Imagined mobility: migration and transnationalism among Indian students in Australia

Baas, M.

Citation for published version (APA):
Postscript:

Curry Bashing (Indian Students)

An Increase in Racist and/or Opportunistic Attacks

Because of an increase in racist and/or opportunistic assaults and attacks on Indian students in 2009, the topic of Indian students in Australia has recently made headlines around the world. News channels such as Al Jazeera, BBC World News and CNN all covered the large protests that erupted after a number of violent attacks on Indian students. The incidents happened when my dissertation was already finished and there was thus little I could do with the topic itself. Yet I feel it is still important to make mention of some of the things that have happened in order to show that the situation has become much more aggressive and violent than it was in 2005-6. Issues of racism were hardly a topic of discussion among students in that period while these days the papers are full of questions about whether or not the attacks were racists, if Australians are racist and what place Indian students take up in Australian society. The beating up/attacking of Indian students even has a name now: curry bashing, referring specifically to an activity in which some (mostly young) Australians engage in.

One of the more recent cases that became headline news in Australia was the beating up of Sourabh Sharma (21) on a train in Melbourne. The footage of the security camera in the train quickly found its way onto the Internet and caused widespread alarm among Indian students. “The footage shows [the] victim… being beaten after being asked for a cigarette by a group of thugs who descended on him as he travelled alone along Melbourne’s Werribee train line on May 9 [2009].” (The Australian, May 21, 2009) Many Indian students travel regularly by train to the colleges and universities they attend as well as to their part-time jobs. Since many students have jobs that require them to travel late at night, working in Seven-Elevens (small supermarkets, open 24 hours per day), petrol pumps, car washes and restaurants (often Indian), feelings of being in a vulnerable position were considerably heightened. Sourabh was taken to the Mercy Hospital in Melbourne where he was treated for a fractured cheekbone and a lost tooth.

The news of Sourabh triggered a whole avalanche of reports on the safety of Indian students. One striking example was that of Rajesh Kumar (25) who had become the victim of a petrol bomb hurled through the window of the home he shared with other Indian students in the suburb of Harris Park, Sydney. “The explosion and subsequent fire left Kumar, 25, with burns to a third of his body.” (SMH, May 25, 2009)
Five days later the newspapers reported another incident. This time it concerned a 17 year old Australian boy who was charged with attempted murder of four Indian students. He had been part of a group who had gate crashed a party and had then attacked one of the students, Shravan Kumar (25), with a screwdriver. *(The Hindu, May 30, 2009)* While his friends took him to hospital their house was burgled and everything of value was stolen. According to Gautam Gupta, President of the Federation of Indian student Association (FISA), “They have no clothes or anything left in the house and the students are really feeling insecure and unsafe.” *(The Times of India, May 28, 2009)* Shravan remained in critical condition for days afterwards until the papers were able to report that he had come out of a coma and was able to move his hands, according to one of his friends. *(SIFY, May 31, 2009)*

Around the same time Baljinder Singh, another student, was stabbed by two men at Carnegie train station in Melbourne. According to the papers he had gone there after work on Monday night when “two knife-wielding boys, aged around 20, approached him.” While he looked for his purse in his bag the guys had stabbed him in the stomach and he fell down on the floor. Apparently the guys had just laughed and had then left. *(SIFY, May 31, 2009)* This story was quickly followed by the news of Kamal Jit (23) who had gotten beaten up for the second time in a fortnight by a group of Australian boys. He was found unconscious and bleeding; in an early occasion he had been pelted with eggs by several masked men after getting off a late night train at St Albans station. This time, though, he had to be treated in hospital where he received seven stitches for having received a blow with a steel rod. *(ExpressIndia.com, June 8, 2009)*

*ABC* then started reporting that students at the University of Newcastle (Sydney) were living in fear because of a recent spate of racist attacks on campus. It also became clear that the attacks were not completely limited to Indian students: “Vietnamese student was set upon by a gang as he left the university’s library… One international student from the Philippines has been assaulted three times…” According to Superintendent Max Mitchell most cases were related to robbery. “So they’re carrying cash; they’re carrying other equipment such as iPods, mobile phones, etc that are easily taken by those who are responsible.” *(ABC May 21, 2009)* And thus the news kept coming. Nardeep Singh (21) from Ludhiana was attacked by a group of males demanding cigarettes and money. A nursing student at Chisholm Institute in Dandenong was slashed with a box-cutter knife in broad daylight. And in addition a vandalism spree at a Sikh temple in Shepparton, Central Victoria, was reported. *(The Age, June 2, 2009)*

According to the Melbourne police, the number of assaults was up 1477 from 1083 around the same time the previous year. Police Chief Commissioner Simon Overland was quoted as having said that indeed the figures show that robberies and assaults on Indian people had increased by a third in a year. *(South Asia Times, June 3,*
Meanwhile the assaults seemed to increase everyday. Parminder Singh (24) was badly bashed up in his taxi on Friday in Narre Warren South for asking fare from his passengers the fifth of June. He had asked for the remaining fare, the rest had already been paid upfront. Two of his teeth were broken and blood was oozing out. The same day Amrit Pal Singh (20) from Haryana was attacked in Melbourne by a group looking for money and cellphones. (Hindustan Times, June 5, 2009) The media managed to find more victims who had been recent victims. (ABC, June 3, 2009) Two Indian men who were allegedly assaulted by a group of Lebanese men at Harris Park in Sydney, for instance. (The Australian June 9, 2009) There was also a news report on racist graffiti and swastikas being scribbled on the walls of a Sikh gurdwara in Shepparton, a small town 90km from Melbourne. (The Times of India, June 3, 2009) Other attacks involved one Sourabh Sharma having been attacked at Laverton Station (coming back from his work shift at KFC) and Shravan Teerthala, also at a train station, this time Glenroy. (The Age, June 4 2009; Bharat Times Online, May 29, 2009) A car set light in the same week was seen as yet another example of hate crime. (Herald Sun, June 8, 2009) One community leader in Sydney, Yadu Singh (cardiologist), revealed that in the month of May alone twenty racial attacks had been reported. Another report apparently had it that there had been more than a hundred attacks on Indian students in the past twelve months. (Times of India May 30, 2009) A name for these happenings had quickly found its way into the papers and common speak: curry bashing.

Time to Take (Reclaim) the Streets

On the 31st of May the Federation for Indian Students in Australia (FISA) organized a peace rally in the center of Melbourne to draw attention to the attacks of April-May 2009. According to various news reports, thousands of Indian students rallied that day, demanding justice for victims of recent attacks. The Times of India even spoke of 5,000 protestors who walked down to the Victorian Parliament House on Spring Street, holding placards with slogans reading ‘We want Justice’, ‘We are the economy builders’, and ‘End racist attacks.’ In the same article FISA representative Gautam Gupta was quoted having said that they (at FISA) believe in Gandhigiri and peaceful ways to present the demands of the of the student community. (The Times of India, June 1, 2009) SBS reported that the police was present in rather large numbers as well. Apparently about 200 police surrounded the protesters, using heavy-handed tactics including pressure points, to break up the rally. The police subsequently came under fire in the media because of having used excessive force to break up the all-night rally. Victorian Police Commissioner Simon Overland, however, blamed a group of trouble makers for what he phrased as hijacking a peaceful demonstration, bringing in alcohol and weapons. According to Overland, most of the protesters weren’t Indian at all and the situation had gotten out of control because of ‘others’ using the protest to serve their political agenda. (SBS, June 1, 2009) One sitting protestor was knocked
unconscious by repeated punches to the head by a policeman. *(The Australian, June 1, 2009)* In total eighteen arrests were made that day. *(Herald Sun, June 1, 2009)*

One week later, Sydney became the site of several days of protests. The Sunday after the bashing up of Kamal Jit (see earlier) hundreds of students rallied in Sydney to protest. *(ExpressIndia.com June 8, 2009)* Rumor quickly had it that a group of Middle Eastern appearance (‘Lebanese’) were involved. A crowd on Wigram Street (western Sydney) quickly grew to about 150 people, all chanting and protesting about the rise of violence against the Indian community. Police said a smaller group of about 70 men had then made their way to Parramatta police station to complain about recent treatment of the Indian community. *(The Age, June 9, 2009)* Again heavy police had been present. According to Monider Singh of the United Indian Associations the attacks were almost daily in occurrence. “The biggest applause went to Navjot Singh (29) who said he had been attacked recently and demanded that the many police watching the rally should go and do their duty.” According to Navjot, virtually ever house where Indians lived (in the inner western suburb) had gotten robbed at some point. *(The Australian, June 8, 2009)* Protests continued throughout the nights afterwards. Indian students took to the street of Harris Park and increasingly ‘Middle Eastern’ men were pointed at as the one to blame for recent attacks. *(The Australian, June 11, 2009)* Yet with the continuing protests also came voices of discontent. Both the Indian consult-general Amit Dasgupta and the Lord Mayor Tony Issa of Parramatta appealed for calm in the Harris Park area. According to Tony Issa the community was suffering from all the protests; businesses were loosing business, and restaurants missing out on bookings. Their comments certainly also had to do with the fear of retaliation: “Up to 200 men of Indian background, some of them armed with baseball bats and hockey sticks, last night rallied in the main street of Harris Park, protesting what they say is a pattern of violence against students and migrants.” *(SMH June 1, 2009)*

*A Bollywood Style Uproar & Hindu Fundamentalists Against Australia*

Meanwhile the news of the attacks and protests had reached Indian shores as well. International general secretary Praveen Togadia of the Vishwa Hindu Parishat (VHP) criticized the Centre with making no serious effort to protect Indian students in Australia. *(The Australian June 11, 2009)* Head of the Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray, demanded that all Australians leave India, including the removal of Australian players should be removed from the Indian premier league until ‘the blood of innocent Indians’ is no
longer being shed Australian soil. (Financial Times, June 4, 2009) And a protest in Delhi included the burning of effigies of Australia’s Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Students at Panjab University chose a different approach though. “They got hold of a bunch of a number of firangs and gave them a good lesson in Indian hospitality, giving them food and dressing them up in garlands, claiming that guests should be treated as God.” (The Times of India, June 3, 2009)

A completely different reaction came from Mumbai based Federation of Western Indian Cinema Employees who called on Hindi film producers to avoid Australia. (The Age, June 4, 2009) Amitabh Bachchan, one of India’s best known actors, had meanwhile decided to turn down an Australian honorary doctorate from the Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane) as a mark of protest. Captain of the Rajasthan Royals and world-famous Australian cricketer Shane Warne went on record saying: “I think it is atrocious what is going on with Indian students.” (News.com.au June 5, 2009) Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna reminded Australia about its responsibility to ensure the well-being and security of Indian students studying in the country. (The Times of India, May 27, 2009) Australia’s Prime Minister Kevin Rudd argued that the attacks threatened to impair good relations with India. (News.com.au, June 3, 2009) Rudd’s senior national adviser, Duncan Lewis, was then appointed to head a new task force formed specifically to respond to what was then commonly referred to as the race-related violence. (Herald Sun, June 3, 2009)

Australian Opposition leader, Ted Baillieu, who had been advocating the issue of Indian students in Australia for years, blamed the Victorian government for neglecting the issue for long. “We’ve been raising these concerns for nearly three years and the problems got worse, not better. Scores of students have been attacked,” he said in an article The Hindu (May 30, 2009). Meanwhile the Deputy Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and the Premier of Victoria had all (also) stepped forward with statements expressing their deep concern. As a way to help students further, the Victorian authorities also established a hotline to assist them with their concerns. These hotlines are staffed by people fluent in Hindi and English.105 Trade Minister Simon Crean went public saying the Australian Government was working very hard to make sure both students and Australia’s reputation were safe. He prided Australia for being a welcoming, tolerant country. (Australia Network News, June 8, 2009) In addition it was announced that a police team would visit various Indian cities to hold sessions on personal security with aspirants before they come to Australia for education.

105 According to a press release from the Australian High Commission in New Delhi (29-05-2009). See also: ‘Helpline just in time for Indian students.’ Bharat Times Online, May 29, 2009. “The FIAV acknowledged St. George’s Institute for Professionals for agreeing to sponsor the 1800 342800 number, while iASCEND Tafe and VISA would volunteer in manning the telephone lines and Victoria Police would continue to support this community initiative.”
(The Age, May 13, 2009) FISA, meanwhile, announced Art of Living and Self Defense workshops.

Some New Research Questions…
In part it could be argued that the protesting students had China to thank for many of the measures being taken by the government. The Chinese government had gone public with concerns about violence against its own students in Australia (though they were Chinese students among those attacked); something that raised fears that the incidents could damage diplomatic relations with Australia’s main trading partners. (The Age, June 4, 2009; Telegraph.co.uk, June 4, 2009) It shows once again how many money is involved in the business of overseas education and how this thus also looked upon by officials.

It is thus clear that the situation has considerably changed the past five years. The recent happenings in Australia also make clear that more research is necessary to come to an understanding how things could develop, and spiral out of control, the way they did. Questions that seem relevant asking are: for what reason have Indian students become targets of racism, what effect does this have on students (planning on) coming to Australia, and what are the consequences for Australia’s imaginations of being a multicultural nation? Obviously these are not the only questions that emerge out of this situation yet they offer a starting point from where to argue and think further.