonial authorities, looked alike. They were similar in appearance (many wore a turban) and it was claimed that many were Muslim. (Walsh, 2001: 23, see also: BIMPR, 1995: 3) Although united as one group by outsiders who couldn’t really tell the difference, it was a diverse group that slowly became part of the social landscape of, mostly, rural Australia.

The Imagined Asian

The 1850s witnessed the discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria, which attracted migrants from all over the world (in particular from China). This period of increased Asian (Chinese) migration is usually referred to as the starting point of the White Australia Policy. It is this policy which would not only severely limit the entry of Indians but of almost all non-European migrants to Australia. The increased inflow of Chinese would initially lead to an act passed in 1855 aimed at restricting the number of Chinese migrants. Besides the aggressive attitude towards the Chinese, the second half of the 19th century also illustrates that Indians were becoming increasingly less welcome in Australia. In fact, by the end of the 19th century sentiments had turned completely against Asian migration and legislative measures were being introduced to further restrict or even prohibit ‘colored’ migration to Australia. The 1901 Immigration Restriction Act would complete what had already been set in motion: the almost complete blockade of non-European (colored) migration to Australia. With the passing of this Act, Australia was making clear its desires to be a white European nation. This contrasts highly with the Australia of today which wants to play an increasing important role in Asia, promotes itself as being part of Asia, and celebrates it multiculturalty as

42 A caste from Maharashtra, western India.
43 “As hawkers and peddlers, the Pathans, with their heavily laden horse-pack, penetrated the remoter parts of the continent, supplying clothing and luxury items to settlers scattered around the country settlement” (Bilimoria and Ganguley-Scrase, 1988: 19). Others found jobs as cane cutters in northern New South Wales and north Queensland. Many also ended up settling in the smaller rural towns of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. (BIMPR, 1995: 3, see also Jayaraman 1988, p. 543)
Some History Lessons, as well as Learning the Hard Way

an important achievement. In light of this, it is all the more interesting to read the justifications for the policy adopted. Part of the Migration Act demanded that new arrivals had to carry a landing permit with them, which was often issued overseas. Upon arrival, the officers of the Immigration Department “had the unenviable task of judging the degree of ‘blood’ in the veins of applicants for settlement.” (Jupp, 2002: 9)

The argument for all this was basically ‘social harmony’. Furthermore, the Dictation Act, which was part of the Restriction Act, was one of the most important tools for ‘testing’ whether a newcomer was welcome in Australia or not. The test required those seeking to enter into Australia as migrants “to write down a passage which was dictated to them by an immigration official in any prescribed European language.” (Joshi, 2000: 27) This was usually enough to keep those ‘undesired’ (‘colored’) out of the country as ‘which European language’ was conveniently left undefined.

The image Australians had of Indians at the time was hardly flattering. If, according to Yarwood, an Australian had actually met an Indian (or Sinhalese for that matter), he would know him as:

[…] a hawker of imported goods in suburban and country areas (where he was accused of frightening lonely women into buying his wares) or as a farm worker (notably in northern New South Wales where he allegedly depressed wages and contaminated milk). Otherwise he might have seen him as a Lascar employed on one of the Peninsular and Oriental Company’s vessels, and failing that he would have depended for information on hearsay or on the pen portraits and cartoons appearing in the press. (Yarwood, 1968: 125)

The image Australians had of Indians improved somewhat after the Great War of 1914-18 during which India had apparently left a positive impression on the Anglo-Saxon world. “The ‘magnificent response’ of the princes and people in dispatching and financing overseas contingents was recorded in Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers in November 1914.” (Yarwood, 1968: 132) Although the general image of Indians may have improved, in practical terms Indians were still “[that] brown race, whose representatives scour the hinterland as pedlars and camel-drivers”, according to Lyng (1927: 2), as quoted by de Lepervanche, who claims that his opinion was characteristic of those generally held at the time.

Historical accounts remain relatively silent on the decades leading up to the Second World War. Although migration from India to Australia continued in the 1920s and 1930s the White Australia policy was having a rather marked affect, and thus numbers remained low, and would continue to do so until the end of the 1950s. As mentioned previously, Indian students (with a British passport) were at one point allowed freer access to Australia. Yet this did not seem to result in an increase in
students coming in. And so students are largely absent from the historical accounts of the first groups of Indians to settle in Australia. According to Fraser (1984), the first private overseas student arrived in Australia in 1904. Without a doubt others followed but how many, who they were, and what became of them, is unknown.

The absence of newcomers, whether students or not, tells us something about the state of the Indian community around the time of the Second World War. For one, the notion of something called a ‘community’ appears to be a tenuous one. Such a community not only needs to be felt or experienced, among those who are seen as part of it, it also needs to exist in the imagination of ‘others’. The numbers were probably too small for that. The rural Indian community at Woolgoolga which Lepervanche describes (1984) had definitely started to take shape, and some Indians had also settled in the bigger cities, but they were scattered all over the country, means to stay in touch were limited, and the political climate was hardly ‘pleasant’ for Indians (or Asians in general) to promote themselves in such a way.

**White No More**

After the Second World War, fear about Australia’s vulnerability and physical isolation had a particular influence on the way Australia was to deal with migration in the future. Billy Hughes, Australia’s seventh prime minister (1915-1923), had already coined the phrase ‘populate or perish’ in 1937, but now this seemed even more necessary than ever. Arthur Calwell, the Australian Labor Party leader at the time, quickly revived the slogan. Whereas the migration plans of the 1920s had been abandoned because of the depression, those established at the end of the 1940s continue to dominate Australia’s immigration politics today. (Jupp, 2002: 11) For the first time Australia started actively recruiting non-English speaking migrants; most of whom came from the refugee and displacement camps all over Europe. At the time it was mostly Dutch and Germans that were recruited. (McAllister & Moore, 1991: 130) India-born British citizens and Anglo-Indians also gained easier access to Australia however, and during the 1950s the country did accept a significant number of ‘mixed race’ immigrants who were born in Asia in the recently independent, former European colonies. (BIMPR, 1995: 3)

One of the most important changes came in 1958 when the much despised dictation test was finally abolished. It was no longer necessary for newcomers to prove that they were able to speak/write a particular European language. Specifically relevant for the case at hand, though, is another change, which was announced in 1959. From that moment onward, distinguished and highly qualified Asians would be admitted for permanent residence. (Bilimoria and Ganguly-Scrase, 1988: 34) Furthermore, family reunions were also made easier. It would take some time before the numbers would really take off though. According to the 1961 census there were 14,000 Indians living in Australia. Most of them were of British descent or could be considered Anglo-Indians. Only 3,184 Indians (and Singhalese) actually fell under the category ‘overseas by race’,...
meaning that they had come to Australia during their own lifetime and had neither been born there, nor previously lived elsewhere outside India.

Internally things were rumbling. The White Australia policy had become an embarrassment in the eyes of Australian intellectuals and others aware of how the policy was being criticized outside the country. Besides that, more and more critique could be heard on the unfair treatment of non-white immigrants. The Immigration Reform Group (based at the University of Melbourne) released an influential pamphlet in 1960, calling for reform in the immigration rules. The idea was not only to make things better for incoming migrants but also to improve relations with nearby Asian countries. The pamphlet argued for a more relaxed entry for non-white migrants who wanted to settle in Australia. The pamphlet also showed sympathy with students who wished to remain in Australia after having completed their studies. The material certainly was not very well received; harsh criticism followed, but it did manage to leave an impression and, in a way, contributed to the already growing resentment against the White Australia Policy at home and abroad.

The Policy was officially dropped in 1965 but this did not automatically result in things becoming easier for Asian or Indian migrants. More ‘relaxations of regulation’ and ‘liberalisations of conditions’ for permanent residency were announced a year later in 1966. For one, non-Europeans who had been in Australia under temporary permits but who were planning on staying indefinitely were allowed to apply for permanent residence. Even more significant was the announcement that well-qualified non-Europeans wishing to settle in Australia would be considered on the grounds of their suitability as settlers, their ability to integrate and their possession of qualifications useful to Australia. (de Lepervanche, 1984: 72) It should be noted though that even after these changes, until 1973, it was not easy for immigrants to actually obtain Australian citizenship. Non-European British subjects were not able to apply for Australian citizenship as other British subjects could, and non-Europeans could not obtain citizenship after three years, as others (mostly European) could. In their case it would still take five years. All this came to an end, however, when the Australian Citizenship Act was introduced in 1973 and non-Europeans became equals to other migrants. (Ibid)

Between 1966 and 1971 the number of ethnic Indians “approved for entry” had risen to 6,418, amongst this number were now also a substantial number of “professionally and technically qualified Indian immigrants.” (Bilimoria and Ganguly-Scraser, 1988: 36) The subsequent years saw the further and complete abolishment of the White Australian policy and consequently it also became easier for lesser-educated Indians to enter Australia. One of the first acts of the Whitlam government was a declaration (in 1972) that race, colour or creed would no longer be a basis for immigration control. It was during the late 1960s that immigration into Australia peaked. In the end though, the Whitlam government, concerned with the ‘developmental pressures’
immigration numbers were having on the major cities decided to scale back the program. Immigration was reduced from 140,000 in 1971-72 to 110,000 in 1973-74. The start of a recession gave another impulse to downsize the migration program. Only 80,000 immigrants were allowed in, in 1974-75 and, even less, 50,000 in 1975-76. (Birrell, 2001: 50) Interestingly though, during this period the number of Indian migrants showed a definite increase. In 1972 10% of all those intending to settle in Australia originated from Asia (excluding the Middle East). In the period from 1971-81 the number of Indians coming into Australia increased from 29,211 to 41,657. In the mid-1980s the percentage of settlers coming from Asia had increased to forty. In 1991 this number was even higher: half of all settlers were from Asia at the time, and 5 to 6 per cent of them were from India.44 The days of White Australia were definitely over.

Enter the Professional Indian
Those Indians coming in from the 1970s onwards were far removed from the indentured laborers that had once set foot on Australian shores. Whereas in the past they had come in as sugarcane cutters, camel drivers, or had simply found work as hawkers and peddlars; the new arrivals included a relatively high proportion of professionals such as doctors, engineers, university teachers and computer programmers. By 1991 only eight per cent were living outside the major cities, and in addition, almost 85 per cent were living in only three states: almost one third in New South Wales, an almost similar number in Victoria and just under 19 per cent in Western Australia. (BIMPR, 1995: 4)

Meanwhile, the abolition of fees for tertiary education in 1974, as well as a ‘more open competition for tertiary academic appointments, fellowships and scholarships’, was starting to have a visible effect on the presence of Asians on campuses in Australia. (Bilimoria and Ganguly-Scrase, 1988: 36) While the numbers of Indian students remained relatively low, overall the India born population had managed to become one of the highest educated groups in Australia. In the years to come the Indian community would continue to establish itself as a highly educated one. By 1996, for instance, of those Indians employed, 36 percent held administrative, managerial or professional jobs, compared to, for instance, the Chinese: 22.5 percent. Of the Chinese in Australia, 31 percent had higher qualifications; among Indians this was 49 percent, the highest of all Asian countries. (BIMPR, 1995: 5)

During the 1990s the Indian community continued to grow rapidly. In 2005 there were 138,662 India-born people living in Australia. This made them the sixth largest foreign presence in Australia, after the UK (1,137,374), New Zealand (455,105), Italy (224,309), China (191,194; not included are the SARs and Taiwan Province), and

Vietnam (177,728); more than ever before newcomers established themselves in the states of Victoria and New South Wales, and, more specifically, in its respective capitals Melbourne and Sydney. In 1993-94 there were 2,643 newcomers from India, 29.5 percent of whom ended up in Victoria, and 51.6 percent in New South Wales. By 2003-04 the absolute number of newcomers had increased more than threefold to 8,135. Although New South Wales remains the most popular state among Indians, Victoria, and more in particular Melbourne, has been gaining in popularity recently. Melbourne heading the polls of most-livable city in the world, as well as increased economic activity and lower unemployment rates than in Sydney, have certainly been a contributing factor.

And this is also where we currently find ourselves: in Melbourne, investigating the ambivalent relationship between Indian overseas students and members of the established Indian community. Historically it can be said that Indian students only very recently started to have an influence on the formation and identity of the Indian community, both in terms of how the community understands this and how the outside world perceives it. Before 1991 there were only 378 Indian overseas students in Australia (Gillan et al, 1993: 1396), in 2005 this number had increased to 27,000. Although in the eyes of the established Indian community they may remain Newly Arrived Indians for a long time to come, by law they are temporary residents, born in India, and - because of their desire for PR - potential/future Indian community members. Two years will first have to be bridged though, two years when these students are not yet considered migrants in the statistics, yet in many practical ways they already are.

**INSIDE THE COMMUNITY**

*The Current State of the Indian Community in Melbourne*

The *Indian Voice* of December 2005 announced the birth of the Uttaranchal Society of Australia. Its main aim: “to promote the welfare of Australian residents, originating from the State of Uttaranchal in India; to promote activities to foster the culture of that State.” A couple of months earlier World Goa Day had received considerable attention in Melbourne. “A grand celebration was held… in both the halls at St. Anthony’s, Noble Park which witnessed a night of authentic Goan culture and songs.” (*Indian Voice*, September) As the *Bharat Times* reported, “theme this year was promotion of Goan culture and heritage in their second home, Australia.” That same month the Indian Senior Citizens Associations of Victoria had celebrated its tenth anniversary. The programme of the evening was described as a ‘multicultural journey’, and the *Bharat Times* (September) reported that: “it started with the ‘Old Boys Band’ playing the National Anthems of Australia and India… and then the MC… took over and guided the audience through items of dances and music from different part of the world such as Philippines, Mauritius, Bengal, Sri Lanka, El Salvador, Gujarat, Fiji and Punjab.”
Around the same time the Punjabi Club of Victoria celebrated its annual dinner at the Eastern Golf Club at Doncaster; the invitees were nicely dressed up in their best wedding suits and saris, as the theme of the evening happened to be ‘marriage’. Meanwhile Club Bollywood had already seen the opening of its doors in May. “The venue was Inflation, one of Australia’s most famous and renowned nightclubs and the place to be for the first ever Bollywood club night in Melbourne ‘Hot & Spicy’ back in 1999.” (Indian Voice, June) An afternoon of comedy was further organized by the Telegu Association of Australia in the same month, and Karnataka Minister of Large, Small & Medium Industries, Infrastructure Development & Civil Aviation, Mr. P.G.R. Sindhia, was warmly welcomed at Paradise Indian Restaurant, Wheelers Hill. The Kanadda Sangam had organized the evening and according to the South Asia Times (June), a large number of its community leaders and members were present that evening.

Whereas the first section of this chapter explored the question of how the Indian community is perceived by outsiders, in particular by Indian students, and what this can tell us about the relationship that exists between the two groups, this third and final section will turn this question around and look community-inwards in order to understand how the ‘community’ sees this itself. The community here remains that which Indian students and outsiders perceive it to be: the visible part of it, represented by community leaders that head the various organizations, as well as those who openly present themselves as being Indian: shop and restaurant owners for instance. It is they who are understood to be the Indian community, and it is with them I would often talk about Indian overseas students.

**The Commercial Community**

Teachers I met at the smaller colleges in the Central Business District would often tell me of how the interaction with Indian students had often shocked them. Contrary to the larger universities where the distance between student and teacher seemed much bigger, the smaller colleges often seemed to expect much more of their teachers in terms of guidance and counseling. As a result new teachers would quickly become aware of the difficulties some students faced. Stories of homelessness, exploitation, odd working hours, and plagiarism were the most common. Such stories would often worry them. For one, they had never realized the kind of (financial) pressure students are under and how this made them vulnerable to possible exploitation by third parties. The drive for permanent residency surprised them too. I learned of an initiative where two former teachers from a large and fast-growing college located in the CBD had taken it upon themselves to set up a support network, which at the time I got in touch with them was still busy setting an agenda of what they would be focusing on. Having received a sum of 2,000 dollars from an organization called the Social Development Network (SND) they had started to meet regularly, mostly to talk about the difficulties South Asian students were facing, and also how this could be mapped
more systematically. One plan was to recruit students from colleges and universities with a high number of South Asians to do ‘some fieldwork’ at these colleges. This way, it was reasoned, the network would have more detailed information about the sort of facilities that were present in the campus buildings and if the requirements set by law were being properly met. The goal of this project was not so much to report institutes to the authorities if they were found lacking but more to gain an understanding of what kind of needs, in terms of counseling, these students have. If, for instance, there were no student counselors employed by the college, this could be something that the network could facilitate. What is of interest here is not so much whether or not the support network was particularly successful in its endeavors but much more the sort of role they were trying to perform. Considering the number of overseas students (not just Indian but from all over the world) coming in, it is perhaps surprising that these services might not already be fully in place.

The ‘support network’ had also tried involving some of the more influential persons within the Indian community in its plans but had quickly discovered that they were to be of little help. FIAV’s president at the time of my research, Shabbir Wahid, explained that the FIAV had no official policy to deal with international students, though one of their member associations was the Federation of Indian Students of Australia (FISA). This association was not particularly active though, something Wahid was well aware of. He did stress that the FIAV would like to do more but he was quite clear that they would not be addressing visa or education issues. He argued that both are commercial issues, which should be solved by the students themselves. His comments communicated a feeling that I frequently noticed to be very much alive within the community. This feeling could be understood in the following simplistic way: they have come here on their own account / they have family back home / these universities have people who are supposed to help them as well / and PR is something that they are not entitled to: ‘we cannot help them with that.’

Similarly, community leaders would often stress the issue of ‘own responsibility’ especially in the field of migration. This is not something ‘the community’, or the FIAV for that matter, can help them with, it was argued. It was also felt, though never officially stated, that this was one of the reasons why the FIAV could not support the network’s initiative. As there are services that are offered to students on a commercial basis, such as the Universal Student Services (USS), in which Vasan Srinivasan (Victorian politician and influential member within the community at the time) was involved, free services in the form of community support could actually compete with services that are offered by specific community members (or even: leaders) on a commercial basis. The aforementioned local community papers are usually full of advertisements for education and migration agents, often of Indian origin, all in the business of offering students advice on how to apply for PR, as well as arranging legal representation if they are in trouble.
Vasan Srinivasan explains in an article in *The Hindu* that the services he offers come down to “free guidance to Indian students about the courses available in Australia and help in selecting the right course.” This guidance includes raising awareness of the admission process and arranging visas. It should be noted here that although the service may be free to students, it certainly is not for those institutes that wish to participate (for example by getting USS to recruit students for them). As the article, titled ‘Road shows to create awareness of studying in Australia’, also explains: representatives of the Universities of Ballarat, Monash, Swinburne, ACTH Management College and Eltham College all participated in the delegation. Senior executives of Student Services International (SSI) and ANZ Banking Group joined them. Peter Vlahos, barrister and solicitor of Universal Consultants (sharing an office with Vasan Srinivasan) explained to *The Hindu* that the option of migrating to Australia was not a right of international students but a privilege bestowed by the country. Also part of the team was Benjamin Cass, Director of Student Services International, another commercial venture, engaged in “a range of support services to the students, from finding an accommodation to helping them seek permanent residence status in Australia.” The charges for this, Cass claimed, were negligible compared to the cost of education.

Vasan Srinivasan came to Melbourne in 1987. He quickly developed an interest in politics and became a Victorian parliament member for the Liberal Party, a seat he no longer held when I met him in August 2005, but which he was sure to reclaim at some point. His name was regularly mentioned by other influential members in the community as a person who had a great interest in Indian students. His name was also often associated with the above mentioned Benjamin Cass and his company Students Services International. SSI could arrange all sorts of things connected to studying in Australia. For instance, they operated a 24-hour hotline for students to call if they are in trouble. SSI also assisted in finding jobs and accommodation. An article in

---

45 See for his problematic and possibly criminal role also chapter 5.
46 See for the full article: http://www.hinduonnet.com/2004/07/19/stories/2004071905290400.htm
an Indian publication called *Seasonal Kerala* clarifies how the various stakeholders are connected to each other. In the article Vasan clearly states Peter D. Vlahos’ and his association with SSI, though he also explains to the reporter that running an educational consultancy for making money is not his objective. “We succeeded in Australia because we are well networked with the Indian community here. We could get for our students, the support of the Indian community.” Although Vasan makes this remark in reply to a question about whether he is planning on providing assistance for students from other countries as well, the remark is illuminating in terms of the various (community and commercial) interests involved in this business.

**Knowing the Community**

Sham and Nandesh, the students introduced at the beginning of this chapter, had already explained that they hardly ever participated in community related activities. Sham sometimes went to the Sikh gurdwara in the suburb of Blackburn, but Nandesh claimed not even to know “who this Indian community was.” When I mentioned community related names, for instance that of FIAV’s president, he claimed never to have heard of ‘them’. Neither had he ever heard of FISA or even expected there to be such an organization. Not that it would have mattered because for the duration of my fieldwork FISA was completely inactive. I did meet its founders, Babu Akula (at the time also general secretary of the FIAV) and Gautham Gupta (at the time also Events and Publicity Director for the FIAV), but both had graduated long ago and were not really active within the organization anymore. There were plans towards further strengthening the ties between the different Indian student organizations but there was no evidence during my fieldwork that any of these ‘plans’ had led to anything concrete.

Generally students said that they would deal with problems themselves, sometimes with the help of other students or family back home. Some did remark that it annoyed them to think that bodies such as FIAV probably got money from the Australian government to do ‘things’ for Indians but that obviously did not include ‘them’ according to the community. This is of course not entirely correct as the India Welfare and Resource Center’s (IWRC, part of the FIAV) social worker John Russell reported in the *India Link* of December 2005. In it he describes a number of cases, which had been presented to him in years that he was employed by FIAV. By printing his contact details he was clearly trying to encourage students to come to him if they needed help. Yet students seemed to be largely unaware of such facilities.

During the months that I visited the Indian store in Prahran, Sham could often be found behind the counter late in the evening, filling the quiet hours with studying. At some point I did not see her for a couple of weeks and was informed by one of her colleagues, also an Indian student, that she had moved on to a different job at a call center where she was now working for 20 hours per week, selling some
insurance deal. When I later met the owner of the shop I asked him if he had any idea of what had become of her. He told me he wasn’t sure and that he never stayed in touch with the girls that worked for him. He mumbled that she was probably unable to combine the job at the shop with her new one, but the fact that she had left hardly seemed to bother him. Over the years he had seen so many come and go that he had stopped asking questions. That same evening a new girl could be found behind the counter where she received unpaid training so that she could run the shop herself in the evenings within a couple of weeks.

Perceiving and Receiving Indian Students

Sitting down for coffee with another Indian shop owner who was also directly involved with organizing community related activities, one evening, I got the chance to ask more directly how he felt about students. Involved in an Indian organization that falls under the umbrella of the FIAV though, his story underlines the mixed feelings that exist among those members who are, in one way or the other, more directly involved in community activities. As he explained: “Indian students… there are two kinds: good and bad.” Lighting up a cigarette, giving the question some more thought, he added: “Studies are not so important for many. It is about PR. That is why they are here.” This was something that bothered him. “If they go to good unis there is not a problem. If these unis have some standard and some reputation then it is good. But about these private colleges I am not so convinced.” Moving closer, to stress a certain sense of confidentiality, he continued:

Two three years there was a raid on various students. They were working for 40, 80, a hundred hours. Their parents had taken a loan, sold their properties. These overseas agents were to be blamed. They should have painted a clearer picture... So they raided at the airport where the taxis were waiting. Lots ended up at the detention center. Some rang me about this. I rang the authorities about it. I said that if my son is not at school for one day I receive a call about it; these students are totally overworked; now you are arresting them at the end of their course! So how can they get their degrees? It does not make sense. I said these students are definitely at fault but what about these institutions? 90 percent of these colleges were shut down after that.

It was unclear which colleges he was referring to and whether 90 percent of such institutions had indeed had to close their doors was also something he could not really back up with hard facts. Much more important, though, is the way he frames
what he perceives to know about how students are doing and what their plans are. There is a group of students that is clearly ‘good’ in his eyes. These are enrolled at the more reputable universities such as Monash, University of Melbourne, Swinburne and Latrobe. Smaller and cheaper institutions attract a different kind of student, and of those there were far too many. “Some say these students give us a bad name but I don’t agree to that. I want to know why they behave like that though. There must be reasons.” With this he meant that students will do anything for a PR, and that the system was not designed for that. Yet he also admitted that within the community itself, there were those who made good use of the situation. “Students generally are hardworking people. They get exploited from the start they come here. They get exploited by agents, by restaurants and so on.” Asked if he could give a specific example he explained: “A student comes in with no experience. They give him training, for say ten days. But they will not pay him for these ten days. Then after these ten days they ask him to leave his number so that they can call him if they need him which they never do.” The picture he painted largely corresponded to what students themselves had told me. In this regard he was surprisingly well informed though he explained that he never hired students himself, as his wife and family members were well able to run the shop without students’ help.

Talking about students some more, he suddenly remarked that: “a lot of them go to the US in the end.” This related directly to a discussion that we had previously had about what the community feels about all these new additions to their already sizeable presence in Australia. He was quite clear that many will not stay. Asked if he could give a percentage of how many he expected to ‘move on’ he said he had no idea, really. “But many,” of that he was sure, “had plans in that direction.” In that sense he could never really see them as new members of the community. Meeting a different community leader later on – one who was also closely involved in the FIAV – a similar narrative came up while having dinner. This person, having been in Australia since the mid-90s, now had his own business in the construction field. While serving me food in his large house in a far-off suburb on the outskirts of Melbourne, he explained that he came from an educated family. His brother had also settled in Australia, where he was working as a chartered accountant. To him this was what the Indian community was about most of all. They were highly educated and hard working people who had come to Australia as skilled migrants and who had subsequently done well for themselves. “We came here as skilled migrants. We had minimum of five years to apply for residency. I blame this current system. Now all you have to do is get a master’s degree. It is as simple as that.” He had once tried to recruit an Indian student to work for his company. He had found two civil engineering students whom he had offered a job. “One left within a week and the other never showed up.” One had apparently been driving a taxi alongside his studies and this made him more money than the initial pay he would receive at his new job. The other guy was working in a petrol station and
had given a similar reason. It annoyed him to think that these were also Indians who were now legal residents of Australia. “I don't find anything wrong with a student wanting a PR. It is what they do with it.”

Not Just One but Four Different Indian Communities
In this chapter we have learned what role the local Indian community plays in the lives of Indian overseas students. Indian students clearly fall in between the categories of temporary and permanent residents. Those Indians who had settled in Australia a long time ago, had hardly made them feel very welcome. With the exception of a few who had direct connections in Australia (often in the form of close family) before arriving at Melbourne airport, most had simply come on their own, without expecting any local help. This made them disconnected to the already established community from the outset. Yet in the months that followed arrival there is no evidence to suggest that the two groups can be seen moving closer together. Both sides remained rather outspoken about each other.

When taking a closer look at what we could broadly call the Indian community of Melbourne, it becomes clear that aside from the fact that there are many communities within the community, the term ‘community’ itself is entirely relative to what people perceive it to mean. Because of this at least four different ways of ‘describing’ the Indian community emerged:

1. For the organizers and (active) members of the various associations that fall under the header of the FIAV, the Indian community is exactly that. Many of them are successful business owners, highly educated, professionals such as doctors, dentists or accountants, who came to Australia under the skilled migration programs of the late 1960s and throughout the 70s, and 80s. This is also how they perceive others (mainly Anglo-Aussies) to see them. Indian students threaten this image they have of themselves and imagine others to have of them.

2. For both Anglo-Aussies and Indian students alike, perceptions of what the Indian community actually is were mostly based on where Indians were the most visible in day-to-day life. This means restaurant owners, waiters, petrol pump operators, grocery store managers, and so on. They certainly did not associate these professions with being highly educated. Indian students in particular would often look down on this group. They considered them to be ‘old migrants’, who had ended up in professions that they could not imagine themselves settling for. They sometimes even refer to this group as the Old India, whereas they considered themselves to be the New India.

3. The Indian students did not see themselves belonging to either of the aforementioned categories. The first category of highly skilled migrants who had settled in Australia was a fairly unknown one to the students who often
had very weak linkages with people in Australia prior to leaving India. In addition, the students were often not so keen on participating in so-called community related activities, save for the odd festival such as *Holi* or *Diwali*. They were, however, very familiar with the second category since they were often employed by this group. However, with stories of abuse and misuse of the student labor force aplenty, they did not share particularly warm feelings for this category. By the same token they also did not see themselves belonging to this category in the future (see also 2).

4. Australians (more specifically Anglo-Aussies), however, did not make this particular distinction at all. For them there was just the Indian community under which they appeared to pigeon-hole everybody who looked Indian. This might also include other South Asians as most Australians would not be able to make the distinction between them. For them, the Indian community would often be about what they would read in the papers and see in the streets. In their eyes, Indians were often taxi drivers, or they would be students who crowded the trains on their way to work. Yet the image they had was not always negative. At times these Indians were their doctors, that guy at work (IT department) or that one friendly guy who operates the cash register of the Seven-Eleven on the corner.

The separation between these four communities is mostly a cosmetic one of course. Yet it does help to understand the places the players in this dissertation take in relation to each other. Where Indian students had remarked that they had no real interest in the local Indian community because they were not planning on staying in Australia anyway – having a more ambitious plan of using Australia as a stepping stone to, for instance, the US – Indian community members would often also confirm this idea. Indian students were not only supposed to make use of certain arrangements in the way they did, they were in some cases also not supposed to stay. It is this notion which will be closer examined in the following chapters. For example, the Indian community could hardly ever give examples of students who they had actually successfully seen ‘move on’ to Europe or the US. For them it was quite clear that many were simply staying, often continuing to work as taxi drivers, waiters and shop assistants. But this notion of ‘moving on’ was responsible for maintaining the distance that already existed between the two groups, as the local Indian community believed it was not worth investing time in people who would one day leave.