Imagined mobility: migration and transnationalism among Indian students in Australia

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Graduating as a Migrant

Into the Great Wide Ocean
It is a cold, windy day in September; the wind joyfully plays with the women’s saris while it causes the thin fabric of kurta pyjamas to flap nervously around shivering male legs. We are all watching the spectacle from the pier: two men in snow-white kurtas are making their way into the ice-cold ocean water, carefully balancing a beautifully decorated clay idol of Lord Ganesh over their heads. When they are barely able to keep their heads above the water they submerge the idol in the water. There is applause, pictures are taken, but most of all relief is in the air as we can all go back inside now. Spring may be on its way but on this cold Saturday afternoon, it still seems far away.

When I make my way back into the community center of Seaford, a distant suburb about an hour by train from the CBD, I notice that the place is already packed with Maharashtrians. Waiting in line for the traditional sweets that are being handed out I chat a bit with Rajesh, one of my regular informants. Although he came to Australia as an overseas student, once arrived he discovered that he could have already applied for PR back home (‘offshore’), as he already met the necessary requirements (having the right skills and a required number of years of work experience). Rajesh was planning to go back to his studies at some point, but now that he was working full-time, he wondered whether it would ever be the right time to do so. I noticed that the neck problem he had developed as a result of heavy manual work at a car parts factory, working mostly night shifts, was still there. Rajesh dismissed it somewhat halfheartedly. It was annoying, he agreed, but on such a happy day as this one there was no reason to complain. Having a job, making money, living a relatively secure life was providing enough satisfaction for now. In the future, he was sure, he would get an opportunity to do more with his IT-skills. He firmly wanted to believe in this, but there was also doubt in his eyes.

We have ended up in the fourth semester which means that a long journey is about to come to an end. Some students will simply finish and return home, others will confidently fill out the forms for permanent residency, and then there will be those who want to apply for PR but are not able to just yet. The fact is that for many ‘the time of PR’ is very near and more than ever before it will be a stress factor in their lives. This chapter will deal with that ‘last’ semester that leads up to the final application for PR and asks the question how students deal with the insecurities that
come with this phase, taking into account, in particular, that they once imagined this stage to be a moment nearing arrival. Investigating this question also means taking into account that migration processes are gendered and that narratives produced by different students might be colored by this. By the same token the dimensions of class will be further examined. Although the vast majority of Indian students hail from middle class backgrounds, the Indian middle class is a broad concept and internal differences of caste/class backgrounds are expected to influence the way students deal with, for instance, issues relating to success and failure.

Recently the concept of class has been introduced to studies that focus both on gender and migration. A good example here is a study conducted by Batnitzky et al (2008) on young Indian hotel employees who hail from middle class families. They convincingly show that class and gender take up a central place in analyzing the dynamics at play when migrating to, and building a new life in, a new country. In this chapter I will elaborate on this argument by bringing in the narratives of a number of different Indian students from middle class families. I will show that being middle class in the Indian context does not always mean the same thing. Students might describe themselves as coming from middle class families but often use subcategories such as new or old middle class, lower/middle or even upper middle class. The category should, therefore, be treated with the necessary caution. Caste differences, educational backgrounds, income and even transnational linkages further complicate matters. Expectations and obligations from family members back home, as well as personal ideas on ‘arrival’ will almost certainly be influential. Yet we should not forget that these are all equally gendered and that together they make up the sum that could be understood as the basis for how students imagine their own future.

In the first section ‘the process’ of applying for PR will be dealt with. We will meet students who are either about to or already have applied for PR. We will also meet immigration agents who guide students in making the ‘right’ decision, thus making a profit out of providing such advice. The focus will initially be on those who have run into trouble with their applications and who are now going through all the different options available to them. These ‘options’ are also central to the next section of this chapter, which will closely examine how these different options translate into different (‘individual’) strategies. Although for many obtaining a PR is what they have been aiming for for so long, it doesn’t always bring with it the kind of change in (quality of) lives and lifestyles that one perhaps expects. This then serves as an interesting bridge to the final part of this chapter (‘the return’) in which the camera will zoom in on those who have PR now. How they narrate future expectations, as well as experience their own failure and/or success, will lead to a conclusion on how to understand such early ‘mobile’ lives. Flexibility will be a key term; not only for practical reasons but also in understanding how their experiences of being ‘abroad’ relate to the dreams they once embarked on this plan with. Have plans and imaginations been rewritten as a way to
cope with everyday ‘migrant’ reality? The answer may seem obvious (‘yes, of course’) but this would then cloud the many layers that can be dissected in the way this has happened. It is the small details, in particular, that are the focus of this chapter.

THE PROCESS

Wanting But Not Being Able To

I had learned of the Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations the day before when Geetha had casually inquired, in her usual precise way of speaking English75, if I was planning on going or not. She was unsure about going and as it turned out, in the end she didn’t attend. In the train, en route to Seaford, she had messaged me that the weather (imminent threat of heavy rainfall and a brooding storm) was convincing enough to keep a Pune girl like herself safely inside, with a good book and mug of hot cocoa. The previous day it had already been quite rainy. We had planned to have pizza at an Italian restaurant but first met up at the house she stayed at with two other girls in Glen Huntly. When she opened the door she was dressed in an over-sized sweater and thin girly-like jeans, which somehow made her look skinnier than she really was. Fixing up a quick snack in the kitchen, she complained that she was not able to gain weight from anything really. Once she had tried it but it did not work out very well. “I just ate and ate but all the food made me just feel really sick.” She was longing for some well-prepared home-cooked Indian food. The thoughts of home were appealing in that sense.

Now in the final semester of her masters in health administration, her time in Australia was almost up, as she phrased it herself. She would miss the regular trips to the small city campus Latrobe University operates just behind Victoria Market; she was sure of that. Back in India she had completed a ‘bachelor of homeopathy, medicine and surgery’. In Australia, however, she had initially done a graduate diploma in business administration at Victoria University. At the time, there was nothing in the field of health care that she could enroll in and so she had decided to do a partial MBA. Once she had figured out her options in the health care field she had found a course that fitted her interests. All in all, she said, it had been a huge process. “I had completed my bachelors in 2000. But I wanted to do more; I wanted to do something in management.” She had been clear on the area she wanted to work in but had her

74 Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated all over India. Traditionally, prayers are offered to Lord Ganesh, the elephantheaded God, and finally the clay idol is submerged in the sea. The festival is particularly big in the state of Maharashtra and in the cities of Mumbai and Pune in particular.

75 Geetha attended Indian Cambridge Secondary Education when she was young. It had been renamed Indian Council Secondary Education now, according to Geetha. “My father was always very insecure about his English so he wanted me to learn it at a proper school. So he really wanted to teach us good English. It is a private school. Quite expensive. When the invoice arrived my dad used to say: your love letter has arrived.”
doubts about whether she would be the right person to treat patients. She figured she would probably do better in a management position. “My first idea was to go to the US, to the States. And I had also short listed some universities there.” But then (December 2001) she met her now ex-husband, which changed everything. “He was an Indian but with a Canadian passport.” At the time Geetha was supposed to go just for her GRE/TOEFL. “But then I got engaged to this man.” He was staying in Canada at the time and so she decided to apply for some universities there as well. Things did not go well with her applications though. One university rejected her outright and another was only willing to admit her if she would first come to Canada for an interview. “Then mid 2002 I got married to him.” The ceremony took place in India, after which her husband returned to Canada to make the necessary arrangements there. “He was a green card holder. But he had not applied for mine yet.” She hardly heard from him during those months and early in 2003, on a briefly visit to India, he suddenly announced he wanted to divorce her. “He was extremely religious. Or actually his parents were. He wanted me to follow that as well.” She was convinced that this had been part of the reason. “Because I am not like that at all.” It had been a terribly emotional period during which she not only lost a husband – albeit one she had never shared much of a life with – but also a future outside of India, one she had already invested quite a bit of time, money and hope, in. “So then I decided to go to study in Australia.” That was in April 2003. Geetha managed to get admission in less than a month, meanwhile filing for divorce (“which happened to be on our first anniversary”), and arranging other matters such as plane tickets and a visa. The first time Geetha and I met she had happily announced that she had just celebrated her first ‘divorce anniversary’. Now, having a pizza, sipping on a chilled glass of Chardonnay, all that hardly seemed to matter anymore. As she had mentioned earlier that evening, her time in Australia was almost up and a return to India seemed unavoidable within a matter of months.

“Bang from the start I knew I would not get PR with this course.” She added that she had also never wanted to do a course for that reason alone. That was not her thing. “You know, get a PR and then do some menial job. I could not see myself doing that here.” She also thought that this was exactly why she would often hear Indian students complain about their studies in Australia. “They crib a lot about it. These students only come here for PR, they are not doing something they really want to be doing.” Coming from an upper-caste community, referring to her jati (subcaste) as CHP (Chandra Hasta Kayastha), she had been born and brought up in a rather ‘learned’ environment. Her father was an architect who used to have his own business that also employed six other architects. He had recently scaled back his business considerably.

76 Graduate Record Examination/ Test of English as a Foreign Language.
because of his retirement. Her mother had been a housewife most of her life, never having done much (‘in the work sphere’) with her bachelors degree in arts. Her only sister was still in India, doing a bachelors in engineering. Geetha described her family as “higher middle class” people. “Money was never an issue in our family. We have a bungalow in Poona and four cars at home.” In addition to that there is a farmhouse. “My father loves farming. He built that house.” Her paternal grandfather used to be in the local government working for the railways. “My maternal grandfather was one of those landlords. He had lots of land and did lots of farming.” That side of the family was “pretty well off”, Geetha admitted. He also used to write articles for newspapers. Her maternal grandfather’s brother even had a PhD. Both her grandmothers also did bachelors in arts. “Both used to work for this tribal development organizations.” The family was clearly used to the idea of highly educated women with careers. Geetha did not expect that they would demand that she get remarried right away after she got back, but she was sure the issue would come up at some point. Marriage was always an issue in India; there was no point in denying that. She agreed that this was simply something you were faced with as an Indian woman abroad. There would always be certain expectations that men probably did not have to deal with.

These casual remarks about what was being expected of her fascinated me. Where male students would often remark that their family had certain expectations regarding financial (and connected social) success which would flow from having a son abroad (preferably in some job that matched Indian middle class imagination), female students frequently framed expectations of home in terms of obligations that they would simply have to fulfill. Often this referred to marriage (and thus marrying a suitable partner back in India) but it was often also about what was perceived to be ‘suitable’ for an Indian woman. Living alone, unmarried, in a far away land, was not deemed proper. Being from a wealthy upper middle class family with highly independent and equally highly educated women seemed to have little bearing on this. True, Geetha’s family had no issues with her going to Australia to study, live on her own, make a living by herself, doing all of that unmarried without any supervision. This was not something that had ever been up for debate. Yet, this did not mean that in the end there were still certain expectations to be fulfilled. And this also played a part in her reluctance to return to India. The question of marriage would undoubtedly be raised; if not by her direct relatives than certainly by the wider circle of family and friends.

Geetha had certainly contemplated finding a suitable candidate in Australia but had also realized that not many succeeded in this. At some point she even joked that she was disappointed to hear that I was already taken. She would not have minded an Australian man either; it would certainly give her the opportunity to continue with her career in Australia. When pressed on her future plans she remarked that she had her fingers dipped in many pies. “I want to utilize my degree to the fullest.” The most
important thing was to get more experience. She was still contemplating ways to stay on in Australia, even though she knew it would be very difficult. A sponsorship would be ideal but not particularly easy to arrange. Her job at the Alfred Hospital, where she worked in the administration department, was close to her field of studies but wouldn’t result in any such sponsorship; she already knew that for sure. Not having taken out a loan to pay for her education, however, certainly shielded her from the financial pressures many other students were experiencing; pressures which had led some of them to make rather difficult decisions regarding their studies.

So there we were. The pizzas finished, the waiter at our table asking if we had some room left for desert. The restaurant had a freshly prepared sticky date pudding we could share while we finished off the last bit of wine. Outside it was pouring with rain. Geetha’s family would like to see her settle in Australia as well, she mentioned, scooping some of the whipped cream of her dessert. But living (‘settling’) abroad was hardly a normal thing in her family. “I have some distant cousins in the US; there are quite a few of them there.” But she was not in touch with any of them really, and only close to her direct cousins in India itself. “We were never concerned with going to the US.” Their lives had always been comfortable in India, she explained. There had never been any (logical, rational) need to settle abroad. For her it was different now. In Pune it would be very hard to find an appropriate job in her field. She would probably have to relocate to Mumbai or Bangalore to find a hospital that could really make use of her skills. But that aside, she felt that her life was in Melbourne now. It was going to be very hard to say goodbye to that. She smiled and said that she doubted she would be able to finish the whole dish herself, encouraging me to take a bite as well. Her plate was indeed quite full, but manageable for now, with several options still left to be explored. Although nice to know, the dessert was probably the sweetest it was going to get in the coming months.

Geetha’s case shows, first of all, that not everybody succeeds in becoming a permanent resident in the end. By the same token it shows that certainly not all Indian students are willing to go so far as to, for instance, change courses in order to meet the requirements. But more importantly, Geetha’s case shows how complex trajectories of leaving/migrating out of India can be. A case can have numerous dimensions that are specifically applicable only to that one. These dimensions influence and shape the way a person works towards imaginary arrival points. Geetha was certainly not the only divorced student, I met during my fieldwork to, have come to Australia for a ‘second chance’. At least two other girls I had come across had arrived in Australia for similar reasons, having gone through a failed marriage back in India. And such narratives did not limit themselves to women. There were also men who had arrived in Australia as recent divorcees. Although the connection between divorce, marriage and migration will not be further examined in this dissertation, it is clear that individual migration histories can have multiple starting points that eventually get entangled with each
other and start forming one narrative on how a particular person decides to go abroad.

_Class and Gender in a Community Setting_

While sitting next to Rajesh and his girlfriend Rani, just before the clay idol of Lord Ganesh was submerged in the ocean, listening to the feverish chanting of those around me, I had noticed that the small _mandir_ (temple) that was standing on the podium upfront was empty. It was later explained that Lord Ganesh had left his luscious _mandir_ earlier that day and was now outside, on the roadside, where people would find him. God will have been made into its essence of what he needs to be and in this form gives people what they need, the speaker who had taken the stage droned. Dressed in a beautifully embroidered sari the woman continued in a monotonous, almost hypnotizing, voice that the theme of the celebrations was destruction. But, she warned, it was not destruction in its physical form that this day was about. It was more the philosophical side of destruction, and in particular that of de-construction, that of making things whole and new again. And then came the time to bring the God to its destiny. The crowd slowly got up and some men moved forwards to the carry the _mandir_ on their shoulders. Cheerfully the rest followed into the stormy weather outside. Rajesh quickly took the opportunity to introduce me to his two housemates with whom he had recently teamed up to rent a house in a different part of town. They were both still studying and had only recently arrived in Melbourne.

I had met Rajesh and Geetha initially through Gouri, an immigration agent who had been introduced to me by a mutual acquaintance. Gouri was also there, I noticed. Dressed in a beautiful blue sari, golden slippers underneath, her make-up impeccable, a whole range of expensive looking bangles around her arms, dangling happily while she shook hands with the many people she seemed to know there. Geetha had explained earlier that she was in regular contact with Gouri regarding her options to stay in Australia. Rajesh had managed to get his PR through her; others, whom I noticed among the crowd all seemed to know her as well. Her father-in-law ran a well-established education agency in Pune, and many Maharashtrian students had come to Australia through this agency. As Geetha explained, “I remember that a friend had long ago said that there was this guy who helps with getting admission and immigration.” People would often end up with this agency through word of mouth, and generally there was not much need for marketing efforts, as students seemed to find their way to the agency themselves. Geetha also claimed to have received much emotional support from Gouri in Melbourne. Her parents had become good friends with Gouri’s father-in-law since she had left. It also turned out to be the perfect way to stay in touch. “There is always a student coming back to India [on holiday or because of some other reason] that has gone through them.” There was always somebody bringing back personal news. The network had become quite expanded that way.
Gouri’s network also appeared to have brought the necessary security for the families who had let their daughters go to Australia. The other female students I would meet through this network were all from what could be defined as upper middle class backgrounds. Money was usually not an issue for these families. It was uncommon to find student loans among this group. However, this did not make PR less important. PR was just not tied to financial obligations. For the girl we met in the third chapter, working in an Indian grocery store, and for many of her girlfriends, this was quite a different matter. It had been agreed that she would pay the loan back by working in Australia. It is noteworthy that, in general, PR took on a different meaning for men and women. For one, the very strong imaginary arrival points based on stereotypical images of the successful, transnationally mobile, globally active, middle class India, were much less part of female students’ narratives on expectations of the process of migration which they were undergoing. For female students PR was much more connected to the freedom to live one’s life the way it pleased them. Often their parents had already provided them with the kind of freedom others did not have in India. Yet, they had also realized that this freedom had limits. Marriage always turned out to be an engaging topic which brought this point out. Whenever it came to marriage, these girls would say that they had been on the lookout for local boys to marry. They felt reluctant to go back to India, something they equated with having to give up the kind of freedom that they had obtained by coming to Australia. It was here that I observed gender and class giving each other an awkward handshake. Class had given these girls the opportunity to go to Australia, where gender had not worked in their favor, yet now gender was pushing them to stay on and apply for PR, where class would have preferred them to return to India. The two were working in tandem, yet also contradicting each other. Where class pretended to be modern, gender functioned as a ‘correcting’ factor on this.

Of Others Getting There, Making It, and (You) Missing the Boat
Meeting Gouri on a number of different occasions had provided me with a rather in-depth insight into the workings of a dynamic, well-organized transnational network with a prominent sender (Gouri’s father-in-law) on one side of the (Indian) border,

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77 Generally I did not get the impression that female students were less burdened by their loans than male students. The amounts they had borrowed also appeared to be similar. However, I did get the impression that when it came to eventually paying back the loan, some girls appeared to be less bothered. It was their duty, sure, but not something that could not be resolved otherwise if need be. It is important to stress though that that there is no hard data available on this and it remains an elusive matter. I never quite managed to get to the bottom of how certain girls’ family had figured out alternative plans should the migration plans of the girls fail. One possible answer is to be found in the way Indian families seem to have fewer expectations of their daughters in terms of careers – and thus do not anticipate her to make any money, though if she does it would greatly be appreciated. Unraveling the gender dimensions of student-migration was never a very central item in my research, possibly other researchers will be shed more light on this in future.
and a highly active receiver (Gouri herself) on the other (Australian) side of the fence. Whereas the father-in-law focused on the education side of the business, Gouri focused solely on the immigration details once students had arrived in Melbourne.

Rajesh and Gouri were still in regular touch. It had been because of her that he was now a permanent resident, a process in which her father-in-law had also been involved in. As the application had to be done offshore, based on his Indian skills, he had had no other option than to go back to India earlier that year to get the necessary stamp in his passport. This is something Gouri’s father-in-law had helped with. Rajesh now had a job in a factory, working six to seven hours a day. He combined this job with working for Pizza Hut a couple of hours per week, but there was also talk of another factory job that would give him yet more hours. Considering his family’s background Rajesh was now – in Indian terms – doing work he would never have contemplated for a minute had he stayed back in India. And not just that, it also did not fit in with the education he had already received. He was rather overqualified for the work he was doing. Oddly, it had been the skills he was no longer using which had made it possible for him to work the number of hours he currently did. Being a PR holder he could do whatever pleased him in terms of work, no longer being bound by the 20-hour work rule.

Discussing all this with him, Rajesh was quick to explain that he was still looking for a job in his own field. Although having relevant work experience, and having received an Australian permanent residency through its skilled migration program, he had not been able to find work in his own field yet. “Companies ask for two, three years of experience, or local experience. That’s the problem.” Not being able to work in his own field was making him nervous, as he put it himself, for another reason as well. “They are making big news that they want 80,000 IT people from India. I read that in the India Express some time ago,” he added. Meanwhile he kept hearing stories from other migrants in Australia that they were not able to find work in their own fields. “I have a friend from Dubai. He has four years experience but still there is no work for him.” It was confusing. Rajesh was not sure what Australian employers were looking for. Why would they want 80,000 IT guys from India? “You can get half of that number here.” In fact, Rajesh had already applied to all the major IT companies, but without success. They all want local experience, he repeated, sighing once again. But as nobody seemed to be willing to give him ‘a break’ he was not getting any experience either. “All students say the same about that,” he added. “It is all about luck.” Thinking about it a little more he commented: “The problem is: they want ready-made people most of all.”

‘Ready-made’ was not something Rajesh considered himself to be. With a loan of ten lakhs, half of which he had already used up; his first concern now was to get the ease his family’s financial burden. But talking about his family a little more he also admitted that as his parents were fairly well off there was certainly no immediate
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pressure. He just felt it was his duty to do so. He was the eldest son and he had promised to take care of his family. It were these same obligations (the very same promise) that was now keeping him from taking too many risks, such as giving up his day job and dedicating himself fully to the search for a more fitting job. His general pride and optimism were standing in the way of truly seeing himself as a failure, I knew, but it was something that was on his mind. It was a problem Paresh, a student from the city of Hyderabad, was familiar with as well. Talking to Rajesh and some of his friends at the Ganesh Chaturthi festival, reminded me of the struggles Paresh was going through, having just applied for PR but knowing that it was unlikely he would actually get one. Now on a bridging visa, awaiting a decision from the migration authorities, he was dedicating all his time and attention to finding a job in his field of study (IT) with an employer that would also be willing to sponsor him. He knew his chances were slim but he was very determined.

Paresh had dropped by one evening at the house of one of my regular informants (Kishore). It was a house that newly-arrived Indian students regularly stayed in for short periods, while they looked for a place to live themselves. That week a bunch of new students had come in and Paresh had dropped by to say hello to the newcomers as well as recount the most recent developments in his struggles to find the right job. I had the sense that these visits were actually annoying my contact a little. For Kishore applying for PR was still a long way off and he did not want other people’s worries to become part of his own daily reality. (See also chapter 3 on the negative ‘culture of migration’) This did not mean PR was not part of his plans though. “With a western passport it is easier to have lots of opportunities. PR gives you all these opportunities.” With ‘opportunities’ he mostly referred to the US and its ‘huge economy’. “And there is a huge demand there, so I want to go to the US in the end.” He added that “with a PR I won’t even need a visa,” which underlined even more what the value of it was for him. “But then I will also look for Australian citizenship.” That way, he was sure, the liberty of going wherever he wanted to would never be taken away from him. In that sense, being an Australian was much more attractive than being an Indian.

These were also things that had been on Paresh’s mind, but PR was a much more ‘urgent’ issue for him. He needed PR because soon his loan would have to be repaid and, like many others, Paresh had taken financial risks based on his hopes of getting a PR in Australia. While standing in the kitchen, cooking for his housemates, Kishore commented that PR was not so important in that sense for him. He had taken a loan but his family was able to repay it without him having PR. If it really didn’t work out he would simply go back to India and start a business there. “The ones who don’t make it explain it like they lost lots in life.” It was something he found hard to understand, and something that bothered him. “They show helplessness that way.” Referring to Paresh he said: “He has to go home next month. His depression strikes
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me; you get influenced by that.” The way he saw it Indian students could largely be
dissected into three different groups. There were those who were simply from very
rich families and then there were those who had come to Australia for PR. “And then
there is this group in between. They get fooled by lawyers.” He had heard stories of
how students had been told that they could make most of the money needed to study
in Australia by working (more than) part-time. So that way they wouldn’t really need
any money at all. “That’s what the agents say.” To some extent Kishore included Paresh
among one of the ‘duped’ here. He had been fooled into thinking it would all work out
easily. Yet I wondered what he actually meant with that group in between. Kishore
was attending a much better university than Paresh. And it was also clear that the
money issues Paresh was dealing with would never be a problem for Kishore. Class
backgrounds were certainly playing a role here. And I wondered if, to a certain extent,
the situation could also not be understood as ‘gendered’. Here there were two male
Indian students who each had come to Australia with their own expectations. These
expectations also related to what family back home was expecting of them. Kishore
understood all too well that Paresh was not only failing to migrate but by doing so was
also failing his family in terms of monetary securities. Times ahead were going to be
tough and Paresh was, in a sense, to blame for this.

Meeting Paresh a couple of weeks later, it seemed he had become even more
depressed. Sharing a house with some other Indians who were all PR holders hardly
seemed to be helping him either. A friend, who had just dropped by when I walked in,
had completed a TAFE course in catering and hospitality management with William
Angliss College a couple of year earlier and had become an Australian resident not
long after that. Having been a chef with a large restaurant for 3 and a half years he
had recently moved on to start up his own export business, dealing mostly in lentils
and sugar cane. The business was going well though he would sometimes still work
as a chef at bigger functions to make some extra money. While he summed up his
achievements in the span of about 15 minutes I noticed Paresh look at his friend with
a rather blank expression. It was what he wanted as well but his plan of getting PR
was failing and he had no idea what to do next. Yet it would be too simplistic to think
that Paresh wanted exactly the same. Paresh wanted to work as an IT professional for
a high-tech company in Australia. This is what he believed he was capable off and also
what he deemed fitting for a hard-working, young, English-speaking, middle class
student. He equated what his friend was now doing with something that belonged
to a different (and maybe also older) form of migration. It reminded me of the stories
I had heard of two Indian students who had graduated from Swinburne a couple of
years earlier and who now operated an Indian grocery store near the campus where
they had studied. Although I had met them myself the stories other students would
tell me about them interested me much more. The disdain expressed over the choices
these students had made was never hard to miss. It was a popular anecdote about
how one could fail to make it after having received one’s PR and I would hear the story on many different occasions.

The Struggle of Becoming What One Had Imagined
Having arrived in Australia in August 2003, Paresh had recently completed his masters in business information systems. After completing a bachelors of science with Osmana University, he had come to Australia right away. His first reason had been to set up a business for himself in the future. “I will get more money if I stay here so that I can save some for that.” The second reason he had was that the work culture was (“much”) better in Australia. He had learned about this doing research online in India and hearing others talk about this. “And my third reason was that I had never been out of home.” He had relatives all over the place in India, as he put it, but none living abroad and certainly not in Australia. “I wanted to get exposed to that,” meaning life abroad. “The struggle is important in that,” he commented. “That struggle, from that I will learn a lot.” He added: “it’s the struggle that makes you strong.” What he did not understand though was why they were making it so hard for him. “Because the rules changed it is tough getting PR these days.” The year he arrived, (2003), in Australia, some of the migration rules changed, and specifically those applying people wanting to convert their student visa into an Australian permanent residency. What it came down to, Paresh felt, was that they (meaning Indian students planning on coming to Australia) had been given the impression that if you undertook a two-year course you would automatically get a PR. “But they betrayed us with that.” The rules had changed, and his course was no longer fetching the MODL points it once had. “I have even written a letter about it to the minister. I got a reply back from one of her secretaries.” In his letter he had asked her why they had taken the option to become an Australian resident away from him. Didn’t they know that he had based his plans on what had once seemed so easy? He was of the opinion that they should have warned him properly. “My masters education won’t be recognized in India,” he fumed. “Education is much ahead there.” He claimed to have no idea about this before he left. “They have all these fancy names for these courses.” But it had turned out, at least so Paresh claimed, that most of these courses had little or no contents. “But I was not so bothered about that really.” He claimed to have come for “the business side of things” in Australia. His Australian education should have led straight to a PR after which he would have been able to set up his own business. These plans were off for now.

All he could do in the months to come was to try to convince a company to sponsor him in getting a work permit. But at the same time he claimed there was hardly any work available, “at least not in my field.” He had ‘heard’ that it would pick up in about eighteen months though. Many of his friends were voluntarily going back to India, he suddenly remarked. “All the work is going there I mean. It is all there now.” Yet, he couldn’t picture himself there. He had worked hard to get out of India and
going back was not something he was truly willing to consider, even if the prospects were good there. Coming from a “very middle class family” things were going to be difficult financially. What this being ‘very middle class’ was supposed to precisely signify confused me a little but the way he said it reminded me of how other Indians I met also usually used phrases such as ‘typically middle class’ or simply ‘middle class’, without an adjective like ‘lower’ or ‘upper’. It basically signified the upwardly mobile middle class that only recently started having the money to spend and invest in something like studying abroad. And this certainly fitted the picture I had mentally been able to make of Paresh’s family back home. His father, a retired supervisor with an electrical plant where he used to supervise the accounts division, and his mother “a simple housewife”, the family had been able to send their son abroad but not without the help of a lot of other people. “We have taken money from all the friends we have; family friends, personal friends.” In total the loan was 12,000 Australian dollars. “All the expenses were paid with that, including my first semester.” The other semesters he had taken care of by working alongside his studies. “I used to work all seven nights; as a console operator at a fuel station.” During holidays he would work between 40 and 60 hours per week. “During my college days between 20 and 25 hours. Sometimes I would work 30 hours.” Most of it would be TFN though, he added.

“I am quite frustrated by that whole PR thing. I had planned it that way - that I would get it.” It had been his most important reason for coming to Australia. He mentioned that he could also have gone to Canada. “It would have been much cheaper that way.” He had friends who had done so. “They have grants there for international students. Here you don’t get them so easily.” Now that he had applied for PR, knowing in fact that he wouldn’t get it, he was living on borrowed time that was quickly running out. Because of all the time he was investing in finding an employer who would be willing to sponsor him, he hardly had time to do any real ‘paid’ work. He had not told his parents about the trouble he was in just yet. “They think I am good, I am okay.” He had felt little need to keep them fully informed about his troubles in Melbourne. “It might just worry them you know.” And they would also not being able to do much for him. All he could do now was dedicate as much of the time he had left to finding a solution for the situation he was in.

The Male Migrant

As many have argued before (for instance Pessar & Mahler, 2003: 812), gender is one of the oldest organizing principles of daily life. As such it also influences migrants’ lives; there is no denying that. However, the project of bringing gender into the study of migration (or transnationalism for that matter), often led to highlighting the female side of migration, making women far more visible than they had been before. Yet as Pessar & Mahler also argue, at some point: “the pendulum shifted so far in the opposite direction that the male migrant as study subject disappeared almost to the same degree
as the female migrant had previously.” (p. 814) It is perhaps rather ironic then that in their own overview paper Pessar & Mahler pay little attention to specifically male aspects of migration. Migrants are, indeed, often male, and frequently go through migration trajectories among other male migrants. This is not to say that women are not also sometimes part of these very same trajectories; it is just not always the case (the same goes for the other way around, by the way). This notion of being among other male migrants – being a male migrant – is something that studies purporting to include gender often seem to ignore.

Previously I have argued that some of the girls belonging to Gouri’s network hailed from upper middle class families. This class background had enabled them to go to Australia as independent women working on something that would enhance their future careers. Yet I also showed that certain gender infused expectations at home created a complex field where applying for a PR became not just about career options but also about no longer having to meet some of these expectations. I subsequently concluded: ‘Where class pretended to be modern, gender functioned as a ‘correcting’ factor on this.’ Among male Indian students, however, class and gender seemed to be entangled in a slightly different way. Paresh was clearly failing in his attempt to migrate. For Kishore this was not yet an issue, though it should also be noted that he argued that his background – hailing from a wealthy Malayali family in the South – also made it less necessary for him to eventually get PR. If he did not get one he would simply return home and start a business there, he argued. For Paresh this was different. Paresh was also middle class yet the class he belonged to back in India was much more an upcoming one for whom ‘having money’, in the sense of being able to spend it on studying abroad etc., was a rather recent thing. In addition, it had meant that his family had taken out a heavy loan, something Kishore had not needed to do. Rajesh seemed to fall in-between Paresh and Kishore in that sense. Rajesh had taken out a loan, though a particularly large loan had not been necessary. It was also not an immediate problem for Rajesh if he could not pay back part of the loan every month. Class wise, then, it was Kishore who scored highest so to speak, followed by Rajesh, and finally Paresh. All three were Indian middle class, yet there was a definite hierarchy among them.

I realize that framing it these terms is somewhat simplistic, not least because it ignores caste backgrounds. Paresh was from a Brahmin family and Kishore from a trader’s caste. Rajesh on the other hand was from, what could be understood as, a warrior caste. I suggest the fact that all three of them were from a clearly upper caste background makes caste less relevant in this particular case. Most Hindu students in Australia were of an upper caste background. Their specific middle class backgrounds did appear to make a difference though. Following Batnitzky et al (2008), though, class intersects with gender in a particular way here, especially when trying to understand how success and failure are understood in a migration process. Paresh was failing,
Rajesh had managed to get PR, and Kishore was not sure if he would get one but also argued he did not really need one. Whereas Paresh was failing to get a PR, Rajesh was failing in another way; although he had been successful in obtaining a PR based on his skills early on he had subsequently dropped out of university and had not been able to find a job that matched his skills. He was working in a factory and a pizza place. Yet for some reason he seemed to be doing something that still fitted in with what was expected of someone in his situation. Despite Rajesh not being able to find a proper job, Kishore argued that he was at least taking care of his loan by making money in a factory. Paresh in his eyes, however, was making things unnecessarily difficult for his parents by not generating any money and on top of that probably also failing to get a PR. Rajesh was doing what a male Indian migrant was supposed to be doing, irrespective of his class background: he was taking care of his family and meeting his obligations. Kishore was glad he did not have to go through what both other guys were going through though. The way Paresh was handling himself was shameful according to Kishore. He understood the complaining Paresh brought to the house mostly in terms of somebody who did not work hard enough and should take the example of somebody like Rajesh who had embraced the consequences of his earlier decisions and was now doing what so many other migrants were doing; working hard and hoping for the better. In the following sections we will further examine how class and gender play out in the case of Indian students.

THE OPTIONS

Visiting Agents and/or Lawyers

In order to be eligible for a PR a student needs to score 120 points on a so-called points test. That is, if you do not have somebody sponsoring you directly. As most immigration agents I met agreed, the issue for most students is achieving the final five points. As one well-known immigration agent who often appeared in the local Indian media (where he regularly published articles on changing rules and regulations) mentioned: “Right now you have a lot of students changing from IT to accountancy because IT is no longer fetching them enough points.”78 It was something Gouri also agreed with. The ‘five points issue’ was in fact a direct result of DIMIA (the immigration department)
having increased the pass mark for the Skilled Independent Overseas Student visa subclass from 115 to 120 points for students applying after May 2005. The rule change was announced on the first of April 2004, when many students who were banking on getting PR were already in Australia, or so far on in the process of coming to Australia that it no longer made sense to simply abandon plans. Getting these 120 points is a fairly straightforward and easy process as long as one meets the criteria. Generally this works as follows: if a student is below 30 years of age when applying he receives 30 points for age. Another 20 points can be gained by successfully passing the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test at level 6. Most Indian students meet both requirements easily. Once they have completed their two years of full-time education in Australia they can collect another five points. The real problem comes with the particular skills category. The skilled migration program is divided into three different categories, worth 40, 50 and 60 points, respectively. Professions such as IT and engineering were included under the 60 points category at the time of my research. A profession such as accounting, however, was mentioned on the MODL (Migration Occupation in Demand) list and thus received an additional 15 points, totaling 75.

As mentioned earlier, Paresh was falling short on points. He had already visited a number of different immigration agents and they had all painted the same picture: he would have to find a way to claim additional points. But time was running out and it was time that most available options required. One way to claim extra points was through completing six months of fulltime work. Gouri: “So that means twelve months of part-time work.” This requirement may subsequently be completed in 48 months, which is actually twice as long as an Indian student is usually enrolled in a postgrad program. It is also important to realize that not just any kind of work experience will do. The work experience that actually generates points is the type that is classified as ‘in demand’. Another option students often consider is marrying somebody (a fellow student) who already has PR or who may not find it hard to get one. However, Gouri had not met many people who had been able to make this work, as she was also aware of the sometimes-ambivalent relationship between Indian students and Indian community members (see also chapter 3). Another interesting option for claiming extra points was, unfortunately, of rather limited use to students. If a student managed to make a fixed capital investment of at least AUS$100,000 dollars for one year, five bonus points could be claimed upon application. Yet, Gouri had observed that this was probably only a real option for about two percent of the Indian student population. “I have two clients now who want to do that.” Though at the time she was not sure if they would really be able to pull it off. A far more interesting option turned out to be the NAATI test, which would lead to certification as a legal translator in one of the Indian languages. “Some of my clients have tried this.” It still turned out to be far from easy though. “I know somebody who marks these papers and the pass rate seems to be disappointing.”
Well-known immigration agent, Bikkar Singh Brar, who regularly published his thoughts on these matters in a local Indian paper, advised that “applicants who are unable to claim five points now may see the option of extending their course for another semester by leaving (or failing) one odd subject, provided they are able to extend their visa and education providers accept it.” (*Indian Voice*, May 18, 2005) During this extra semester the student could then study for NAATI or gain Australian work experience. Yet, Gouri added that: “if during the initial consultation I think that it is just not going to happen I will say so.” She had no problem doing so, being fully aware that the rules are strict and there is little scope for negotiation with the authorities if an application fails. “But students go through at least three, four agents before they make up their minds. They will get second and third opinions from other places.” Even some of those students who had come to her via her father-in-law would do so. She was fully aware of that. The only thing she could rely on (a little) in her business was her reputation as an honest agent. She was unwilling to risk a student’s future by giving him unclear or unfounded information. “They will have to go back if things don’t work out”. It was quite a responsibility to make sure they received the right information. Yet, she also knew that even if applications failed, many still did not go back. “Eighty to ninety percent will find a way.” With the option of now getting a temporary residency visa for a regional area, there was yet another way of postponing having to go back. “Any student fulfills those criteria.” However, Gouri was also quite cynical about this option. “Indian students will take these SIR [Skilled Independent Regional] visas out of desperation.”

*Waiting for PR News To Come In*

Strategies to make sure that PR is a safe-bet from the start sometimes lead to rather innovative schemes that craftily make use of gray zones that exist between what the rules and regulations say and what the objectives of these very same rules and regulations are. In a way it could be argued that such schemes make use of something that is purposely left unresolved. While overseas education is not supposed to encourage migration, overseas students do get the option to become permanent residents if they meet the right criteria. And ‘the right criteria’ are equal to all. Let’s zoom in for a minute on the case of Gurpreet, a 25 year old Punjabi who had come to Melbourne to do her masters in IT in Australia, already having completed an MBA back home in India. Having no prior experience or, for that matter, interest in IT, her choice could be perceived as an odd one. Before she came to Australia she had completed a bachelors in commerce with Punjab University and then went on to do a master’s degree in the hill town of Dehradun. This she completed in 2000 after which she went on to do an MBA in human resource management with Punjab Technical University (Jullundur), which she finished in 2002. After that she had quickly found a job as a senior executive with a large company. It was also around this time that she met her now ex-husband.
Asked about how she had ended up in Australia she said: “It was not really my decision to study here, it was partly my husband’s decision.” She had actually been quite content with her life in India and had no desire to go abroad. “But he wanted to”, she said, nodding her head towards the bedroom door where her husband was sleeping, having worked at night driving a taxi. Her husband had come as a ‘dependent’ of her. “Most friends have done it this way,” Gurpreet added. “They apply for a student-visa, is what they do.” This visa allows their husbands to enter the country as well. “It is usually the girl who applies for the visa.” She had a simple explanation why this was so. “If a guy applied he does not get full working rights. He will be the student then which means he is limited to working 20 hours.” Now that she was doing her masters, her husband was able to work fulltime. “If you come to do your bachelors here it is different. Then your husband can only work 20 hours per week.” Gurpreet was talking about herself and the situation she was in rather paradoxically. Her husband had wanted to go abroad, and although she had had a good job back in India and was reluctant to follow him, she had eventually agreed. It was something that felt natural to her. Their marriage had been a ‘love’ match, and she felt it was important to obey her husband and to see his reasoning as superior to hers. At the same time the migration now depended on her since she was the one who had made it possible for her husband to go abroad. Although on paper she was in charge of the whole affair, the weight of responsibilities she was now carrying was set in motion by her husband. Referring back to Geetha, we are now able to observe that whereas men carry particular responsibilities and obligations that are tied-in with what is expected of them as Indian men, female students may also have the same ‘ultimate’ objective (an Australian PR), yet the way they carry certain responsibilities and obligations may have different underlying meanings. These meanings may well be connected to what is typically seen as proper for an Indian female.79

Initially Gurpreet had chosen to do a masters in IT. Having enrolled with MIT (Melbourne Institute of Technology) she had soon realized that it was not her ‘thing’ though. She had heard from others that it would not be hard to do a masters in IT with MIT without any background in IT, but it turned out not to be that simple. She ended up changing to ‘information systems’, a course with less programming content. Yet it had still turned out to be far from easy to complete her course without having to do a lot of extra work. It would have been nice if she had known about this beforehand but her agent in India had been quite convincing. “He was just one person. He only sends

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79 A narrative of close friend of Gurpreet’s was remarkably similar. This girl was studying at the Melbourne Institute for Tourism and Hospitality at the time, not too far from the campus where Gurpreet often followed classes. Her husband had also been the main reason for coming to Australia. At the time he was doing a security job at Coles, a supermarket chain that has shops all over Melbourne. The marriage had been a love marriage and Nandini explained that she had simply wanted to be with him. When they heard of Gurpreet and her husband going to Australia as well, her husband saw an opportunity to do the same.
people to CQU and Ballarat [MIT].” It had seemed like the most sensible thing to do, as their plans were clearly to settle in Australia. “He also gives advice on PR.” Yet, she claimed, he was not very well informed. “He passes on mixed up information.” That was also probably why she had not received proper information on whether or not she would be able to complete a masters in a field she had no prior experience in nor any real talent for.

With hindsight there had been much easier ways to get into Australia, in fact. Having recently discussed her options with an immigration agent, she had found out that her Indian experience with, and degrees in, accounting actually qualified her for applying for PR almost right away. In that way her case was quite comparable to that of Rajesh whom we met earlier in this chapter. Gurpreet’s next step was to get her Indian education assessed with the National Institute of Accountants (NIA). The results of this assessment meant that she would be able to get exemptions for eight subjects. “But you need nine to apply for PR.” So she decided to do one subject with another university in Melbourne for which she had received the results (‘a pass’) recently. “So now I will send this to NIA again and they will give me that exemption. That will all be sent to DIMIA.” She had already decided what she would do once she received her PR; she would give up her studies at MIT. “If I had full working rights without the PR I would be doing that anyway,” she said, being of the opinion that her degree with MIT would not be worth much anyway.

For months Paresh and Gurpreet were basically in the same situation. Although they had never met each other before they both belonged to a network of Indian students and other people that were somehow, through educational histories, jobs and other factors (‘weakly yet closely’) connected to each other. Paresh was basically waiting for DIMIA to tell him to leave the country, knowing that he had only submitted the forms because it would buy him some extra time, but definitely no longer entertaining the illusion that he would actually get a permanent residency. Gurpreet, on the other hand, knew she met the qualifications set by the Australian government, yet had no idea how long it would take for her application to be processed, and in turn when she would be able to stop her education for which she was paying using borrowed money. Although the PR process had been set into motion long ago, Gurpreet kept stressing that it had never been her choice to come to Australia. “I still want to go back to India; I just want to go back to my own country.” But she also understood that the choices had more or less already been made for her. Not only because her husband (who had completed a degree in pharmacy back in India) had a dream of starting a business in Australia, but also because the money they had so far invested in the process would have to be made back one way or the other. Her husband was now earning well (at least relative to what he had been able to bring into the household in India), and they had been able to start repaying the loan a little. But the PR process itself had also been quite costly. The fee they had to pay to DIMIA was AUS$1,935 dollars, and the agent
fees were AUS$2,100 dollars. Most agents/lawyers would charge the same. An agent that I interviewed one afternoon in November summed it up as follows:

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Application fee</td>
<td>$1935</td>
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<td>Lawyer fee, ex appeal</td>
<td>$1750, includes $80 consultation fee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health checks</td>
<td>$300</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police clearance</td>
<td>$36, Australia</td>
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Gurpreet herself also counted the extra expenses of taking an additional accounting subject at another university in order to complete the requirements the assessment body had asked of her. In total, she estimated that she had spent in between seven and eight thousand dollars on the application so far. The degree she was doing now would be of little or no value. She had no intention of ever working in the IT sector. When she realized her Indian skills were almost sufficient for an application based on skills she had realized that there was a much more ‘fitting’ way to become an Australian resident. For that matter she wasn’t waiting for graduation to come along so that she could apply for PR and start making money, precisely the opposite; she was waiting for her PR to arrive so that she could give up her education, and start making money.

The Options Further Examined
While Paresh and Gurpreet were in the middle of their application process, waiting for agents to get back to them, regularly contacting DIMIA on progress updates; others were occupied with figuring out how to get the necessary final points in the first place. Jaganath was one such person. Busy downloading a Bollywood movie from the Internet, and having me go through his already burned-to-CD catalogue of recently viewed ones, he explained that he had gone to see an immigration agent the other day who had basically told him the same as his friends had. Having done his bachelors in computer application at a university outside Delhi, he had come to Australia to do a masters in computer science with Monash University. He had abandoned earlier plans, such as going to the UK and the US, having realized that graduating from “a third degree kind of place” wasn’t going to help him much. “Then I applied with IDP because I knew they could help me out with this one.” It wasn’t just that the UK and US would, in his opinion, be hard to get into, he also felt they were too expensive. “My father is a government servant.” Yet he added that for Indians the US would always be the
first preference. “I knew Australia only as an alternative to that.” Permanent residency in Australia certainly played a part in this. “Then you still needed 115 points.” The passmark having been raised from 115 to 120 he was now in the situation so many others were in: five points short. “I am now planning on doing my translators course at Ballarat.” He was referring to a course that the Melbourne Institute of Technology (MIT), a ‘subsidiary’ campus of the University of Ballarat, had recently started to offer and with which they were regularly advertising in local Indian papers, clearly targeting Indian overseas students who needed extra points for their PR applications. “It will cost 5,000 dollars and it will be for four months which is good.” It was also the only real option he had left now. Some of his friends had already started taking the courses, “so I am just waiting to see how they are doing and if they are doing well I will do that too.” Some of his friends had also taken the exam without doing any proper studying, thinking that as more or less native speakers of Hindi they would be able to do it ‘easily’. In fact, many had failed.

The ‘five points issue’ had been a stress factor in Jaganath’s life almost since the day he had arrived in Australia. Not long after he had arrived in Australia the rules had changed. Students from similar business family and caste backgrounds, some of them quite wealthy, dominated the house he had lived in at the time. “They can repay these annual fees just like that.” He added that: “they can just take that money out of their father’s businesses and it is no problem at all.” He was quite sure that some of these students who lived there were going “for the 100,000 dollar thing.” A problem for them was going to be showing that the money was white though. I knew some of these students myself and was aware that that was exactly what they were struggling with. One of the students Jaganath had ‘not quite’ hit it off with had also faced this problem when financing his study abroad plans. He had taken out a student loan for the full amount but had not really needed one. The family had ‘more than enough’ money but being involved in all sorts of business ventures, much of it was black money. The loan had actually come in handy for laundering some of this money. Yet there were now also agents who were able to help such students out with their
“100,000 dollar thing.” Jaganath was of the opinion that it always worked like that; there was always some way to circumvent the rules.

‘Going Bush’: Not an Option
An option Jaganath was most definitely not considering was going to a regional area on a SIR (Skilled Independent Regional) visa. The SIR visa is a provisional visa that is marketed as something that international students can apply for when they don’t meet the normal criteria for PR. It involves working and living in a regional area for a number of years, after which they can consider applying for PR if they meet the requirements. In order to attract more people to the state of Victoria, and in particular to its more provincial areas, the Victorian State Government launched a website called ‘Living in Victoria’ in May 2005, to make it easier and more interesting for potential migrants to migrate to Victoria. The website was launched at RMIT and by doing so the State Government was making it perfectly clear who they saw as potential candidates for the SIR visa. The questions that came from the audience also made perfectly clear that for many the option of applying for SIR came with ‘ideas’ to make it work anyway. One Chinese lady in the audience asked: “does my husband have to live in the same regional area?” The answer was that ‘yes, he does’ causing a disapproving murmur among the crowd. Clearly this question had been on other people’s minds as well. The officials present, however, were quick to point out that these regional places are really not that bad to live in. They had apparently perceived from the crowd that what they were offering them wasn’t exactly the most appealing prospect. The meeting took a more aggressive turn when an Indian student demanded to know why the Australian government had first given them the impression that it would not be hard at all to get a PR, and that now they kept on making it more difficult.

80 As reported on the FISA website (http://www.downundernewslinks.com/?p=2369) more than 200 Indians were suspected of fraudulently securing residency through this scheme. At the time (November 22, 2007) they were running the risk of deportation:

“The alleged scam was uncovered after the bank found discrepancies in loans issued by a now-suspended manager. The Australian Federal Police has been called in to investigate as the bank tries to recoup $22.7 million it fears may be lost. Documents lodged in the Federal Court allege ex-Moorabbin East business banking centre manager Akshay Batra admitted to the bank he provided 227 $100,000 loans to Indians so they could get a general skilled migration visa. The Indians allegedly used the loans to buy government-issued bonds, which, until recent changes, earned them five points towards the 100 that were required to get the visa. Documents filed in court alleged investigators had found an absence of written applications for the loans, loans were issued to unregistered companies and correspondence was returned marked “addressee not known”. The bank told the court it was looking for the Indians and would offer them free legal advice in the hope that they would confirm that the $100,000 of bonds they each owned belonged to the bank. Maybe NAB will let all these Indians work off their debts? after all, NAB does seem to like giving all the Australian jobs to India.”

81 See for an interesting study on the needs of regional areas: Rural and Regional Australia: Change, Challenge and Capacity. By: Mission Australia.
with increasing passmarks and taking skills off the MODL list. This was a question that those launching the website had clearly not anticipated and showing a complete lack of understanding, the speaker bluntly remarked that a student visa was not designed to lead to PR. That was something they simply had to accept. There appeared to be no sense of irony that they were launching this website in a university among overseas students (see also chapter five). Another subsequent question was about how long you actually needed to live in these regional areas. The inquirer asked as if he was talking about a prison sentence; the answer came back that he was to be assured that there was nothing wrong with living in these areas. A muffled ‘whatever’ could be heard and a number of students decided to leave out of protest.

Talking to students who were in similar situations as Jaganath, it seemed that although nobody actually wanted to live in a regional area, many were still ‘inquiring’ about it, giving it ‘some thought’, maybe seeing ‘an opportunity there’. Yet for almost all it was way down the list, along with the option of investing a hundred thousand dollars and marrying a ‘local girl’. The most common worry expressed about committing to a life in a regional area was that, besides the fact that it might be hard to get a job there; it also meant living an isolated life in a state of uncertainty about when one would be considered a real resident in Australia with full rights and benefits.

Students, who already felt disappointed by the education they received in Australia, or by Australia simply having changed the PR requirements, are especially likely to see moving to the countryside as an extra slap in the face. Agents were also far from eager to recommend the option. “Some go for regional. But that is a poor deal really.” An immigration agent whom I met one bright and sunny afternoon was particularly clear on this. “Nobody of my client base has gone for that so far.” He felt it was just not a very good deal. “The numbers who have gone for that are very disappointing I have heard.” He added that he was of the opinion that “they haven’t really thought that SIR visa through if you ask me.” Preliminary data from DIMIA available in 2005, also suggests that, at that time, the number of applications for SIR visas was still limited. In the period 2004-05 only six SIR visas had been granted to Indians, alongside four invalid applications and four others which were still being processed. In the case of Chinese applicants the situation was not much different: 22 granted SIR visas, 2 invalid, 1 refused, 5 withdrawn and 10 still in hand. It is unlikely that the situation changed very much after that.82 It is highly relevant that many students decided not to go for a SIR visa but found other ways of staying on. That said, it is also a little odd as

82 See also: Indian Voice, June 2005, in which Rory Hudson, immigration agent, writes: “It has been found that the new Skilled Independent Regional (SIR) visa, announced with much fanfare recently, has been a dismal failure. This is another result which I predicted, and is not at all surprising to anybody who thinks about the issues, since the visa includes so many restrictions on a person’s freedom and so doubtful a prospect of permanent residence even after two or three years of hardship. The new changes do nothing to address these fundamental problems, and so it is my prediction that the SIR visa will continue to be a failure.”
so many had at some point considered SIR, giving it a serious spot on their options-list for a while. It illustrates the desperation many students were feeling, a desperation that was not only related to financial pressures but also to very clear ideas (dreams, aspirations, imaginings) about (a continued, permanent) life outside India (see for instance Paresh’s case).

THE RETURN

A Return to a Departure Point

Half a year later I am waiting for Paresh at the intersection of two busy roads in downtown Hyderabad (India). I receive a message saying he can see me standing in front of a drugstore, and that he is near a gas station on the other side of the crossing. I call him but can barely hear him over the usual rush hour noise. Apparently he is waving at me, but I can’t see him and neither can I see a safe way to cross the road. He shouts that I should stay where I am. Dressed in loose fitting kurta and Levis and with the latest Nokia in his hands he greets me, shouting enthusiastically, competing with the incessant honking of some trucks which are trying to get the rest of the traffic to ignore the red light. “Very different from Melbourne, ah?” I can only nod in agreement and follow him through the traffic. On the one hand what we are doing feels suicidal, yet on the other also exciting, as we avoid a scooter trying to get ahead of the game, and a rickshaw which suddenly decides to change lanes. “It is all so alive,” I shout at Paresh, thinking of how quiet Melbourne could be sometimes. He nods, but his eyes betray a different sentiment. When we finally reach the sidewalk on the other side, Paresh suggests first greeting his parents who live nearby and then heading for dinner at a hotel a little further down the road.

Paresh had no option other than to return home at the end of the year, as no company was willing to hire, and thus sponsor him. It had not been a simple decision but it had, it seems, been unavoidable. Now he was back in India trying to figure out what to do next. The rules had very recently changed again though (announced December 2005) which could very well provide Paresh with a safe return to Australia. Whereas in the previous two years IT had been off the MODL list, mostly as a result of the slump in IT worldwide and a surplus of IT workers in Australia itself, it had recently been re-added. The IT profiles that were on the list were quite specific, and in addition he would have to show relevant work experience, but Paresh knew that he could probably meet the requirements.

When we enter the small but comfortable family apartment, his mother, dressed in sari with the remote control in her hands, busy changing channels, quickly moves into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee and some snacks. His father who was taking a nap is woken up and comes out of the bedroom to greet me cheerfully. He has heard about me, knowing that Paresh and I used to be friends in Melbourne, and
is curious to hear what my business in Hyderabad is. Now that he is retired he spends most of his time practicing yoga and praying, he explains, somewhat apologetically. The family is Brahmin and the holy cord is resting comfortably on his wiry frame. While I drink my coffee his father moves into the kitchen and opens the *pooja* cabinet, lighting some incense sticks and paying respect to Lord Ganesh.

His father soon forgets my presence and I am able to take in my surroundings. It is an apartment like so many others, clearly home to a typical urban middle class family in India, one of which the media constantly says form a new market of millions of affluent consumers. Yet the impression I get from the apartment is not one of wealth. Compared to the many other families I had visited in India (not necessarily for this research), and who also referred to themselves as middle class, I realize how diverse this category really is. My observations of the apartment also take me back to discussions I observed between Paresh and Kishore. It now seemed more clear than ever to me that Kishore knew exactly where Paresh came from. It seemed that the financial obligations Paresh carried with him, and that Kishore could operate relatively free of, were not the only thing that had played a part in the difficult (at times friendly, yet often strained) relationship the two had with each other. There was also a middle class struggle going on here where one felt clearly superior to the other. Paresh’s Brahmin caste could hardly compete with Kishore’s upper-caste trader’s background. Under the old system Paresh’s background might have been ranked higher, but the family was new to the world of money unlike Kishore’s. In this often unspoken ambivalence that existed between them, gender obligations almost certainly played a role too. Whereas Kishore was taking care of himself by working in Australia, and making serious plans to create a tourist business between the two countries (from which the family would one day profit), Paresh was failing to do what he had set out to do and had actually made things worse for his parents. That they were both eldest sons had a strong impact on the way they experienced their migration trajectories.

Paresh lets me finish my coffee and then ushers me out of the door to a restaurant nearby. When the food arrives we quietly focus on our biriyanis. Paresh is busy doing some additional courses in IT, I know. He is trying to gain some extra skills before returning to Australia and entering the job market there. But we both know that a number of other obstacles have to be overcome first. Paresh calls the waiter over and in rapid Telegu asks for a bottle of mineral water, as he does not trust the water in the jug. I ask him what his plans are now. I know that he is planning on returning to Australia, but how? He explains that because of his PR application DIMIA had put him on a bridging visa, which allowed him to leave and return to Australia within the period it was issued for. He returned home early December no longer believing he would get a PR but still hoping the rules would change. Then suddenly they did. It was something he had already heard some rumors about but staying on in Australia was simply becoming too expensive. He felt he had no other choice at the time. Fortunately
his bridging visa was still valid so now he was going back to Australia to lodge a new PR application. The new requirement to show relevant work experience was not going to be a big problem. He had found a way to show this (on paper), and as he still meets all the other requirements he should have enough points to actually get a PR. “And then a job of course,” he adds. A job is very necessary as he has a high student loan to pay off. There are still about 12,000 Australian dollars left to repay and already his parents are paying six thousand Indian rupees interest per month; about his father’s monthly pension payments. He mentions it all as if it’s nothing though we both know that he is in trouble. In fact, the need to stay on in Australia had already been confirmed before he actually arrived there, at the moment he had taken out a large loan and knowing that repaying that loan in India would be difficult, to say the least.

After we have said our goodbyes, and I hail a rickshaw to take me to the bus station. I can’t help but let my memories run free, and follow them all the way back, three years earlier, to an apartment complex located on the Outer Ring Road, on the outskirts of Bangalore. It was there that I had my base from where I did fieldwork on Indian IT professionals. At the time this group was receiving more and more global attention as the Indian economy seemed to be going through the roof, and Bangalore increasingly became the Silicon Valley of the East. The lives of these young professionals were colored by the global economy, influenced by IT developments in the US and most of all determined by the rigid deadlines of the 24 hour economy. While many were constantly on the look-out for better jobs with different companies, there were three things they almost unanimously agreed on: now was the time to be in IT; Bangalore was the place to be; and India was going to be the world’s next economic superpower. Suddenly, I realized that Paresh had never actually expressed a wish to work in the Indian IT industry. It seemed as if it had never been an option he had genuinely wished to consider. He would soon be leaving India again, heading for a new future in Melbourne, where he was hoping to find a job in the Australian IT industry, an industry which I knew a great number of people, many of whom were Indians who had arrived a couple of years earlier, were having a hard time finding a job in. Paresh knew this too, yet he still had every intention of making it there. What precisely was the attraction? I wondered. Did I actually have an answer to that question? It all seemed so paradoxical and contradictory.

The Question of Permanent Residence

As Khoo et al (2008; see also 2007: 499) recently argued, for some migrants an application for PR may not necessarily mean permanent migration to Australia. “Migrants in the survey had commented that permanent residence status would make them independent of employer sponsorship and give them more flexibility in the labor market.”(p. 207) In a way this places them right back in the old ‘push and pull’ models that migration theories made use of long ago. Once again the migrant is reduced to a homo oeconomicus, precisely what Fog & Sorensen (2002: 2-3) argued
Graduating as a Migrant

against. Everything they (read: migrants) do is the result of very tangible and mostly rational reasoning: become an Australian permanent resident is useful because it makes it easier to get a job, it allows access to unemployment benefits, to health care, school fees at local Australian rates etc. Certainly, these were things that were mentioned to me during interviews. Yet as the cases of Geetha, Jaganath and Rajesh show, there is much more going on. Their tales are colored by much less rational and tangible ideas of what it would mean to become a permanent resident. Leitner & Ehrkamp (2006) also raise this issue by arguing that recent academic debates on topics such as transnationalism, migration and citizenship have largely ignored migrants’ perspectives on this. They argue that the “dominant discourses of liberal democratic citizenship and migrants’ situated positions condition and mediate in complex ways their imaginings and practices of citizenship.” (p. 1615) In this sense citizenship from a particular country is a meaningful tool in their struggle for mobility across the border.

The lives (ex-) students such as Geetha, Jaganath, Paresh and Rajesh were aspiring to, clearly had a rather general transnational dimension that had yet to crystallize into a more specific one. The way they imagined this was closely related to the newly ‘bought’ freedom an Australian PR had or would come with. They would finally be able to go where they wanted to. That many were simply staying on in Australia repaying loans, traveling back to India only to visit family and friends after long periods of absence, sometimes getting married and then bringing back a wife to Australia, was highly understandable. For many it was simply that their student-days were over and, in that sense, they were now about to start their professional, and ‘grown-up’ (adult) lives. Families back home would be expecting that too, as many explained. They were expected to get married, settle down, buy a house, and have children. In many ways, until this point, India had been kept from the door because of student-like-obligations, having part-time jobs, making ends meet. Now, having to graduate, these days were over. They would no longer be able to refer to themselves as ‘students’, and family back home would also no longer be able to think of them in this way either. Now that the student component of their lives had come to an end, the migrant one was what they were left with. How would they be able to equate this migrant existence with the idea of the successful fast-moving, globally-active and highly mobile Indian that seemed integral to the image many had of what it meant to be truly successful outside India? For now though, they had their PR’s, that’s what they had come for, the rest of all that was imagined would either materialize, become a reality; or simply get reworked along the way in order to fit the situation. Success has always been relative in that sense.
Gendered Imaginations of Success and Failure

This chapter reproduced the narratives of a number of different students all of whom were on the brink of applying for permanent residency or was beginning to realize that it was never going to happen. Special attention was paid to class and gender dimensions as they were hypothesized to influence the way this final phase is experienced. In the introduction I drew attention to a study by Batnitzky et al (2008), which clearly showed how class and gender are interrelated in migration decisions and experiences. In their study of young middle class men working in a London hotel they demonstrate how the process of migration: “both challenges and reinforces migrants’ gender and class identities in the country of destination by challenging monolithic assumptions about Indian men, as well as Indian notions of class-based masculine identity. (p. 52) Indians who find a job in what they (apparently) consider the glamorous hospitality industry of London (p. 51) are to a certain extent comparable with the Indian students I investigated in Melbourne. Like Indian hotel employees, they developed an interest in studying in Australia because of appealing imagery, which plays both a verbal and physical part in Indian middle class lives at home.

Yet this would forego some of the more practical reasons why students migrate this particular way. And this is where I find Batnitzky et al’s analysis somewhat
limiting. When they argue that what it means to be an Indian male migrant is based on signifiers that are tied to class status back in India, they leave little room for an understanding of success and failure in the migration progress, which partly operates independent of this. I would specifically like to highlight that the way migration-decisions are made is highly dependent on earlier experiences of success or failure. Among Indian students in Melbourne this was an important topic of conversation since many had applied for an American study visa before they made the decision to go to Australia. Australia was often second or third choice when it came to preferred study-abroad decisions. A number of students had also attempted to get into one of the top institutes in India itself; something they felt outranked even studying in the US. In this way, studying in Australia is often perceived as a failure to make it elsewhere. Australia then becomes a second chance to, for instance, still make it into the US. These ‘perceptions’ of success and failure have their roots in Indian understandings of class and gender. What constitutes a successful migration path for an Indian male is highly dependent on what is perceived to be appropriate for an Indian male. Simply zooming in on a point when a migration decision has already been made (working in a hotel London, studying in Melbourne) temporally freezes something which is actually a very dynamic process which began long before the actual migration decision was made, and will likely continue to unfold further in the coming years. What it means then to be a middle class Indian becomes a more dynamic question about the way this is related to gender and class based expectations and experiences. A further complicating factor is the idea of success and failure, which is often informed by transnational understandings. Class dynamics in India are constantly in motion under the pressure of visual success in terms of making money, going to the right institute, migrating to the right country and so on. When understanding migration routes out of India as gendered and class-based, we need to understand that issues such as success and failure operate as semi-independent players in this. Although gender and class of course influence ideas about future points of arrival, they are also influenced by western and/or global images that further color what migrants such as these young middle class Indians work towards. In that sense I do follow the argument that class based gender identities change across time and place (Batnitzky et al 2008: 53) but also argue that we should not understand Indian middle class identities purely as ‘Indian’ but also, equally, as ‘global’. And these identities are influenced by the stories numerous already migrated family members, friends and acquaintances bring home, as well as western TV programs, movies and the Internet.

The following chapter will build on this argument by attempting to frame these findings, and those of the other chapters, in a theoretical approach that might aide further research into new forms of migration. What we need to take with us is are these gendered class and gendered experiences of failure and success and ask the question how they relate to the earlier introduced concepts of in-betweenness
and arrival points. Finally we will have to investigate how class and gender influence ‘imagination’, as in the way the imagined future takes shape, and also changes, over time. This will lead us to an understanding that has it roots both in the local (India) and the global (Australia and beyond).