Imagined mobility: migration and transnationalism among Indian students in Australia
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07: Arrival:

Imagined Mobility

Understanding Student-Migration

This research started with the question of how Indian students experience the process of migration through studying abroad. It aimed at treating this process as a new form of migration, one that, thus far, literature has not been very concerned. True, issues such as the braindrain and that of non-return had been discussed, but with the commercialization of education and the explosive numbers of full-fee paying students going overseas, the issue of migration seemed largely off the table. Yet there should be no doubt that the two are intricately linked in the case of Australia. Studying student-migration through the lenses of either migration or transnationalism studies poses serious difficulties though. It seems especially difficult to locate agency in studies of transnationalism. In particular this is problematic when trying to understand these as entailing (individual) processes of transnationalization which people do not just ‘undergo’ but also have ideas and expectations about what the process will eventually lead to. How people imagine their lives abroad and how such imaginations change over time are questions that these studies do not really have answers for. In the case of Indian students in Australia one could argue that what we are dealing with here is ‘starting’ transnationals who one day imagine themselves living (and of whom it could be imagined that they will live) the kind of lifestyles that the study of transnationalism describes. At the same time, though, perhaps it is too easy to think that they see this as an end-goal; ‘ultimate arrival’ does not just work the way horizons keep receding, the fixity-to-place it assumes is simply not something that these starting transnationals strive for. In that sense it reminds us of the tourist-concept introduced by Zygmunt Bauman. For Bauman, this figure of the tourist was the quintessence of the post-modern condition: “The life of men and women of our time is much like that of tourists-through-time: they cannot and would not decide in advance what places they will visit and what the sequence of stations will be; what they know for sure is that they will keep on the move, never sure whether the place they have reached is their final destination.” (1995: 268-9) It is this idea, which needs to be further incorporated into the way we understand the (individual) process of transnationalization.

The way Basch et al (1994) framed transnationalism worked as a window through which it could be observed. It not only offered a window of opportunity for further research, it also created a rather neatly bordered view that made perfectly clear
what the object of the study was about. One could look at it, describe it according to certain clearly set parameters, and then point at it and say: “that’s transnationalism, there it is, see!” Although transnationalism was presented as a most flexible concept - one that, one could argue, almost by nature depended on the idea of ‘flexibility’ (not only of interpretation but most definitely in terms of the way transnationals were observed to behave) - there was something distinctly ‘idée fixed’ about the whole approach. For one, Basch et al had spoken of a ‘process’, thus creating the assumption that people were active, creating social relations across borders and so on. But instead what their definition did was formulate borders that more or less trapped those to whom the definition was supposed to apply. Only those who fitted the criteria of transnationalism, as the definition had it, could be labelled as such. This certainly had to do with the study’s obsession to set itself apart from the study of migration, the scholars of which were more than ready to question the newness of the idea of transnationalism.

The Indian students that featured in this dissertation are not transnationals (yet). They are not even migrants, since legally they are students. Yet there is every indication that they are aiming for something that one day might be labeled a transnational lifestyle. For this reason I have structured this dissertation as a learning process, zooming in on both what students learn on the path to permanent residency (PR) and how their ideas of the future change. This dissertation showed that the meaning of Australia – of having an Australian PR – and associated expectations of the future vary overtime, often adapting to the reality of the situation at hand. In order to understand how this works in practice we constantly had to keep in mind that these Indians fall in between rather narrowly defined categories (student-migrant, adolescent-adult, legal-illegal, India-Australia, East-West etc). This state of in-betweenness turned out to characterize the journey to becoming an Australian PR holder. And it was, in the end, these instances of in-betweenness that characterized the individual chapters as well.

This final chapter aims at bringing these instances of in-betweenness together and to rework them into analytical concepts that will prove useful for understanding other (new) forms of migration. My advocating a more comprehensive use of the concept of in-betweenness has its origin in my argument that the way we understand migration and transnationalism is often too static and basically ignores the wider process that influences the decision to live abroad. True, migration studies often do focus on the question why people migrate, but all too often this still comes down to a very rational and functional analysis of push-and-pull factors. It is also true that many scholars have already rejected focusing merely on push and pull factors – arguing that there are many more intangible factors affecting the decision making progress to migrate abroad – yet the way people imagine life abroad is still often omitted from the equation. I therefore argue that imagination plays a key role in the decision to attempt
to make it abroad. And not only that, it remains influential while migrants are building a new life in the country of destination. This means a rather decisive move away from more rational explanations that underlie the push-and-pull models.

A Middle Class Dream of Going Abroad

Now that Indian middle classes are profiting from India’s economic boom, the type of air travel that has been common to western middle classes for years, has also become an option for many of these families. For that reason, crossing borders has become much more tied up with certain expectations of desired lifestyles. Yet as the previous chapters also showed, while Indian money may now buy a ticket out of India, an Indian passport still does not guarantee an easy passage across the border. Young Indians are clearly aware of the limitations of an Indian passport. Yet this is certainly not the only thing they are aware of. Indian students have been exposed to stories of life outside India (read: in western countries) for as long as they remember. And in a similar fashion, information about migration has been around them for years before they came to Australia. When I asked them to give me examples, they could come up with numerous scenarios. This was something they had clearly given some thought to at some point in their lives; in the sense of imagining such a scenario and where they would then end up themselves. As Castles noted: “even those who do not migrate are affected as relatives, friends or descendants of migrants; or through experiences of change in their community as a result of departure of neighbors or arrival of newcomers.” (Castles 2000: 270) Although Castles is generally talking about poor people in search of better livelihoods, the situation is such that, in many countries like India, people know how other people have migrated. In some cases this has led to the situation where particular areas have become highly transnational, with remittances coming in from afar and almost everybody having a friend of relative somewhere else on the globe. As Levitt (2001) describes in her book The Transnational Villagers, not only do such people send money home but also ideas, so called social remittances. According to Levitt’s observations, these remittances influence people and lead them to picture themselves abroad.

Understanding and dreaming up a particular ‘elsewhere’, under the influence of returning migrants and transnationals, in combination with information flows that have become faster and more all-encompassing than ever before, has a clear impact on the idea of the mobile/global person in the minds of young people who are still fixed (stuck, as they would have it) to a particular location. It must be noted though that the global flows generated by popular media often bring information on lifestyles that bare little relation to local wage levels. Yet it is only natural that the media adds to the imagination of particular lifestyles. As Portes argues: “this process simultaneously pre-socializes future immigrants in what to expect of their lives abroad, and increases the drive to move through the growing gap between local realities and imported...
consumption aspirations.” (As quoted in Al-Ali & Koser 2002: 2) In addition Portes argues that this affects the working and middle-classes in particular, as they are frequently exposed to marketing messages and cultural symbols, emanating from the West.

Being part of and having grown up in an Indian middle class family most of the time means that ‘abroad’ was present in one form or other; either because of direct links with family, friends or acquaintances abroad, or because of other people belonging to the same circle (caste, community, social layer). Ideas on (the quality of) life outside India often seemed to gain an extra dimension by the frequent romanticization of it in the (Indian) media, most notably Bollywood movies. The way students would narrate their imaginations of ‘abroad’ was often framed in sentences such as ‘everybody was always talking about it’, ‘we would hear about it all the time,’ and ‘you always wanted to go there.’ An interesting case described by Chakravartty (2006: 170) shows how this works in another but comparable situation. Working on the topic of highly skilled Indian migrants in the US, Chakravartty makes mention of a person named Krishan, who himself was the first person in his family to find a job in the US. This did not mean though, that he did not already know people in the US and that he was not aware of what sort of life he could expect there: “he had friends from college who were “already” in the U.S. and felt he had a clear sense of the “American lifestyle” from stories in college, his online research on the subject and from conversations with people who had worked abroad.” Networks of friends, family and colleagues who were already in the US had certainly helped with the migration process and because of this: “news and details of the American lifestyle were everywhere before the actual journey to the U.S. even began.” (Ibid)

For many Indian students it was much the same, describing how news and details were part and parcel of their lives long before they had actually got on the plane and left. In a way, one could argue that such students had been part of ‘a culture of migration’ (Kandel & Massey, 2002; Deléchat, 2001; Tsuda, 1999; Massey et al, 1994; Gardner, 1993) for most of their lives. In an article on Mexican migration, William Kandel and Douglas S. Massey (2002: 981) speak of a culture of migration in the sense of international migration becoming so deeply rooted that migrating almost becomes a normative thing for young people to expect to happen at some point (and in the case they describe this is about migrating to and living in the US). Other studies such as the one conducted by Katy Gardner (1993, 1995) on Sylheti (Bangladeshi) migration and Japanese-Brazilian immigrant workers in Japan by Tsuda (1999) show something similar. Yet in the case of Indian students, this culture of migration was a much less concrete presence in the sense of a clearly established migration network that can facilitate ways out of the country and into another one (often connected to job prospects). While they had been influenced by it, it was clear they had to find a way out of India themselves.
Emma Mawdsley, analyzing the various ways the Indian middle class is depicted, writes that according to certain accounts the India middle class is “a transnational class of people who are bound up in the cultural and economic transactions of contemporary globalization, and who have more in common and closer relations with parallel classes in South Africa, Australia and the USA than with the parochialized ‘have-nots’ of their own nation.” (2004: 85) A similar argument was made by Mario Rutten (2001) who – after having analysed what happened in Gujarat regarding aid provided by various Indian groups after the state had been struck by a severe earthquake (2001) – came to the conclusion that the Indian middle class seems to be less and less interested in what happens to the poorer segments of Indian society. This indifference, according to Rutten (2001: 3359), takes place within a specific context of globalization. Because of globalization large sections of the Indian middle classes have been able to look across the border and connect with the people they see there. “Television, transport of people, and more recently Internet has brought the middle classes of different parts of Asia closer together and closer to the middle classes in other parts of the world.” Rutten also adds that, in this regard, the Asian middle classes have developed a strong transnational perspective. “They feel more at ease with their counterparts in other Asian countries and in western societies than with the poorer sections in their own society.” (Ibid)

It is often argued that one of the ways the Indian middle class thinks about and perceives their place in Indian society is influenced by their contacts abroad. Diaspora communities seem to play a crucial role here. The desire students show to go abroad, however, is certainly not just the result of close contact with family members abroad, since many actually do not entertain very long and strong ties with them (see chapter two and three). Yet their talk of how life outside India was supposed to be better seemed to be highly influenced by images of and ideas about ‘abroad’. In this sense ‘abroad’ played an intricate part in their lives in India. When asked how they knew that, for instance, quality of life would be so much better in Australia, they would reply that they had looked it up on the Internet, or seen it on TV. Some also remarked how everybody was always talking about this. One thing was clear though; among such students ideas about life outside India were constantly floating and buzzing around them. Not only did these stories inform them of lifestyles abroad, but also created the idea that it was desirable to live abroad. As one student put it:

When you come from families such as ours there is this idea that it is all so much better abroad. People talk about that. They will say: oh wow such and such person is abroad. Even my father, you know. Now that I am here, he will tell everybody about this. When he goes somewhere people will talk to him with a lot of respect because of this. They are all impressed with that.
Leela Fernandes argues that: “the notion of ‘abroad’ in middle-class discourses operates as a sign of a desire for class-based privilege.” (2000: 612) She further states that: “hence, the notion that ‘abroad is now in India’… signifies the potential realization of middle-class aspirations of consumption, one that can now take place within India’s borders.” Although Fernandes is mostly referring to consumer products here, I argue that it is certainly not limited to this. ‘Abroad’ is a constant in Indian middle class lives, even if they do not have direct family members residing overseas. Talking about, dreaming of, planning a life abroad is ever present in Indian middle class families. When talking to Indian IT professionals it would often strike me how inherent ‘going abroad’ was to their ideas about the future. Although many had gone on training or short assignments abroad, most were actually thinking of applying for residencies in countries such as Australia and Canada. Hanging out with them, simply talking about nothing in particular, the topic would always come up, one way or another. Indeed, when Indian overseas students described this in Melbourne I instantly recognized how unavoidable the topic had been. The idea of going abroad and belonging abroad had been present a large part of their lives.

Imagination in the Process of Transnationalization

Migration studies sometimes hint at the way diaspora or overseas communities ‘imagine’ their homelands. The way they are doing this is increasingly influenced by technological innovations such as the Internet, video and satellite television (Kaldor-Robinson 2002: 177). Axel even speaks of a ‘diasporic imaginary’ in this sense. (2002: 423-4) He argues that “rather than conceiving of the homeland as something that creates the diaspora, it may be more productive to consider the diaspora as something that creates the homeland.” (p. 424) An argument made by Sandhya Shukla that “imaginaries, in social life or fictional narrative, are a central fact of diasporas”, (2001: 522) also fits well here. Often one finds that the media plays a particularly important role here. As in the case of Singh’s research on Indo-Caribbeans, about whom he argues that their “imagination of India is strongly informed by Hindi films (Bollywood) and Hindi film music.” (2003: 226) I argue that this works the same way for young middle class Indians in the way they imagine their future lives abroad. Internet and cable TV play a crucial role in shaping the imagination when it comes to this. Bollywood

83 For my masters research in 2003.
and Hollywood further fill in the gaps in this imagination. While doing fieldwork in 2005 the Bollywood movie Salaam Namaste came out. The movie dealt with Indians Downunder, a number of whom were students. The story was as usual a rather simple one. Successful Indian cook falls in love with loudmouth Indian girl who works as a DJ for a local radio station. Australia is an imaginary version of itself where the sun always shines, life is carefree and the Australians themselves generally relaxed (though also a little stupid). Movies are what they are and so there is little sense in criticizing them for their factually incorrect contents. Yet it does not take much to imagine such images being or becoming part of a much wider constellation of fictional images of abroad. And such images also impact how the western world is further imagined.

It is important to realize, though, that Australia, as a specific country, only plays a relative role in this. Students would often remark how Australia had been a second or even third choice when it came to choosing a study-migrate abroad destination. This probably had something to do with what Madan, for instance, argues that: “except for media coverage of international cricket, Australia has had little exposure in India, and as a result it has not figured prominently in the Indian imagination on in Indian popular culture.” (2000: 23) What in the end matters the most about Australia is the residency the country has to offer at the end of their studies. Such a residency might open doors that would otherwise remain locked. In this ‘abroad’ is what appeals, and not so much Australia in particular. Obviously this does not mean that Australia does not appeal to the imagination, it is just that Australia is part of a bigger idea about how lifestyles are better outside India. And of course this is not limited to the Indian middle class. As Margolis writes on Brazil, “middle class and urban immigrants are, as are most Brazilians in New York City, predisposed to the lifestyles of the industrialized world, particularly those of the United States.” (2001: 206) And just as the Indian media does, “Brazilian television and magazines transmit an unending stream of idealized images of American patterns of consumption and style, with an oblique message of their superiority to the home-grown variety” (Ibid), thus influencing and triggering the imagination of life lived elsewhere.

Although both migration studies and transnationalism try to cover the spectrum of people crossing borders and building a life abroad, both fields largely ignore that, in all likelihood, more and more people are aware of how they could, in theory,

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84 In a study on the culture of migration among Muslims in Hyderabad, Syed Ali writes: “The culturally rooted desire to migrate was often enhanced by such things as enjoyment of Western music and lifestyle depictions through various Indian and Western media, including MTV and the pan-Asian satellite channel ‘Channel [V]’. Western soap operas, the widespread showing and popularity of Western films in cinemas (shown in English and also dubbed into different Indian languages), and the depictions of Indians living in Western countries in Hindi films (one of which featured the hero and heroine dancing in a suburban office parking lot), all built up familiarity with Western popular and entertainment culture. It was also common to see this desire reflected simply in the adornment of their motorcycles with stickers of American, Canadian, British and Australian flags.” (2007: 48-9)
live such lives. This ‘imaginary life’ abroad indicates that the sort of lifestyles social sciences have been describing for decades might now actually be a desired outcome of a particular migration strategy. It gives way to the idea that people in countries that have a history of out-migration (such as India), have not just acquired knowledge on how to leave one’s country, but also how to combine permanent settlement ‘elsewhere’ with a mobile life across and between borders. In this idea, leaving (India, home, family, friends, business, work) and arriving (abroad, in Australia, successfully setting up a new ‘local life’ there) have taken on an entirely different meaning. They are likely to have become flexible concepts, and are also understood as such. Although this hypothesis could be used in the context of understanding a migrant’s decision to go abroad, I wish to use it to understand how this further influences the process once a migrant has actually crossed the border. In the case of Indian students, then, the question is about how their previous imaginations of life abroad influence the way they now experience this life overseas. In addition, this provides an opportunity to ask how this then influences and changes the way they themselves imagine their own arrival points: imaginary moments when they will have achieved what they set out to achieve. What these questions do is hint at rethinking the ideas we have about temporary and permanent migrants. As the following sections demonstrate, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand both in terms of what their definitions tell us.

The End of Permanency

In migration studies the issue of permanency has been challenged in a number of ways before. Yang (2000), for instance, did so by bringing the sojourner hypothesis back into play and argued that Chinese immigrants in America were actually sojourners who intended to make and save money but who would, at some point, return to their home villages. It is not unthinkable that Indian students leave with similar ideas, yet common spoilers, such as the infamous myth of return, usually stand in the way of such reasoning. The myth of return relies heavily on the process of migration being, in the end, a permanent one, though simultaneously admitting that this goes hand-in-hand with imagining it as being temporary. Fixity seems to be an integral part of this, meaning a sort of inescapability of the whole journey. Takeyuki Tsuda, writing on Japanese-Brazilian migrants, argued that “[a]lthough many of today’s sojourners still end up settling in the host country, the initial intention to remain abroad only temporarily has a significant impact on their willingness to migrate.” (1999: 1) Put simply, people are more willing to migrate if it is perceived to be a temporary matter. Studies on migration and diaspora communities show that return often does not happen, however, they appear to make no further attempts to understand how ideas about this future non-return impact on how life is lived and perceived in the host society.
The issue of non-return was highlighted in a very different light in chapter four which referred to the case of overseas students who were meant to return to their home countries but in the end did not do so. And although the days of the Colombo Plan and similar initiatives are long gone, the emphasis in public discourse on the stay of overseas students is, as Kuptsch (2005: 152) also notes, by definition on it being temporary. Judging what has been discussed so far one could argue that this assumption bares some similarities with the ‘rotation and return myths’ common to (earlier) guest worker schemes. In the same way that guest workers of the past often did not seem to return to their home countries, although having (apparently) every intention of doing so, overseas students also frequently stay. And as with the guest workers, one wonders if these myths were not, above all, certain concepts social researchers had started to believe in – as ‘typical of migrant behaviour’ – while migrants themselves may never have actually (‘truly’) believed in this themselves, knowing very well that the intention was to settle elsewhere. The temporary-ness of their chosen paths (entering as guest workers, overseas students) probably dictates the ‘myth of return’ more than the actual way the most ideal form of ‘arrival’ is imagined. In short, a guest worker translates his fears of having to return into a desire in order to cope with the possibility. In reality, however, he is perhaps hoping for a more permanent stay abroad which would leave the option of return open. In addition, the idea of possible return might even make permanent settlement a more acceptable reality.

The guest worker schemes of the past have now been rewritten and ‘reworked’ into what is commonly referred to as ‘skilled migration’ programs, through which mostly highly or specifically skilled migrants are recruited. Much more than the old guest worker schemes such programs have a habit of being constantly revised, adding a much more temporary ‘feeling’ to the way such programs are experienced. Skilled migration programs are supposed to be in tune with what the market wants (the needs of the labor market); at the same time they should acknowledge (in terms of policy) what the public at large feels and thinks. More than ever such programs have a very clear political dimension. Discussions on skilled migration programs generally link up with other discussions such as those on the state and quality of education in a particular country, the courses young ‘locals’ are enrolling in, and also with more demographically related issues such as the ‘graying’ of the local population, associated welfare-state issues and even what the nation should be about. What about ‘our’ national culture? How should we define this culture? Should migrants be expected to integrate into this culture? These are questions that this particular study did not deal with but which certainly fit in with the larger picture of a mobile world where migrants, on the one hand, seem to offer specific solutions to particular ‘national’ problems, and on the other challenge what is understood as national, defying and contesting the ‘nation’ at its core.

The desire to be mobile, as expressed by Indian students, challenges the nation
in a similar way. Yet at the same time permanent residency somewhere else is needed in order to establish mobility. The Indian students in this dissertation were still very much in the process of realizing this. They were not there yet; rather they were busy finding ways to cross the border, and then staying, building a life there, ensuring that going back to India remained an option rather than a threat. Their aim was flexibility, the type required to be able to regularly move back and forth between both home country and their chosen destination. Once one is free of India, or more accurately, free of an Indian passport, the world is perceived to be open (and to a certain extent also: welcoming, waiting, in anticipation). It is clear that this desire to be in charge of a mobile life has blurred the boundaries between permanent and temporary stays abroad. ‘Temporariness’, in this regard, may come across as a confusing term but in reality it is not. What starts out as a two-year stay abroad will in the end become an indefinite period. And this ‘indefiniteness’ provides the students with a sense of agency that they previously did not have. They can now decide themselves how long they will stay abroad, away from India, in another country, and so on. And this was also how it is often experienced: while they have the means to stay in Australia as long as they want, it was usually also perceived as a temporary matter. Yet it is this temporariness that they are now in control of.

Mentally and Physically Arriving

With the introduction of the study of transnationalism, the concept of arriving had already captured a whole new meaning. ‘Arriving’ might still take place in the sense of physically arriving in a new country of settlement, however, mentally the idea of arriving seemed increasingly less about actual settlement. In studies on the lives of transnationals, it was frequently observed that people who fall under this header retain and maintain (regular) contact with relatives, friends and other (business) relations in their home country. As the large body of literature on this topic also shows, many migrants regularly send money (remittances) back home; remittances on which the family that stayed behind (partly) depends. It was argued that this was an integral part of the reason for migrating in the first place. With newcomers settling in areas where other migrants already live, migrant businesses were observed to have mushroomed, busy importing products directly from countries where their customers originate from, often making use of networks that have connections in both countries. Calling cards, DVDs from the countries of origin, religious products, otherwise unavailable vegetables, spices and other foodstuffs were all found to be easily available in areas with sizeable migrant populations.

It was because of such findings that we slowly started to understand that the idea of ‘arriving’ is much less about arriving in a new country and much more about arriving in a locally operating migrant community that caters to all the ‘new’ migrants’ needs. The argument that this is exactly what prevents migrants from
integrating into a local culture has its origins in such observations. Yet, where such
groups are not integrated in ‘the local’, studies on the topic of transnationalism show
that such migrants are very much part of ‘the global’. It is for this reason too that
new migrants are often referred to as transmigrants or transnationals; people who
haven’t just moved to a new location, but who also “forge and sustain multi-stranded
social relations” (Basch et al, 1994) between host country and country of destination.
Furthermore, with the world connecting on all multiple and diverse levels, it has been
observed that more and more migrants from the same country of origin, but living
in different countries, are connecting with each other, staying in touch, establishing
business links and so on. In this sense the label of transmigrant (or ‘transnational’) has
very much come to stand for lived experiences that transcend the boundaries of the
nation-state (see Bailey, 2001).

There is an obvious and very clear ‘but’ to this kind of reasoning however.
Inevitably the situation is far more complex. Favell et al argue that despite market
forces, “the control functions of states do continue to pose obvious obstacles to
poorer international migrants.” But: “when the focus turns to the movement of
highly educated and talented migrants, many assume there are likely to be fewer barriers…” (2000: 1) This is particularly interesting in light of the assumptions made
by global city theorists such as Castells (2000) and Taylor (2004), that “the virtual
’space of flows’ on which new global networks of capital and trade are based, must
also be peopled by mobile persons who… are embodied by the world’s growing cadre
of international highly skilled migrants.” (as discussed in Favell et al, 2000: 2) Leslie
Sklair (2001), for instance, refers to this group as the ‘transnational capitalist class’.
While it is true that for highly-paid managers, IT workers (of special significance) and
others\(^{85}\) who could logically be expected to fall in the same category, nation-states
have made special arrangements (fast visa processing etc.), they only comprise a small
segment of those who can be grouped under the heading of highly-skilled or educated
migrants. Many with the desire to go (work/live) abroad, still have to endure lengthy,
difficult and expensive visa procedures that often require the help of professionals
(migration agents and lawyers), especially if they are from countries not considered
part of the ‘western’ or ‘developed’ world. And thus an interesting situation presents
itself. Whereas on the one hand globalization seems to have (made) an impact on day-
to-day life all over the world, making the world smaller, physically going ‘elsewhere’
is actually becoming harder for many. Theoretically, cheaper air travel, easier access
to information (through technological innovations such as the Internet), as well as
increased spending power among the (mostly Asian but also South American) middle
classes, should make it easier to travel/visit/go to other countries, however, stricter

\(^{85}\) See Jonathan V. Beaverstock’s paper (2005) on the British highly skilled inter-company transferees in New York
City’s financial district for more on this group of people.
visa rules and other obstacles put in place to prevent people from entering, are actually making it harder.

The ‘physical’ limits that come with having an Indian passport create the desire to live a more flexible life in terms of being able to cross particular borders. It is this flexibility which Indian students are aiming for that produces a rather paradoxical narrative on arrival. Arrival, a certain imagined point in the future, not only relates to a permanent settlement elsewhere, but also to the idea of ‘permanency’ providing flexibility towards *in-betweenness* and temporariness. *In-betweenness* in this sense should be read as not having to commit oneself to just one country. At the same time, one should not confuse this with more orthodox ideas on transnationalism that portray this in terms of a certain fixed number of countries (usually two or three) with which clearly traceable networks are formed. No, the idea of in-betweenness refers to not having to commit to any one country in particular.

*Imaginary Arrival Points*

In order to better understand the reasons and motivations young (new) migrants have for choosing studying abroad as a way of leaving India and, moreover, how they then further experience this process, the concept of ‘arrival points’ makes a particularly useful tool. When people enter a particular migration process they do so with an idea of arrival in mind. They imagine themselves arriving somewhere not just in a physical but also in a ‘mental’ way. This mental arrival is about a point in the future when one has achieved what one had set out to do. Looking at Indian students one could argue that this imagination of arrival is often highly influenced by examples of Indians who have already made it in the global field. These are the Indians who work for transnationally operating companies, travel a lot, reside abroad yet are also frequently to be found in India where they are also still at (and have a) home.

At the same time though we should be aware that, as the previous chapter also showed, the idea of the arrival point also comes with certain gender implications. The successful, globally active transnationally mobile Indian is on the whole still imagined as a male concept. The way *he* is represented by the media and the way he features in everyday stories among middle class families, *he* is in essence a *he*. This may be slowly changing but it remains a significant factor when trying to understand where Indian students are heading and should not be forgotten. The kind of lifestyle, which needs ultimately to be flexible, is in that sense also one that is still rather an exclusively male affair. Indian women may also strive for such a lifestyle but are much more bound by certain gendered expectations that revolve around ideas of starting a family, getting married and so on. The independent kind of living that comes with a global lifestyle is, in Indian terms at least, primarily something men do. Research in the coming years will have to show how women can or do create spaces for themselves in the way global lifestyles are understood (in India).
Imaginary arrival constantly needs to be reworked along the way as students are faced with the realities of everyday. Changing rules and regulations certainly play a part in this. But also not being able to find the right part-time job, issues with accommodation or disappointments with the education being offered influences this future self-image. Even more though, having to make it in a new country means a re-evaluation of the self. Who am I? What am I worth in a global playing field? Coming from a middle class background with money to spend, being considered part of a group who will make it in the world, Indian students in Australia often find themselves associated with low paid jobs such as working in restaurants, petrol stations, car washes and supermarkets. He is that highly educated taxi driver who has a funny accent and is just not quite able to dress the way Australians do. He is an outsider and certainly no longer associated with the sort of global success stories he stepped on the plane with. Having left with the idea of getting closer to that ultimate point of arrival, it now seems further away than ever before. What happened? And what now?

The concept of arrival points delivers a way of understanding why ultimate arrival can remain the kind of future happening that it is presumed to be. Disappointments and failures along the way do not mean that one gives up and returns home but simply that the imagination of ultimate arrival needs to be rewritten under current conditions. The imagination that arrival is still possible means that those things that do not fit the bill (driving a taxi, waiting tables, standing behind a cash register at Seven Eleven) become acceptable. They are merely staging posts along the way to the end destination where true arrival will be experienced. Like the Indian students of this research, most migrants nowadays will only have a rather general idea of when they will have landed at a point when they can claim to have truly ‘arrived’. Yet it is precisely this flexible idea of ‘arriving’ that plays a crucial role in understanding how young/new migrants deal with new situations along the way. Not only can a current situation be understood as temporary through an imaginary arrival point in the future, the current situation itself also has a habit of continuously influencing the way ultimate arrival is imagined. In the case of Indian overseas students it is important to understand the way most imagine arrival to take place. This is not so much in terms of getting a PR and being allowed to stay on in Australia, but as exactly the opposite: to be free of having to think in line with such thoughts. As argued previously, ideas of permanency and temporariness play awkward roles here. Having a permanent residence means one can consider a stay in Australia as ‘only temporary’. At the same time, where an overseas student had no choice but to think of being in Australia as a temporary matter because of a lack of a PR, now the situation is exactly opposite: having a PR gives one the freedom to think of it as temporary. The temporariness which gave so much cause of concern and triggered so many feelings of insecurity and stress now does the complete opposite.

It is here that I wish to argue for the incorporation of the concept of ‘mobility’
in order to better understand what it is these young/new migrants aim for in life.
More specifically, I would like to locate mobility in between the concepts of migration
and transnationalism in order to bring a clearer sense of agency to the process where
people are observed to be at the start of what one day could be understood as a
full transnational life. This mirrors the renewed interest the concept of mobility has
recently received from scholars such as John Urry who even introduced a
mobilities paradigm. (2007; see also Sheller & Urry 2006) Urry puts the issue of
propinquity central and argues that too often the social sciences have let themselves
be guided by geographical communities that communicate face-to-face. This clouds
the fact that there are multiple forms of imagined presences through which objects,
people, information and images travel. This approach urges us to rethink what was
previously understood as fixed, static, not in motion, as principally being in motion;
mobile. People are in motion, are mobile, move and go places. Their desires and
imaginations are also connected to this. It is interesting to recall a number of Urry’s
five ‘mobilities’ (2007: 47) here, as they give substance to social life across distances:
the corporeal travel of people for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, migration etc; the
imaginative travel through images of places and peoples appearing in print and visual
media; and the communicative travel (phone, instant messaging, Internet etc).

Although imagination plays a part in Urry’s analysis of mobilities, he mostly
seems to understand it as something that contributes to the overall picture of what
could be understood as ‘mobile’. Traveling, for instance, also occurs through seeing
pictures of other places and thus imagining elsewheres. And in that sense this
contributes to the idea that everything and everybody is connected in thin networks
of connections and that nowhere can be an isolated island. (Sheller & Urry 2006)
Structure, however, seems to take the upper hand in such understandings of mobilities
and because of this imagination is not given its proper breathing space. I argue that
imagination itself triggers mobility, as people imagine themselves being or becoming
mobile. Globalization plays an important part in this as it also makes it so much easier
to imagine life elsewhere. At the same time, with debates on migrants becoming
increasingly about ‘keeping them out’, ‘having them go back’, ‘making sure only the
right ones come in’, and so on, the border (and crossing it) has taken up a much more
central role in people’s lives in countries with mainly outmigration.

A Transnational Gaze
One of the main points of this dissertation has been to show that Indian students
are in-between; they are neither here nor yet there. Their quest for mobility is an
ongoing one that urges us to look beyond the borders that have framed the way we
have understood migration and transnationalism so far. New migrants of today may
cross borders with a specific idea of arrival in mind; in practice they will often not
quite do so. And this is also what characterizes the way they live and perceive their
lives ‘elsewhere’. From the perspective of the state this is also where the greatest challenge lies. Although the nation-state is far from obsolete, defining to a large extent what is possible in terms of living transnational lives, it is also the challenge such not-yet-arrived migrants pose that puts them in a very difficult and often awkward position. Migrants are often seen as ‘solutions’ to national problems (the skills crisis, the ageing of the population) yet they also challenge ‘the national’ by living lives transnationally which is at odds with what the nation-state is supposed to stand for. With more and more commercial interests tied up with such desires (dreams, fantasies, imaginations) of mobile lives, the challenge facing ‘the national’ and ‘the local’ seems more complicated than ever.

This dissertation showed that to understand the way migrants experience life abroad, we must approach the topic as an ongoing process, one which does not necessarily have a clear beginning, lacks a clear end-state, and is, above all, characterized by individual strategies that can largely be understood as a desire for mobility (in the sense of being able to cross borders, either for political, economic, social/cultural reasons or simply because ‘others’ can). This process of (personal/individual) ‘mobilization’ is highly colored by the involvement of all sorts of institutions, organizations, government bodies and commercial enterprises that are also aware of people’s desire to be (able to be) mobile and who draw up their own plans to benefit from the situation. This dissertation investigated how ‘migrancy’ comes into being, in the way DeMaria Harney & Baldassar (2007) conceptualised it. Migrancy, as they understand it, privileges movement, and this urges us to pay more attention to the interconnection between movement in both space and time. In addition, migrancy decentres the nation and brings the agency of migrants back into the story. Yet most important of all, it privileges the notion of movement and process rather than stability and fixity. (p. 189) This also gives proper weight to the concept of in-betweenness, which I have demonstrated is relevant to understanding the process and transformation these students undergo. Ralph Grillo (2007) probably phrased this in the most original way by speaking of the ‘betwixt and between’ state of transmigrant trajectories. These ponderings also connect to what Fog & Sorensen (2002) argued about ‘mobile populations’: people do not necessarily migrate to start a new life elsewhere; rather they do so to seek out new opportunities that could enhance and diversify livelihoods practiced and valued back home. (2002: 1) Although the focus is here on the impact back home, I argue that this also counts for the individual fulfillment along the way, already having crossed the border.

Imagination is key in all of this. People have certain imaginations about the way they think it is all going to work out. Fog & Sorensen advocate shifting the analytical focus from place to mobility. They argue we should not so much focus our attention on place of origin and destination but more on the movements involved in sustaining a ‘mobile livelihood’. (2002: 10) A better understanding of migration
and transnationalism, then, calls for an incorporation of the concept of mobility. Yet mobility should not only be understood as merely physical, but also as having a mental dimension, one that is heavily embedded in how people imagine life elsewhere. One could speak of a ‘transnational gaze’ here which is already part and parcel of new migrants’ lives long before they actually decide to leave. We should be constantly aware when understanding reasons and motivations of how the process of individual ‘mobilization’ is imagined. We should also be conscious of the fact that the way ‘mobilization’ is expressed, narrated and ultimately ‘imagined’ will not always be through the analytical concepts that researchers make use of. This means that when it comes to studying migration and transnationalism, we should keep in mind that being a migrant, a transmigrant or, for that matter, a transnational are not just observable end-states where people meet the definitions attached to them. These are processes in which people are on their way to imaginary arrival points that are constantly rewritten under changing circumstances. And finally then, this is also how we should understand the very practical process Indian students undergo on their way to Australian permanent residency.