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Escaping India's culture of education: Migration desires among aspiring middle-class young men

This paper discusses the relationship between student migration and processes of class formation in the southern Indian state of Kerala, with a particular focus on a group of young men from middle-class backgrounds who desire to migrate to Australia as students. It brings back to life data gathered between 2009 and 2010, the heyday of student migration from India to Australia. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted at a recruitment agency that specializes in sending students to Australia, the article is primarily aimed at deepening our understanding of the motives of young men for seeking to migrate as overseas students within the context of their middle-class lives in India.

Current research on Indian overseas student migration to Australia has rightly shown that there is an intricate relation between class formation and migration processes (see, e.g., Baas, 2010b). Yet most of this work has tended to focus on the experiences of students already abroad. Research on the link between the formulation of migration-decisions and class dynamics from the perspective of the sending side that sheds light on how young people's decisions to migrate are produced in complex ways, in relation to individual/familial strategies of mobility and ideas of self-realisation, exploration and development, has been slow to emerge. This gap arguably reflects what Osella and Gardner (2003: vi) describe as a 'northern bias' still shaping much research on migration. This refers to the preferential focus on the 'receiving places', the English-speaking north in particular, where diasporic communities and

subjectivities are constituted, and an accompanying lack of rigor when it comes to examining the ‘sending places’ⁱ.

In this paper I aim to elaborate on this gap. I locate my analysis within the context of recent studies on the Indian middle classesⁱ (see, e.g., Baviskar and Ray, 2011; Donner, 2011). Such work has shown how over the last two decades, growing numbers of families, communities, and individuals of a reasonably prosperous stratum have gained access to the material lifestyles and the self-identification as ‘middle-class’ⁱⁱ (Baviskar and Ray, 2011; Donner, 2011). As a result, people who describe themselves as middle-class differ widely, not only in terms of economic position and consumption practices, but also in terms of status, values, and backgrounds (Donner, 2011; De Neve, 2011: 3). Following this transformations, anthropological analyses often distinguish between the so-called ‘established’ middle classes, who possess inherited material, social or symbolic capital (see e.g. De Neve, 2011), and the ‘new’ middle classes, who normally rank low in caste hierarchies, and whose social and economic position is of recent origin. Anthropologists have been especially interested in exploring the experiences and practices through which newly upwardly mobile groups forge new class-based strategies and identities.

Others scholars have called for the need to supplement empirical accounts of the experience of being middle class with ‘an analysis of the ideological work performed by the “middle class” as a social construct’ (Baviskar and Ray, 2011: 7). They make less emphasis on identity and more on the ideology of a ‘new’ middle class, and underscore the ways in which

ⁱ Here I understand ‘middle-classness’ as a constantly re-enacted cultural project geared towards the construction of itself, through performance and narrative, in opposition to its class others, above and below, and simultaneously a ‘domain of internally competing cultural strategies’ (Liechty, 2003: 15).

the *idea* of the middle class continues to articulate hegemonic experiences, aspirations and trajectories. Depictions of the middle class purveyed in the media, as well as through family members in metropolitan areas and abroad, unite around the notion of an English-speaking, consumerist, and globally mobile class whose lifestyle, as a result of rising incomes, the influx of new consumer goods, and multiplying global connections and travels, can be transferred effortlessly to any corner of the modern world (Fernandes, 2006; Mazzarella, 2003; Rajagopal, 2001). They are also imagined as a particular kind of productive citizenry allegedly endowed with an enterprising acumen (Gooptu, 2013), and particularly associated with the rapidly expanding IT industry. I draw particular inspiration from recent studies that highlight the ways in which a dominant middle class culture of education, which privileges a competitive, economic, and status-based conception of aspiration, plays a central role in the reproduction of inequalities between the established and emergent middle classes (see, e.g., Kumar, 2011; Sancho, 2013, 2015).

Migration-desires are reflective of these middle-class dynamics, emerging at the confluence of a wider ideology of the middle class and as part of specific class-based strategies at different levels of India's new middle classes. I wish to elaborate on the work of Michiel Baas (Baas, 2006, 2010b, 2010a) on the complex ways in which class is linked in the way the migration process is experienced among Indian overseas students in Australia. He demonstrates that the migration process is underpinned by wider desires to become integrated into the global world of an imagined transnational Indian middle class. Young men who migrate to Australia in one way or another want to become the successful, highly educate middle class Indian who has made it abroad. This, in turn, relates to wider gendered expectations, such as the pressure of

success in terms of making money, getting the ‘right’ higher education, migrating to the right country and so on (Baas, 2010b: 76). He shows that this is, of course, linked with complying with the prerequisites for accomplishing permanent residency in Australia. Simultaneously, though he stresses how migration decision, strategies, and experiences vary widely among students of different middle-class backgrounds. Such differences are more clearly seen in his comparison between students enrolled in different types of higher education institutions: from top-end Universities with a well-established reputation to new, cheap colleges that typically cater only two Chinese and Indian students seeking mostly courses that promised permanent resident status.

The Indian young men studying in various Australian institutions that Baas described are in many ways comparable to the young South Indian men I investigated at the recruitment agency in Kochi. This paper is an attempt to contribute to this line of work by widening the terms of the debate about migration desires to incorporate important elements that emerge in the process of attempting to migrate, which highlight key facets of the connection between migration and class formation. First I focus on the issue of language to draw our attention to the experiences of young men from the lowest or more struggling sections of India’s new middle classes. Not having received an English medium education, these young men envisage educational migration, simultaneously as a path to become a global Indian and as a way to acquire forms of cultural capital central to becoming ‘middle class’ (primarily, English fluency), which they failed to accrue during their schooling years. Second, I examine how the decision to migrate as overseas students emerges out the failure to realise the highly competitive educational expectations that the middle class culture of education promotes. Finally, drawing

on recent work that points to the complex temporal dimensions of migration (e.g. Cwerner, 2001), I point to how my informants' intentions are almost never to stay in Australia indefinitely. Instead, they envisage migration as a temporary strategy geared towards accruing economic and cultural capital necessary for the fulfilment of class-based personal ambitions and wider social responsibilities at home. Through ethnographic examples this paper aims to show how migration is a crucial part of a wider ongoing process of class formation that now straddles multiple sites, resources and aspirations.

Fieldwork in Kochi

From April to December 2009 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at a student recruitment agency which I will call the Global Student Agency (GSA), which provides assistance and facilitates the enrolment of Indian students in universities and other tertiary educational institutions in Australia and other countries such as the UK, Canada, USA, Ireland and New Zealand. GSA's headquarters are in Melbourne, yet the bulk of their recruitment takes place through a network of centres across five Indian cities. The centre was on the second floor of a commercial building, situated at a busy intersection in Kochi, India, consisting of two rooms: one devoted to visa and the administrative side of the recruitment process, and the other, a makeshift language training centre. The fieldwork that I draw upon in this paper was conducted mostly within the latter, and focuses on young men aspiring to migrate, mainly to Australia. As I am an anthropologist, I spent most of my time at the centre hanging out with them informally, and observing and participating in the everyday activities taking place *in situ*. As time went by and rapport grew, I was also asked to collaborate with the aspirants' preparations for the IELTS tests. This involved leading different English language exercises.

Finally, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with aspirants and the centre's eloquent language coach, who doubled as an educational/migration agent and who became a close friend and collaborator.

The company was established in 2004 by an Australian entrepreneur of Indian origin with the objective of catering to Indian students wanting to access Australia's Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions. Compared to universities, TAFE institutes are highly price-competitive. They provide a variety of primarily vocational tertiary education courses in a wide range of fields such as business, finance, hospitality, tourism, construction, engineering, visual arts, information technology and community work. The company was the first in the city to tap into the at-the-time emerging market, when the majority of recruitment companies were marketing overseas university education. In a conversation with the language coach, whom I will call Prof PM Joseph, he recalled how at that time, recruitment companies 'didn't know about this rich mine of opportunities', which GSA was able to foresee. Fuelled by recruiting companies like GSA, the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia experienced an explosive expansion, with student visa applications growing 150% between 2006 and 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Such growth was driven by mostly Chinese and Indian students seeking courses that promised to lead to permanent resident status. The expansion of TAFE institutes meant that studying abroad had become available to more Indian students than ever before, for not only did more Indians had the money to send the children to study abroad, this new colleges were also highly prize competitive, knowing that they catered to a new market unable to afford the traditional and more expensive universities (Baas, 2010b: 87).

In 2009, GSA had been operating for four and half years, during which time it had managed to send 500 Indian students overseas; 250 from Kerala (mostly to Australia). Classes took place daily, closing only for a short lunch break. Groups were small, of no more than six students at a given time. They had an agreement with the Australian authorities according to which they had to send at least 80 visas per year in order to keep their online visa issuing facility. Revenue came from the universities and other institutions that enrolled students; a commission for every student enrolled was charged, usually consisting of a percentage of the first semesters' college fees. Despite being obliged to sell nothing more than education, migration was frankly talked about as the ultimate purpose of the agency as well as the primary motivation of the aspirant students attending the IELTS preparation classes. Prof Joseph openly talked about skill shortages in Australia and the courses in different TAFE institutions (be it community welfare, hairdressing, or office equipment maintenance) that matched those needs, and hence offered, at least in theory, a better chance to acquire the coveted Permanent Resident (PR) status. He put it like this:

The majority of them have this (TAFE) migratory agenda. These students are here to prepare for migration to go and work, to go and settle overseas. In a place like this, like India, people are concerned, with attaining a comfortable living, which is related to earning a certain amount of money. They don't really go to get a degree or for obtaining further educational qualification, but still some of them get some sort of qualification, but the part-time job, the earning, is what they are after. Students who came here are from backward areas, educationally backward, economically backward, sociologically backward... mostly dropouts who could not complete their university studies, who don't *fit* in the Indian job market, who don't *fit* in the British or American, or Australian universities.

That is (NOT) English only!

I met around 25 of the approximately 80 students that the centre claims to train every year. Most of them (19) did not represent the majority of Indian overseas students in Australian higher education institutions, who are normally enrolled in master's programmes in reputed universities, and generally have no trouble meeting the language requirements to get admitted into such institutions (Baas, 2006). Unlike this majority, they were hardly concerned with the quality and reputation of the courses and institutions they were enrolled in, and chose courses that were most likely to lead to PR in Australia, and thus the right to live and work. They were extremely price conscious, and thus they generally enrolled in cheap, recently established TAFE institutions. They came from suburban or rural regions and had attended government-run schools where the medium of education was either Malayalam – the state language – or a poorer quality English than that usually found in urban schools². For this majority, language remained the main obstacle to migrate. Research conducted at the receiving end tends to assume that Indian students, if they have the money, seem to almost always make it to Australia once they have decided to migrate (see, e.g., Baas, 2006: 18). Money usually features as a more determining factor. In Kochi, it worked all the way around: money seemed less of a concern when compare to language. As I was made aware by the language coach and a few students, for the purpose of demonstrating sufficiency of funds to study abroad, 'anyone can forge a bank statement'. Almost all of my informants were planning to rely on bank loans to fund their initial travel and fees. A few others talked about planning to use money lenders, who temporarily

² There were two students who were fluent in English and had attended top-end private schools in the city. In addition, there four female nurses preparing to pass the EILTS in order to be able work abroad.

transfer money into someone's bank account in exchange for a percentage (usually 3%) of the amount transferred. Although money was an issue that people felt could be dealt with, language skills was a much more determining, and sometimes insurmountable obstacle.

The command of English, and the access to quality English education are still crucial for the reproduction of inequalities between the established and emergent middle classes. Investing in English-medium private schooling has emerged as a ubiquitous practice in the everyday lives of a widening range of social groups and individual families who consider themselves middle class (see, e.g., Jeffery, 2005). Recent literature has shown how non-urban 'new middle classes'—those who have recently experienced social and economic ascension often as a result of agrarian reforms, positive discrimination policies or the opening of employment markets prior and after economic liberalisation—have often resorted to intensifying their search for valued private English-medium education in urban centres to establish cultural distinction and to shore up their recently acquired economic position (see, e.g., Jeffery et al., 2011). In Kerala, this has been a central strategy to defend economic gains of families on the verge of social ascension, most commonly as a result of migration to the Gulf region since the 1970s. However, there are still many within the 'aspiring' middle classes without access to an English-medium education. Moreover, there are recent studies that unpack the capacity of contemporary private schooling in Kerala to reproduce class (and caste) inequalities, with different qualities of 'English-medium' education becoming available to different economic capabilities (Sancho, 2015).

Asked to describe the kinds of students attending GSA, Prof Joseph talked about there being two kinds of aspirants in GSA: those aspiring to get a diploma from a TAFE institute in

Australia and a minority of students who had attended CBSE schools – the main English-medium curriculum taught in private schools across India. Manu belongs to the latter category. When I met Manu, an Ezhavaⁱⁱⁱ young man from an emerging middle-class family, he had completed a degree in hotel management. Both his parents are non-English-speakers, schooled at class 10 level. Benefiting from a stable job in a public enterprise for more than two decades, Manu's father (a welder) has managed to carve out a successful middle-class lifestyle: owing a house in a popular middle-class neighbourhood, and sending Manu (an only child) to a reputed private English-medium school, where I conducted extensive ethnographic research between 2009 and 2010. Manu knew that a degree, and subsequently a career in hotel management would not provide him the earnings and savings that he would need to lead the comfortable middle-class life to which he aspired. It is difficult to find a top-end job in that field and salaries (in 2009) were around 3,000 to 4,000 rupees per month. So for Manu, the Indian job market was not the place where he envisaged himself. He aspired to a successful life abroad. When I met Manu at GSA during one of his few sessions I asked him how he felt about the IELTS exam, to which he replied 'oh that is English only!' A couple weeks later Manu cleared the IELTS comfortably, and went off to complete a master's degree from the University of Bournemouth in the United Kingdom. Subsequently, Manu did an internship in the UK, after which he found a job in an American corporate membership club in Tokyo, Japan. After Manu's departure, Prof Joseph remembered that with Manu his job was 'very easy': 'I could just supervise his work, give him a couple of mock tests, and send him for the exam'. Although Manu came from a non-English-speaking home, his education in an urban private English-medium school had paid off.

In school, he grew up among peers of higher status backgrounds and absorbed their command of the English language and their particularly confident demeanour.

Manu's story was an exception at GSA, where most aspiring overseas students' struggle to overcome the language requirements lasted between three to four months. When preparing to take the IELTS exams, many stopped working, and travelled to Kochi to study English full-time, while staying in hostels close to GSA. This category of aspirant attended GSA almost daily, and described their situation as 'nerve-wrecking' when probed about their experience of preparing to take the language examination. Having attended vernacular medium schools and coming from non-English-speaker families, their level of English was significantly poorer than students such as Manu. In addition, even among students who had sufficient knowledge of the language, their low level of confidence undermined their performance especially in the speaking portion of the exam. Prof Joseph's speaking lessons were aimed at developing students' vocabulary and most importantly at giving students tools that allowed them to approach speaking exercises with at least a minimum degree of confidence.

When I first met Robin in one of the speaking lessons I led at GSA, he was struggling to master one of such techniques. On that occasion, students were given two minutes to prepare a one-minute presentation on a topic provided to them. As Prof Joseph had taught him, Robin began by trying to talk in abstract or general terms about the given topic, then moving on to connect that initial discussion to his personal experience using concrete examples. Arduously choosing his words, Robin made a huge effort to sound and look eloquent and calm. Instead, he looked serious and anxious. Like many of his peers he had gone through the speaking exercises

used in class on countless occasions. Still, mustering the level of confidence that was crucial to faring well in the exam seemed a difficult task.

At age 24, Robin was preparing his second attempt at passing the IELTS. He held a degree in commerce from a rural college, after which he had been working as an accountant for two years. Like Manu, both of his parents were non-English-speakers, and he was the first in his household to attain a university degree. When talking about his reasons for wanting to go to Australia, the first thing that Robin talked about was his desire ‘to get knowledge’. ‘You see’, he said, ‘in Indian universities you learn Indian culture, but in Australian universities you get international culture, international exposure’ (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2006). As others have already argued (see Baas, 2006), a qualification from an Australian institution was not an aspiration *per se*. He planned to apply to a one-year diploma course in accounting. Already having a degree in commerce, such qualification would have been a redundancy. Instead, he aspired to the benefits of being immersed in an overseas English-speaking context, where he could ‘gain [the] courage for mingling in Australia’. On several occasions during my wider research in Kerala, people have referred to the ability ‘to mingle’ – a few of them apologizing for not being able ‘to mingle’ with me – as synonymous with being able to communicate effortlessly in a particularly confident brand of English. The notion of mingling also refers to occupying or ‘hanging out’ at ease in new urban cosmopolitan spaces, such as malls and coffee shops, crucial to discourses and imaginaries of the ‘new’ India and the world-class lifestyles now available to an increasingly affluent middle class. In urban India, being able to speak English is increasingly insufficient; belonging to the new enterprising, professional and cosmopolitan middle class is increasingly constituted and communicated through the effortless

performance of embodied practices, which include assertiveness in speech, handshakes, eye contact, body posture, and so on (McGuire, 2013: 122). For Robin, 'getting knowledge' was akin to the process of 'exposure' described by Fuller and Narasimhan (2006: 260), entailing the acquisition of a certain mastery of the language as well as 'social skills and cultural knowledge through new opportunities, experiences, social contacts and sources of information'. Robin hoped this would offset previous language deficiencies. In the end, though, Robin failed his second and third attempts to achieve the required results necessary for him to travel to Australia as a student. In my year working at GSA I met three aspirants who, like Robin, were left behind, failing to pass English proficiency examinations numerous times.

Both Manu and Robin belonged to what many anthropologists referred to as the new middle classes; that is, families who are upwardly mobile, but whose relatively prosperous standing is of recent origin. However, their stories help us better understand how young men from different layers of the so-called India's new middle classes engage with migration with respect to their wider quest to attain and secure middle-class status. In particular, their stories shed light on the link between formal education and the acquisition of cultural capital during their schooling years and the way they engage with educational migration. Manu, resorted to educational migration to acquire a degree from a prestigious foreign university, and as a path to a successful life abroad. Robin, and several others who had failed to accumulate important forms of cultural capital such as English fluency through privilege English medium education, engage with educational migration in a way that reproduced the aspirations, strategies and investments of those better positioned within the middle classes, whilst simultaneously

involving an effort to catch up with and accumulate forms of cultural capital which they had failed to accrue during the schooling years.

Prospects that ‘do not give much respect’

While Robin spoke about his desire to migrate to Australia in terms of gain, many others highlighted their desire to escape India’s culture of education, which they saw as increasingly competitive and exclusionary. Most of them felt unfit to become successful in India. They knew their chances of achieving good jobs, their ability to translate their education into well-paid employment, were slim because of their lack of capital. They all traced their intentions to migrate to not having ‘studied well’, not being that ‘good in studies’, not being able to ‘reach high through studies’, or not having attended the ‘right’ kind of school (read urban, private, English-medium education). This perception was, of course, premised on a particular understanding of ‘success’ in rapidly globalizing India, which involves not only pursuing particular educational and professional trajectories^{iv}, but also mastering particular embodied behaviours that constitute and communicate an enterprising, cosmopolitan, and professional self (McGuire, 2013: 122). The conception of success being privileged in India meant that many of them saw themselves as ‘low performers’. Although the earlier stories of Manu and Robin are at first glance diametrically opposed, they both approached migration as a way to circumvent dominant understandings of success in India today, and as a way to mitigate their scarcity of capital (Waters, 2010). For Manu, India was a place to get out of if he wanted to maintain his status and self-respect. Robin lamented not having attended an English-medium school, and saw migration as a way to address his lack of confidence and language skills. Throughout fieldwork I heard several middle class parents talk about degrees such as hotel

management, commerce, the humanities and the social sciences, as sources of concern as they 'give not much respect'.

Aspirants at GSA often voiced moral discourses of education in which they criticized the high level of competition and narrow educational/professional aspirations deemed respectable. This was aptly captured by Lester, a returnee who failed to acquire PR status after completing a Diploma in Information Technology (IT) at a TAFE institute in Melbourne. Lester complained that:

Everyone (in Kerala) goes for engineering or medical fields... I wanted to do computers. We are forced to go into those two fields actually, not for the studies but for the status in the community: so that they (parents) can say my son is an engineer or a doctor... You can either score very high marks or get into a College where you have to pay big fee and give a huge donation.

His school marks were not that high, and had not allowed him to enter into a reputed Indian college. As in most cases at GSA, Lester and his parents had agreed that migration to Australia would be the best possible strategy to maximize Lester's future prospects in the face of such past failure. However, after completing his qualification, changes in the point-base migratory regulations meant that Lester had to return to India. Even though his first attempt to achieve PR had failed, Lester drew great pride on how his experience in Australia had transformed his 'attitude'. His firm handshakes and eye contact, as well as his good command of English (with a much milder Indian accent) helped him communicate his newly-found cosmopolitan self, which stood out at GSA. As a result of these changes, he explained, his self-confidence was 'at its highest'. Lester now planned to complete a computer-related degree in India, then clear the

IELTS once more, and again attempt to achieve PR status, this time after completing a master's degree in Australia.

Like Lester, Don and Chacko, both 18, were among the waves of students aspiring to migrate to Australia right after their school education. When I met them at GSA, it had only been three weeks since they got their higher secondary school results, and they had already applied for their passports. They, too, criticized the high level of competition and exigencies placed upon middle-class young people (see, e.g., Kumar, 2011). In particular, they complained about the rising importance placed upon academic performance, which has meant that students' agendas are increasingly filled with coaching and extra tuition to improve their prospects in competitive entrance examinations towards higher education (Sancho, 2013). Chacko protested about how 'one goes from school and then there is coaching, so one arrives home late and tired, there is no energy left for anything else'. They criticized the majority of their school friends who took coaching lessons to help prepare for entrance examinations to professional courses – mainly in the engineering and medical fields. They felt proud of eschewing dominant educational aspirations and avoiding the hard work and sacrifice, to which their classmates submitted themselves.

Their plan was to do a one-year diploma course in automotive technology and to work part-time as much as possible. Disdaining their entire school education as 'not much of an experience' they were, above all, looking forward to beginning to earn an income and gaining work experience. Having a part-time job while studying is looked down upon in India and working during one's college years is highly frowned upon. In Australia, having a part-time job

is necessary, for families are usually not able to pay for their children's living expenses beyond the initial one or two months.

Don and Chacko's interest in migration as a livelihood strategy was nothing new among their families. Both Don's and Chacko's fathers had spent more than 20 years working in the Gulf region. Chacko drew particular inspiration from his elder brother, who completed a three-year diploma in aircraft maintenance in the UK, and was then offered a job with Emirates Airline in Bahrain. In Kerala, migration is much more a norm than an exception. For decades now, migration has offered an alternative to high levels of unemployment. At GSA, a large portion of students came from Kerala's northern district, such as Malappuram, Kannur and Kasaragod, which have produced a steady migration flow for the past three decades to different parts of India and the world, but primarily to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Zachariah and Rajan, 2010). It has recently been suggested that emigration to the Gulf countries might be edging towards a turning point, with many of the major centres of emigration in Kerala already experiencing a decline in the number of emigrants (Zachariah and Rajan, 2012: 8). That trend is still to be confirmed. However, the point to be made here is that in a highly internationally mobile society like Kerala, the rising appeal of 'making it abroad', that is of becoming integrated into an imaginary transnational Indian middle class, will most likely see a growing entanglement between different migration flows between older and newer destination.

Moreover, their cases also point to how migration does not only emerge as an alternative to a local lack of employment opportunities, but in connection with the dominant middle-class culture of education. This insight supports emerging work on middle-class

parenting practices with respect to school education, entrance coaching, and higher education in urban India (see, e.g., Kumar, 2011; Sancho, 2013). They point to how middle class parents privileged a competitive, economic, and status-based conception of aspiration, producing growing anxieties and failure among middle class young people. As Lester, Don, and Chacko suggest, young people in middle-class India are pushed and disciplined into narrow and risk-averse life trajectories ultimately geared towards ensuring middle-class status aspirations (Sancho, 2013). In this context, their migration desires were primarily an attempt to negotiate with a culture of education that marks them as unsuccessful. After having failed to string together the educational and professional successes central to achieving and reproducing middle-class status in India, the student/migrants I present in this paper turned to vocational education and work in Australia as an alternative strategy to accumulate economic and cultural capital conducive to middle-class status in India. In short, their stories speak to the intricate ways in which migration is a crucial part of processes of class formation in India.

A temporary migration strategy

Throughout fieldwork, Prof Joseph often talked about the motivation of his students. He assumed that his students' desires to acquiring PR status implied an irreversible wish to settle in Australia. As has been argued, paradigms of permanent settlement and full citizenship continue to dominate discursive constructions of migration, which is typically assumed to imply a temporally linear progression over time from an old home or culture to a new one, and from alien to citizen (Robertson, 2014: 1918). On several occasions he explained that aspirants come to GSA in order to migrate: 'they are here to prepare for migration, to go, work, and settle overseas'. He agreed with findings that TAFE diplomas and certificates were seen as an easy

way into Australia – as PR factories. However, on many occasions, his ideas were contested by aspirants for whom acquiring PR status did not mean irreversibly ‘settling down’ in Australia.

It has been recently argued that we must pay greater attention to how all migration processes have complex temporal dimensions, related to both the nation state’s management of immigration, and to the social and cultural practices of migrants themselves (Cwerner, 2001). In other words, we must recognise the ways in which time, and not only space, structures migrant desires and biographies, and how this is simultaneously ‘enabled or constrained by temporal limitations or temporal norms placed upon different kinds of migrant mobilities through national and international systems of governance’ (Robertson, 2014: 1917). Therefore, ‘temporariness’ is both the result of disciplinary state practices, which shapes migrants’ possibilities and subjectivities, as well as of migrants’ subjective expectations. Both of these temporal aspects are, of course, dynamic and can change over time. For many migrants, prospects of duration differ vastly over time, and planned ‘sojourns’ of one or two years can lead to much more extended stays (Cwerner, 2001), regardless of whether the migration scheme they arrive under designates them officially as temporary or permanent (Robertson, 2014: 1918).

Current work on Indian overseas students in Australia points to how Australia is almost always considered a temporary destination, often seen as a stepping stone to further migration to more coveted destinations such as Europe and the United States, in spite of the common assumption that the quest for PR entails a desire to settle permanently (see, e.g., Baas, 2010a, 2010b). Baas presents the on-going trajectories of several Indian students, some who have returned to India, others who have stayed on in Australia, and even those who now reside

elsewhere altogether (Baas, 2010a). Most of the young men I talked to at GSA narrated their plans of studying, living and working in Australia over time almost entirely in temporary terms. Their plans for the future did not include staying in Australia indefinitely – they mostly stated a desire to return to India after making enough money to attend to responsibilities as sons, husbands and respected men^v. This involved achieving essential life-cycle milestones such as building a house in India. PR status meant, above all, the right to work and earn, and was thus instrumental to achieving their overall objectives back at home.

Take, for instance, the example of Safeer, for whom living and working in Australia was primarily a way to circumvent local educational/professional expectations and as an alternative source of respect, which would allow him to eventually return to Kerala. At age 23, Safeer came from a land-owning, well-off Muslim family from Edappally. After completing his higher secondary schooling certificate, or class 12, Safeer started a BA Economics course at Bharat Mata College near Kochi – a mid-ranging government aided college. He was not able to complete his degree in economics – his marks were below average and his attendance was poor. After dropping out from college, he held numerous in jobs in Kochi, all of them low-paying. His disinclination for working in the family business and his severely limited options to get a job deemed suited to his family's status had convinced him, as he explained, that he 'could not work here' any longer. That is how he first pictured migrating to Australia.

Safeer described his dreams of going to Australia in the language of adventure, excitement and fun (see Waters et al., 2011 for a similar account). Many of his friends had already travelled to Australia and he looked forward to 'enjoying life', 'blasting fully', 'seeing places, and the excitement of living with his friends in Melbourne'. He envisaged himself

helping other friends to join him in Australia once settled down. Safeer looked forward to a 'big change and a big salary' and he dreamt of buying 'full freaky' (read stylish) clothes and building a 'luxury house' in India.

In Australia, he planned to go for a diploma in automotive technology in which he would learn to do the work of a diesel or petrol engine mechanic. In Kerala, working as a mechanic would not only be considered degrading for him and his family, but also as a mechanic he would not make enough money to satisfy the comfortable standards of a middle-class lifestyle in India. Many, like Safeer, were after the anonymity provided by a life overseas. As Prof Joseph explained, 'nobody knows what he's doing there'. Working as a mechanic in Australia would allow him to earn much more than what he saw himself earning in India. He knew he had limited options in the Indian job market, where the jobs he could access would undermine his family's moneyed middle-class status. Thus, living and working in Australia was simultaneously a strategy to maintain Safeer's family's reputation at home, and a path to unburden himself from familial and wider pressures. Life and work in Australia was also about the experience of independence and being diasporic, as well as much better earnings, which could potentially send out all the signals of a successful NRI life, such as sending remittances, investing in the construction of a house in India, and gifting during periodic visits to India. In other words, Australian education offered a spatial strategy for social reproduction (Waters, 2006: 1053). Living and working in Australia was not underpinned by a desire to settle overseas; its significance was bound in expectations and considerations of respect that extended across thousands of miles in India. For many, PR status opened up earning opportunities that were inexistent within India, but most importantly perhaps, it provided young men like Safeer a

symbolic resource to overcome a lack of other forms of capital in India – such as the ‘right’ kind of education and employment for an upwardly-mobile family. Permanent residence and a certain level of earnings allows young men like Safeer to prove themselves and make a head start, enabling them to return to Kerala holding their heads up high. Safeer imagined himself successfully returning to Kerala in his early 30s – as he explained, ‘three years after marriage’.

As my ethnographic examples here indicate, most of the young men with whom I worked at the recruitment centre were ‘low-performing’ according to the dominant culture of education, and felt excluded from the trajectories and the kinds of success that the new ‘pulsating’^{vi} India is thought to offer, and that have come to define middle-class life aspirations. They were usually students whose performance in school was average (or poor), and who have not been able to acquire coveted professional qualifications. Many have not had the privilege of studying in private English-medium schools and came from non-English-speaking families, and hence their fluency of English was not particularly strong. The majority of them came from families who were in the process of cementing a recently attained economic standing through seeking to accumulate forms of cultural capital, such as English-medium private education. Faced by their poor prospects in the Indian employment market, where competition is fierce, these were the students who sought to invest in vocational courses in Australia likely to facilitate the attainment of PR status.

Adding to the wider literature on young people marginalized by processes of regional and global economic restructuring (Demerath, 1999, 2000; Jeffrey et al., 2004; Levinson, 1999; Oni, 1988), this paper has aimed to show how certain students’ aspirations to study and acquire PR status in Australia are a reaction to their felt exclusion from the trajectories promising

success and respect in Indian's rapidly growing economy through embracing migration. Migration to Australia is not only seen as an alternative means to higher earnings than in India, but also as a means to attain a whole host of intangible traits and bodily dispositions to which they have not had access in India, yet that are increasingly necessary to maintain a lifestyle that signals success back at home. In short, through migration they sought to accumulate economic and cultural capital, which they hoped to mobilize as part of projects of social mobility in India, circumventing their own lack cultural capital – a product of their lower status, provincial, or rural origin. Unlike the cosmopolitan middle-class described by writers such as Mitchell (1997: 551) and Ong (1999: 90), most of the students I present in this paper did not come from families seeking to acquire western university degrees as means to maintain a privilege status, and secure global mobility and the professional success of their children in a global economic arena. This paper shows that, for certain students, migration is not the outcome of privilege middle-class status but the means through which middle-class status is hoped to be achieved and maintained.

The education and migration link

In Australia, the nexus between international education – the country's biggest service export – and migration has been widely debated. The numbers alone justify its salience as a topic of debate, not only among academics and policy makers, but also among the general public: according to a government report there were 50,000 international students in Australia in 1991; nothing compared to the 500,000 in 2010 (Walters, 2011: 2). Offering one of the most liberal point-based policies between 1998 and 2010 meant that many former students could apply for permanent residency, turning into skilled migrants while remaining onshore (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014: 3). By the early 2000s, a substantial proportion of

economic migrants held Australian university qualifications, while key research showed that PR status was not only an important outcome, but also a key motivation for many international students in Australian institutions (see, e.g., Baas, 2006; Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014). Between 2004 and 2009, Australia's Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions^{vii} witnessed tremendous growth in student visa application, primarily among Indian students^{viii} aspiring to enter not university courses but the cheaper and shorter Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. Indian students aiming for TAFE course have been shown to be strategic about their education in Australia, deliberately aiming to complete vocational courses in high point-scoring occupations to improve their chances of obtaining PR – usually those featuring in the official Skilled Occupation List (SOL), formerly the 'Migrant Occupations in Demand List' (MODL).

The 2009 boom was followed by a sharp decline over the next four years. The biggest drop has been in vocational training. In terms of revenue, TAFE institutions lost more than \$2bn (close to £1bn), 43% of their revenue since the peak of 2009, while the university sector experienced a 5% loss since its peak in 2010. The decline was related to a much more expensive Australian dollar (Marginson, 2015: 3) the racially motivated attacks on overseas students in 2009^{ix}, as well as to the unsuccessful integration of former students into the labour market, particularly among graduates of vocational training institutes (see, e.g., Birrell, 2006; Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014). In response to the rising demand for courses that would generate PR status, many registered training organizations began to offer affordable and low-quality courses, mainly in the vocational fields on government 'on-demand' lists (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014: 3). There were reports of scams, whereby TAFE institutions were said to

be nothing more than façades for immigration businesses. There were claims of courses being designed as to require minimal English, and institutions were denounced for practicing ‘soft marking’ to benefit overseas students (Birrell, 2006; Birrell et al., 2007). These issues contributed to a major review of government policies on international education and migration in 2010 and 2011. Such reviews led to a significant narrowing of the number of occupations that could yield a migration outcome as well as the introduction temporary visas and extending the waiting periods for students who applied for permanent residence. Other changes included the favouring of employer-sponsored migrants over independent point-based applicants. These changes gave prominence to highly-skilled migrants with work experience and disfavoured international students in vocational training courses.

While the route towards PR has been made considerably more difficult, 2014 witnessed a resurgence of international student numbers, growing by approximately 65,000 from the previous year, and nearly 16,000 in the VET sector alone (Australian Government, 2015a). Moreover, a report indicates that the Government’s skilled program is currently granting visas to former overseas students who remained in Australia after the immigration reforms introduced in 2010 (Birrell and Healy, 2014: 3). Such students form part of the huge pool of 1.1 million migrants in Australia on various temporary resident visas, who have continued to access the Australian labour market and to prolong their stay in Australia by churning from one visa to another. An estimate 142,000 students did so in 2012-13 according to this report (Birrell and Healy, 2014: 4). These developments urge us to re-examine the motivations of students who want to go to Australia. Recent studies on overseas students in Australia concentrate on students’ experiences of the new regulatory frameworks, and highlight the anxieties and sense

of precariousness felt as a result of the shifting state requirement of migrant desirability after 2010 (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014). However, further research that seeks to understand and ground the motivations and worldviews of Indian overseas students within the Indian context is still needed.

Conclusion

Research on Indian overseas students in Australia has shown how education and migration are highly entangled (Baas, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010a; Birrell, 2006; Birrell et al., 2007). They have demonstrated that the main objective of most students 'is to obtain a permanent residence visa in Australia and that they tailor their choice of course and university with this end in mind' (Baas, 2006: 8). The paper seeks to elaborate on this body of research and show that education and migration are not only connected in the Australian context but also in India, where a highly competitive and exclusionary middle-class culture of education drives many to consider migrating as an alternative path to social mobility.

This paper has been an attempt to locate the reasons young Indians have for wanting to migrate to Australia within the context of their aspiring middle-class lives in India. On one hand, I have sought to show that their reasons for migration, as well as the experiences and outcomes of the preparation process are highly varied. English fluency emerges as a crucial determining factor, foreclosing the chances to migrate for many, especially those who have not had the privilege of an English-medium education in India. On the other hand, I have tried to draw links among their experiences and narratives. If there was a common dimension to their experience it was that almost all aspirants at GSA felt unfit to fulfil notions of individual

success that wield tremendous pressure over more and more young men in post-liberalization India. For the young men presented earlier, seeking a TAFE education in Australia was not only ‘a way into Australia’ (Baas, 2007: 58), but also a *way out* of rising aspiration anxieties among the expanding middle classes, and the prospect of scarcely available and low paying jobs. In the context of felt exclusion from trajectories promising success and respect in India’s rapidly growing economy, embracing migration emerged as an alternative model of success distinct from dominant middle-class definitions of respect. The Australian qualifications to which they aspired did not hold much educational value, but opened the door to living and working in Australia, which in turn seemed to offer the economic and cultural capital, which they hoped would compensate for their unmet achievements at home. As such, the paper highlights the role of educational migration in wider strategies of class formation that now straddle multiple sites, resources and aspirations, and for which youth in India today seek to mobilize whatever resources are accessible to them.

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i An exception to this trend is Baas (2006), who does fleetingly consider how the decision of new middle-class men to migrate to Australia emerges as a way to cope with limited prospect of success in the highly competitive local education and employment markets.

ii In accounting for the complexity of being and becoming ‘middle class’ this literature, as well as this article, draw from an understanding of class as a constantly-under-construction cultural project that never exits outside its actual practice or performance in everyday life, yet it is inextricably linked to the bedrock of economic resources.

iii Ezhavas, the biggest single community in Kerala, are an ex-untouchable community who throughout the twentieth century pursued mobility in many social arenas as a caste group and as individual families (Osella and Osella, 2000).

iv This normally involves being a science student in school, and then acquiring a professional qualification (primarily engineering). Being a professional is seen as defining one’s belonging to decidedly aspirational

milieu – and in a new kind of middle class that is imagined as entrepreneurial and enterprising (McGuire 2013: 110).

v As Gardner and Osella (2003: ix) rightly put it: ‘migration at times stretches the boundaries between the fulfilment of personal/individual ambitions and wider social responsibilities’.

vi The notion of a new ‘pulsating’ Indian is nicely captured in the 2007 Times of India’s ‘India Poised’ anthem.

vii Unlike universities, TAFE institutions specialize on offering of predominantly vocational tertiary education courses.

viii China and India are the big drivers in higher education enrolment, representing 38.4% and 9% of total student numbers in the sector respectively. At approximately 18%, Indian students are the biggest driver of the Vocational Education and Training sector in Australia, followed by China (9.9%), South Korea (7.8%), and Thailand (7%) (Australian Government, 2015b).

ix In 2009, Indian students took to the streets of Melbourne to protest against what they considered to be a series of racially motivated attacks.