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Gendering International Student Migration: An Indian Case-Study

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Abstract

Despite the mainstreaming of gender perspectives into migration research, very few attempts have been made to gender international student migration. This paper poses three questions about Indian students who study abroad. Are there gender differences in their motivations? How do they negotiate their gendered everyday lives when abroad? Is the return to India shaped by gender relations? An online survey of Indian study-abroad students (n=157), and in-depth interviews with Indian students in Toronto (n=22), returned students in New Delhi (n=21), and with parents of students abroad (n=22) help to provide answers. Conceptually, the paper draws on a ‘gendered geographies of power’ framework and on student migration as an embodied process subject to ‘matrices of (un)intelligibility’. We find minimal gender-related differences in motivations to study abroad, except that male students are drawn from a wider social background. However, whilst abroad, both male and female Indian students face challenges in performing their gendered identities. The Indian patrifocal family puts greater pressure on males to return; females face greater challenges upon return.

Keywords: international student migration, Indian students abroad, gendered geographies of power, embodiment, performativity, return migration

Introduction

Although there is plenty of evidence that gender has been increasingly ‘mainstreamed’ into migration research (see Lutz 2010; Mahler and Pessar 2006), this is not the case with international student migration/mobility (ISM). This lacuna is confirmed by a recent bibliographic survey of ISM (Riaño and Piguet 2016) which cites only two ‘gender’
references (Geddie 2013; Holloway et al. 2012), to which we add two more (Martin 2014; Salisbury et al. 2010). In this paper, we contribute to remedying this deficit, based on a mixed-method study of the motivations and experiences of Indian students studying in ‘Western’ universities. Our paper also speaks to the theme of this special issue – international academic mobility and inequalities – by focusing on the gendered differences in Indian student mobility abroad. Note that, in contradistinction to Bilecen and Van Mol (2017), we prefer the term ‘differences’ to ‘inequalities’, in view of the value-judgements implicit in the latter. Whilst the embedded patrifocality of Indian families does imply gendered inequalities in the treatment of, and opportunities for, student-age sons and daughters, in other respects the gendered experiences of study-abroad and return are more subtle, and hence require a more nuanced interpretation.

We focus on three main research questions. First, what are the motivations expressed by Indian students to explain their decision to study abroad? How are these responses gendered, if at all? Second, when abroad, how do the students negotiate their gendered everyday lives in a different academic and social context? And third, is the process of return to, and resettlement in, India shaped by gender relations?

Through these three questions, this paper takes a unique approach by presenting diverse experiences of Indian international students across three space-time locations: before departing India, abroad, and after return. This temporally sequenced multi-sited analysis is crucial in understanding how gender relations prior to moving shape who moves and why, the students’ experiences abroad, and their subsequent mobilities. These experiences of mobility in turn (re)shape gendered identities, relations and ideologies into the future.

The Indian context
The second biggest source country for international students after China, Indian students abroad (217,000 in 2012; UNESCO 2014) were overwhelmingly concentrated in Anglophone countries: USA (44.7%), UK (17.4%), Canada (6.5%), Australia (5.4%) and New Zealand (4.4%). This distribution indicates a powerful postcolonial legacy of the British Empire (Madge et al. 2009).

There are few gender-disaggregated data on Indian ISM – which reflects deficiencies in the overall global database on internationally mobile students. According to partial data from UNESCO (2010: 72, 164), India exhibits a strong male bias in access to higher education (61% male) and study abroad (73%). Yet there is no research which examines Indian student mobility through a gender optic, which is surprising for two reasons. First, feminist scholarship over the past 20-30 years has abundantly demonstrated the inevitably gendered nature of the migration process (as cited above). Second, within the Indian patrifocal context of gendered household inequalities, it has long been recognised that the disadvantaged access of women to both higher education and geographical mobility is a stark and unfortunate reality (Chopra 2005).

The notion of patrifocality (as opposed to patriarchy) is used here to refer to the more localised male dominance within the family hierarchy and the highly gender- and generation-differentiated power relations and divisions therein. The specific inherent characteristics of patrifocality, according to Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994: 10), are the centrality of men and male power in Indian families, the importance of the welfare of the family over individual members’ interests, gender-differentiated family-centred authority structures and social roles, and the control and regulation of sexuality, especially of women, in order to maintain family honour within the wider structures of class and caste.

In the archetypal middle-class Indian family, boys are groomed to be breadwinners and future household heads. They are strongly expected to get married, have children and
take care (or have their wives take care) of their ageing parents (Chopra 2005). Girls, by contrast, are prepared for motherhood and household management, and are spatially confined within the private sphere of the parental household.

This generalised picture is subject to ongoing changes. First, several authors (eg. Donnan 2008; Waldrop 2012) highlight the trend amongst upper and, increasingly, middle-class families to encourage their daughters into higher education, including study-abroad. In these cases, the main concerns of parents are that their daughters do not lapse into the perceived promiscuous ‘Western’ student way of life, nor stay abroad beyond the conventional marriage age of early-mid 20s. Second, there is a partial contradiction in the fact that, whilst sons have more freedom to access higher education and international mobility than daughters, they are bound by stronger pressures to return and conform to their expected gendered role within the patrifocal family – to ensure, indeed, its continuation.

**Theoretical underpinnings**

These remarks about Indian family structures and gendered decisions about student (im)mobility fit into the wider analytical frame of the *gendered geographies of power* advanced by Mahler and Pessar (2001), which is the main theoretical setting for this paper. The gendered geographies of power (GGP) framework built on earlier important work in the 1980s and 1990s which brought in women as subjects of migration research. Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994: 3) urged migration scholars to examine ‘how gender relations facilitate both women’s and men’s migration and settlement’ (emphasis in original). Donato et al. (2006) stressed the importance of viewing the entire migration process as a deeply gendered phenomenon, in which it is not just that women and men migrate for different reasons and are subject to different structures, constraints and opportunities, but that male and female migrants are constructed as highly *relational* to each other. This relationality shows that
gender patterns prior to migration shape the patterns and processes of migration, as well as
the other side of the coin – that migration, including return migration, can play a fundamental
role in reshaping the ‘social orders, geographies of inequality, spatialized subjectivities and
the meanings of difference across multiple scales’ (Silvey 2004: 491).

The first building block of GGP is Doreen Massey’s notion of power geometry – ‘a
complex web of relations of domination and subordination’ (Massey 1992: 81) reflecting
both geographical and social inequality. In the context of international student migration,
power geometry refers to the relations of privilege that shape people’s ability to be
internationally mobile. In this research on Indian students, the discussion will be limited
mainly to power inequalities within the family.

Closely related to the spatialities of power geometry is the second element of the
GGP model, geographical scale. Gender norms and behaviours are embedded and expressed
at a variety of scales, ranging from the body and the family to wider social settings, the state
and international law. Our approach in this paper will be to view the Indian travelling student
through the lens of embodied gender and within the multi-scale matrices of gendered family
relations and of different cultural spheres – ‘home’ in India, ‘away’ in the study-country.

The final element is social location, which situates migrants in different hierarchies
of power and inequality as they traverse one location to another, across international borders
and between different societies. In an interesting self-reflexive narrative, Ghosh (in Ghosh
and Wang 2003) reveals that before she left India to study abroad, her social location was on
the lower rung of the family hierarchy – in accordance with the Indian patrifocal system.

However, when she returned home, she found that people, both within and outside the family,
paid more attention to what she said, sought her advice, and asked her about her experiences
abroad. Going abroad and returning improved her standing in the family hierarchy.
Intersectionality also underpins this analytical framework. The concept of intersectionality is used to theorise the relationships of power between different social locations: gender, ‘race’, sexuality, age, and so on. Recent (re)interpretations of intersectionality envision intersections of identities in terms of *performativities*: ‘a more fluid coming together in which positions, identities and differences are made and unmade, claimed and rejected’ (Valentine 2007: 14). The appeal of GGP to the present study is that it allows the exploration of gendered power relations and ‘performances’ of gender in and across multiple scales and sites. Thus far, however, the GGP framework has been little used in empirical studies of migration (but see McIlwaine 2010), and not at all in studies of international student migration.

Our focus on performances of gender, identity, friendship and family takes inspiration from Judith Butler’s two landmark books – *Gender Troubles* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993). According to Butler (1990: 140), gender ‘is not a fact’ but ‘an act, a performance’. Put differently, ‘there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [it] is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (1990: 25). However, the ‘performative act’ of gender is not merely about repetition or routine; it reflects deeper cultural structures and ontologies, including ‘the regulatory practices of gender coherence’ that pertain to a particular culture or social formation (1990: 24). Its situationality unveils fragments of a partially hidden habitus, and also reflects the constitutive conventions and historical meta-narratives of culture, ethnicity and class which appear as externally fixed.

Closely linked to this emphasis on the performativity of gender are two further crucial notions which inform our epistemological approach in this paper. As an *embodied* performance, gender is considered by Butler (1990: 139) ‘*a corporeal style*’ (her emphasis), but as Indian student bodies traverse different spaces and cultures they encounter different
meanings and behavioural practices of masculinities and femininities. The bodies which
match the gendered and racialised standard of the place in question become the subjects and
those which do not, mutually constitute the abject of that space (Ahmed 2000: 3). As we shall
see, the gendered and embodied experiences of Indian students abroad can lead to ‘strange
encounters’ in which bodies are seen, and felt, as either ‘in’ or ‘out of’ place – although these
positionalities are always fluid and subject to negotiation. Butler (1993: 3) refers to this in
terms of matrices of intelligibility: the creation of an exclusionary matrix within which the
‘subjects’ are accepted and understood, but which ‘requires the simultaneous production of a
domain of abject beings… who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject’.

Methods

Our mixed-methods approach involved three main technique operationalised more-or-less
simultaneously over the period August 2010 to November 2011: 1) an online survey with
Indian students, 2) in-depth interviews, both with students and parents, and 3) participant
observation. The quantitative data serves to describe the general background characteristics
of the study-population as well as their decision to go abroad, whereas the qualitative data is
used to delve deeper into the findings.

The online survey was closely patterned on one used for a study of UK study-abroad
students (see Findlay and King 2010: 57-64). The Indian survey was hosted on the
SurveyGizmo web platform. It was distributed via various channels: university international
offices and alumni records, Indian student associations in the UK, USA and Canada, personal
networks, snowballing and Facebook. No incentives were offered to respondents. The final
sample consists of 157 responses.

In order to qualify for the survey, respondents had to self-identify as ‘Indian’ and to
be either currently studying at a university or other higher education institute abroad, or have
recently completed (within the past five years) foreign study (and resident either abroad or back in India). Respondents answered from many countries, but mainly from the UK, USA and Canada, as well as ‘returnees’ in India (29% of the total). Australia, where it is known that there are many Indian students (Baas 2012), was under-represented, due to the networks of contacts utilised for distributing the survey. We cannot claim that the survey results are statistically representative; hence they should be interpreted with care.

The questionnaire collected data on students’ prior educational and residential history, family information, mobility decisions, evaluation of their experience abroad, as well as basic demographic data. STATA was used for the quantitative analysis. In this paper, we will mainly focus on family background and the decision to study abroad.

Both the interviews with international students and the participant observation were carried out by the first-named author, with fieldwork based in two cities, Toronto and New Delhi. This multi-sited strategy was necessary in order to capture the gendered experiences of students and graduates in both the country of destination and that of origin/return.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 students (10 men, 12 women) in two universities in the Toronto metropolitan area. Interviews included all types of student – bachelor’s, master’s, doctoral and diploma/certificate. Most interviews lasted about one hour, but a few were much longer, including follow-up interviews. Although nominally semi-structured and geared around the research questions set out in the introduction, in practice most interviews took the form of loosely structured conversations. This was greatly facilitated by the interviewer’s shared positionality with the interviewees – she was at that time an Indian doctoral student enrolled abroad (in the UK) with earlier periods of her life spent both in India and in Canada.¹

Most interviews in Toronto took place in neutral locations in and close to the university campuses, such as empty offices, quiet corners of public spaces and cafes.
Although the topics of the interview were similar to those on the questionnaire, the main purpose of the interview was to explore in more detail the students’ experiences of study and social life in Canada. For the qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts, partial use was made of NVIVO software, but greater reliance was eventually put on carefully selected case-histories, chosen to represent broader themes emerging from the narrative material.

Participant observation in Toronto took place both within the university environment and in the city. Several events were attended – Diwali celebrations, movie nights and pub outings. In addition to ‘hanging out’ with Indian students at social events such as parties and in pubs and cafes, many academic events were also attended, such as postgraduate seminars where there were Indian students presenting and participating. Observations and notes taken about conversations and events enabled insights to be developed into ‘performances’ of ‘Indianness’ or occasions where the students’ expectations and feelings were challenged.

Fieldwork in New Delhi involved collecting interviews from two additional groups: students who had studied abroad and who had recently returned to live and work in India (21, 11 women, 10 men); and 22 parents of students currently studying abroad. Again, most interviews lasted around an hour, but some were much longer – for instance the interviews with parents in their homes turned into more extended social occasions with refreshments offered. We feel that the parents’ perspectives bring unique insights into the gendering of Indian ISM. For the returnee student interviews, the questions related to time spent abroad, the return decision and post-return experiences.

In sum, this paper is based on 65 interviews and 157 questionnaire responses, and focuses on those findings which shed light on the *gendered experiences* of Indian students, drawing on selected parts of the online survey, as well as illustrative examples from the Toronto and New Delhi fieldwork.
Students’ backgrounds and the decision to study abroad

From the online survey, we observe a slight male majority (55%). The mean age at the time of the survey was 27, equal for men and women. The most common level of study was master’s (45% overall), followed by bachelor’s (19%) and PhD (16%). Some small differences can be noted: males were more likely than females to be master’s students, 48% vs 41%; and females were more likely to be doing a PhD, 19% vs 13%. Contrasts are more evident in the subject-field of the programme: 56% of males were studying STEM subjects (31% females), whereas 50% of females were studying social sciences, media and humanities programmes (23% males). Table 1 presents these results. These proportions are not unexpected; they reflect third-level gendered patterns of study in Indian higher education as well as globally.

When we turn to parental background, an interesting difference arises (see Table 2). Significantly more female study-abroad students had highly educated parents than males, whose parents were of more diverse educational backgrounds. Some 54% of male respondents have mothers who are university-educated, and 75% have fathers with university education. By contrast, 80% of female respondents have university-educated mothers, and 78% have university-educated fathers. Males were much more likely to have neither parent university-educated.

Referring to one of the key constructs of the ‘gendered geographies of power’ model, the differing status of parental education places males and females in different social locations. Women who study abroad are more likely to have university-educated parents, and especially graduate mothers, than men (Table 3). This finding resonates with research in other contexts, for instance Hong Kong students in Canada (Waters 2006) and UK Erasmus students doing a year abroad in Europe (Findlay et al. 2006). Looked at from a different angle, the data suggest that men are less likely to be put in a ‘social-location’ position of
disadvantage for study abroad by virtue of their parents’ lack of higher education. Having
said that, it is clear that the majority of respondents come from broadly middle- and upper-
class backgrounds.

Next, we analyse the responses to five statements for choosing to study abroad,\(^2\)
which respondents could rate on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from ‘not important’ to
‘very important’ (see Table 4). The striking thing about the patterns of response to these five
statements is the lack of gender contrasts; indeed, the figures are almost identical.

More interesting than the gender contrasts, therefore, are the graduations of
importance attached to the five factors. The first three are pre-eminent, the last two much less
so. The desire to attend a so-called ‘world-class’ university and the idea of study abroad as a
step towards an ‘international career’ are, we would argue, closely linked. The third factor,
study-abroad as a ‘unique adventure’, is seen as ‘very important’ by 44%, but this rises to
84% when ‘somewhat important’ is added, suggesting that this is seen more as an ancillary
rather than a primary factor for choosing to study abroad.\(^3\)

Returning to the gender aspect, there are a few slight differences worthy of
comment. Both the ‘unique adventure’ and the ‘migration from India’ statements are scored
more highly by male respondents, but the contrasts are not great, and partly reflect the fact
that females do not score any factor more highly than males.

**Negotiating decisions across gender and generation**

Data from the survey revealed few differences between male and female students in their
decision-making processes to go abroad beyond a wider range of social backgrounds of the
men. However, interview insights from the students and their parents probe the often difficult
and protracted negotiations that took place between sons/daughters and their parents in order
to get permission to go, and thereby help to explain the gender-muted survey result. The main
axis of gender differentiation around which these discussions turn is the contrast between
gendered geographies of power and control are imbricated in Indian middle-class family life; a son or daughter moving away from home is seen by parents as a loss of the power of control. We found that some parents, usually the most highly educated, accept this with an air of inevitability; for others, there remains a general resistance to the idea of studying away from home.

Case-studies from our interviews illustrate the above points. The first case-study is Nitin, from Kerala, who was doing a PhD in Toronto. Nitin’s example exemplifies how Indian students from less wealthy backgrounds overcome the initial obstacles to moving abroad through a process of negotiation combined with their own initiative. Nitin described his family as ‘lower-middle-class’. Neither of his parents have university education; his father is a commercial traveller, his mother a home-maker. His parents aspired for Nitin, their only son, to become either a doctor, an engineer, or a lawyer (three ‘respected’ and well-paid professions), and then to get married to an ‘acceptable’ girl, have children, and look after the parents in their old age. Nitin’s social location as the family’s only son placed him in a position of both privilege and disadvantage: he was advantaged in that his parents could concentrate their financial resources on his education, but under pressure to conform to their model of the ideal son.

Upon completing his Master’s at a university in New Delhi, Nitin spoke of feeling pressured by his parents to get a job, so that he then could get married. But he had other ideas – about doing a social-science PhD abroad. This would only be feasible if he could secure funding, which he did on the third application, although he felt frustrated by his parents’ lack of moral support.
Well they were not very eager about my doing a PhD at all… especially in social science. Maybe they were happy because I was happy, not because they were happy about it… They don’t see any future [laughs]. There is a sort of uncertainty in their mind regarding my future – job, marriage, things like that… they don’t see anything of that happening with me doing a PhD for five years.

This quote takes us back to the issue of sons being under pressure to get married in order to be able to take care of parents in the latter’s old age – which Nitin explicitly acknowledged later in his interview. The possibility that social-science-trained Nitin may not secure a decent professional job, thereby forestalling marriage, means that there are no guaranteed arrangements for parental care. From the side of Nitin, his successful application for a funded PhD enabled him to transform his socio-economic positionality within his family and move abroad to realise his dream – even if, and even on his own terms, his future is far from assured.

Our second example brings in the parental perspective more explicitly and exemplifies another case of change through negotiation. Part of the background to this case-history is the difficulties for female graduates to get the jobs and salaries they desire in the Indian labour market where, especially in scientific subjects and engineering, there are multiple barriers to hiring women (Gupta and Sharma 2002).

In the early part of his interview, Kailash, who was a leading spokesperson for his residential community on the outskirts of Delhi and a professional social worker, talked of his initial displeasure at his daughter’s determination to do research abroad. But then his friends and local community members made him realise that he was doing his daughter a disservice. He recalled a conversation he had with one of his closest friends:
My friend said, ‘Kailash, if you don’t let your daughter go, then I say to you, give me your daughter, I will make sure she goes to study abroad’.

Later in the interview, Kailash became excited about his daughter studying abroad, regaling her success in science exams. He realised that it was important for her to reach her full potential which was unattainable if she stayed in India:

There [naming university in the UK] they have funds for the kind of research she is interested in doing. Here the university didn’t care that she wanted to do research; there, they gave her the money to do a PhD! And there are more jobs for her, especially in her field. Also, there she doesn’t have to worry if she can get a job after she marries. Here, you never know what type of family she marries into. They might not let her work after marriage.

In this quote we see the father expressing not only his keen awareness of the gender-discrimination inherent in the Indian scientific labour market, but also his concern that she might marry a ‘conservative’ husband who would deny her the chance to work. Since daughters are anyway ‘lost’ upon marriage, Kailash reveals his global vision for her future life and career options – very different from the parents of sons who pressure them to stay close or return home.

Gendered spaces of socialisation abroad

Study abroad is an academic and social arena in which Indian international students talk about their gender-differentiated outcomes in their everyday lives in Toronto. We pay
particular attention here to the *gender performances* of Indian students and their evolving
*gender identities*. We mobilise Butler’s (1990: 17; 1993: 7) concept of *matrix of intelligibility*
for its potential to construct a coherent gender identity discourse, which varies across space
and time as regards what is ‘acceptable’ or ‘expected’, and what is not. The somewhat
parallel notion of *bodies in, and out of, place* (Ahmed 2000: 39) physicalises the
‘strangeness’ of ‘different’ bodies, which are then ‘othered’ and seen to both look and behave
in a way which is not consonant with the dominant set of performative norms.

We illustrate the subtleties and tensions involved in Indian students’ negotiations of
the gendered power structures within their host-country academic and social spaces by
reference to two case-studies: Prita, an undergraduate student in her early 20s, and Mayank, a
PhD student in his early 30s. Of course, each of their stories is unique, but they have been
carefully chosen to represent situations which were confronted and described in an analogous
manner by other interviewees.

Prior to coming to Canada to study for a degree in economics, Prita had completed
one year of university in Bangalore, where she had become interested in theatre work. It was
logical, therefore, that upon her arrival in Toronto, she joined the campus theatre group,
seeking out a familiar space in an unfamiliar environment. However, as the following extract
shows, whilst she enjoyed the ‘theatre’ part of the experience, she was very uneasy about
other aspects, particularly the ‘expected’ performance of female students:

I really liked the theatre side… [but] in the theatre club all my friends were from
here [i.e. ‘white’ Canadians]. There were no brown people; I was the only brown
girl. So it was really hard… this culture… different, [...] I was brought up a secluded
Indian girl and they were more open and outgoing… So it was really different in that
way… Here, when they are 19 or 20, they are always going out drinking and
partying, crazy and wild… and all these things were new to me… I didn’t really
want to get into those things.

Several elements of this narrative extract are worthy of comment. First, it is clear that Prita,
as a ‘brown girl’, feels that hers is a ‘body out of place’ in the social space of the theatre
group. Second, her discomfort is discursively reinforced by multiple mentions of ‘everything’
being ‘different’. But the most notable theme is Prita’s description of the expected
performance of the women students, where the signifiers of the dominant expression of
femininity (and, no doubt, masculinity too) involved going out clubbing on a regular basis,
drinking alcohol, and (hinted at rather than stated explicitly in this interview clip) sexual
activity. This led to a cultural dissonance with what Prita, a girl from an upper-class Tamil
Brahmin background, was comfortable with.\textsuperscript{4}

Resisting the pressure to follow a specific heterosexually active female performance,
Prita chose to leave the theatre club and in her second year joined a more ‘familiar’ group, the
Indian students’ association. Here, she found a more congenial ‘matrix of intelligibility’ where
she could feel ‘in place’ rather than ‘out of place’.

I felt I needed to connect with people… so I joined the [Indian] student club, and I
made a lot of friends that way. It was not so different for me as we share the same
background, so it was easier to connect. I am more comfortable with this crowd, we
are from the same culture… I wasn’t really comfortable with the other group in my
first year because I didn’t really know what was happening…

Prita was interviewed several times during the course of the Toronto fieldwork, and
observations and discussions with her over this extended period confirmed that her choice not
to become sexually active was felt by her not to make sense to the theatre crowd. By contrast, this choice was intelligible to her Indian friends, including the men she spent time with, who perfectly understood her behavioural boundaries. Prita’s case can be considered as a counter-hegemonic narrative to the sexual liberation of student-migrants when they move to a ‘Western’ country with liberal views on sexuality (Ahmadi 2003).

Mayank, our second case-history, was another student with whom substantial informal contact was maintained alongside the recorded interview. He had left India around ten years earlier, first to study for an undergraduate degree in the US, where he had also worked for a number of years before starting his PhD in Canada. His parents in Mumbai were not particularly well-off; hence Mayank had to rely on scholarships and periods of work to fund his overseas education.

Our purpose in presenting Mayank’s case is that it provides a kind of parallel experience to Prita, but this time focused around how ‘traditional’ performances of Indian masculinity do not always fit the ‘Western’, and specifically ‘white Canadian’, narratives of heterosexual masculinity. The issue centres around the level of physical contact between male friends, especially young men, in India, compared to what is acceptable, or not acceptable, or possibly misinterpreted, in North America.

I think that [in India] there is a level of physical contact [between male friends], but… here [in Canada] you have to be careful of that. You also have to be careful what you say – that you wouldn’t call someone fat or something like that… I think that all of us [in India] used to hug each other, fool around with each other… it was a typical kind of young [male] thing. We weren’t really aware that our physical contact might be considered… might be gay.
With these words Mayank (who, incidentally, was living with his Indian girlfriend in Toronto – unknown to both sets of parents) lamented the loss of the easy and relaxed physicality shared amongst his male friends in Mumbai, where being friends involved giving each other hugs, holding each other’s hands and arms, and, to use his word, ‘roughhousing’ (‘horse-play’). These actions were well within the standard performance of Indian masculinity but lay beyond the matrix of intelligibility of Canadian heterosexual male friendship.

**Gendering return and post-return**

For the Indian students interviewed in this research, three migration/mobility options were theoretically possible: remain in the country of study, return to India, or move to a different country (either directly from the first country of study, or as a new migration following a return spell back in the homeland). All these trajectories, either actualised or envisioned, were represented in the interview sample.

Unlike the original decision of Indian students to move abroad for their higher education, where gender differences were minimal (Table 4), we find clear gender contrasts in the circumstances surrounding return. Most male former students interviewed in India considered their return as permanent and an end to their migration adventure. This subsample of returnees had secured good jobs and more than half were already married. Most men interviewed in Canada anticipated that they, too, would eventually return to India to settle, although there were some exceptions, including those who aspired to an academic career and saw this as most likely developing outside of India.

For most women interviewed, however, return was experienced or imagined as part of a migration trajectory still to be continued. Most were under some sort of pressure to return – due to the completion of their studies and visa expiry, or the desire/obligation to be close to
their parents, or because of job prospects – but in general they lamented their need to return, and looked forward to ways that would lead them to jobs and lives outside of India.

Three main contexts structure the return process: the labour market, age and the timing of marriage, and care duties towards parents. As well as referencing these issues, participants’ accounts also illustrated the theoretical framings of our analysis. We pick up once again Butler’s (1993) ‘matrix of intelligibility’ to illustrate the extent to which the participants had felt ‘in’ or ‘out’ of place whilst abroad – or, to use another pair of conceptual analogies, whether their (self-)designation as ‘strange bodies’ out of place in Canada increased their ‘homing desire’ (Ahmed 2000). The obvious and straightforward interpretation is that experiences of ‘strangeness’ whilst away create a longing for the familiar space of home where they can feel ‘in place’. However, through the experiences of acculturation ‘away’ and the challenges of reinhabiting the spaces of ‘home’, home and away are recreated for the return students in various ways which, as we shall see below, often reflect clear gender contrasts. Moreover, the reconfiguration of these spaces can transform the border between the familiar and the strange; it makes the imagined familiar spaces strange, and the spaces that were once experienced as strange are remapped as familiar. Thus the matrix of intelligibility, too, is subject to change. Our evidence from interviews with returned students also intimates how the gendered power hierarchies within Indian families and society, expressed at different scales (the body, the household, the neighbourhood, the labour market), shape the everyday return experience of former students and their decisions about the future.

The case of Nitin illustrates the basic dichotomy of being ‘out of place’ abroad and looking forward to being ‘in place’ upon return home. We spoke earlier about Nitin’s negotiations with his parents about studying abroad. Here we pick up his story towards the end of his five-year stay in Toronto, studying for a PhD and working as a teaching assistant.
Despite the length of time spent in Canada (four years at the time of the interview), Nitin said he felt ‘out of place here’ and talked at length of his frustration in not ‘connecting’ with the local students he taught classes to: ‘I don't get their jokes… and they don’t get my references, for example I can’t make references to cricket’. By contrast, ‘I can talk to my Indian friends and they understand’. Nitin’s circle of friends in Toronto was small, and limited to other Indians. Like Mayank, quoted earlier, Nitin found it challenging to navigate different social constructions of masculinity and male friendship, and was anticipating a return to the familiar practices of ‘home’ where the ‘intelligible matrix’ of male friendship would make him feel more comfortable in performing a more homosocial masculinity. But for Nitin, there is a final twist to his story. His strongly expressed desire to return to his family and friends has to confront the reality that they are located in different places. His parents are in Kerala, waiting for him to come home, get married and start a family. But his friends are from his earlier university years in Delhi, 2000km from his parents’ home, or they are scattered in many places since many of them, too, have moved since graduation. Where, and what, then, is home for Nitin?

Most women interviewed in Toronto were reluctant to return to India, and those who had returned expressed frustration at some aspects of their post-return experiences. Two recurring themes were the difficulty of securing a satisfactory job in a male-dominated labour market, and the lack of freedom in how they conducted their everyday lives in India.

Toronto-based PhD student Arpita works in a science discipline and fears that if she returned to India she would be held back in her research path because the field is dominated by men. At the same time, her mother, who lives alone in Kolkata, has multiple health problems and limited support locally. But Arpita survives on a PhD scholarship which leaves no room for savings or expensive flight tickets. Arpita has limited options: stay in Canada, try to arrange long-distance support for her mother, but be consumed by guilt; or return to India,
put her studies on hold and jeopardise her long-term career prospects. Arpita’s case reveals
how the migration of one or more people changes the ways of ‘doing family’ when family
relations and duties are stretched between far-distant places, posing difficult challenges for
the administration of intergenerational care (Raghuram 2012).

A second reason to stay abroad is unwillingness to give up a sense of freedom. Many
women interviewees enunciated phrases such as ‘What I love about Toronto is that nobody
cares; people don't make critical comments about you’. Return to India involved being
subjected to the disciplinary gaze both of parents and the wider society. Hence, a new round
of intergenerational negotiation had to take place for daughters, as the following case
illustrates. Neha had completed a one-year master’s degree in London and stayed on to do an
internship in a marketing firm, during which time she applied for jobs in multinational firms.
She was offered a job in Delhi, her home city, and so decided to return to live with her
parents. Upon her return, she found that her parents’ expectations did not match her own. She
felt that she had grown and matured during her time abroad, but her parents’ attitude towards
her remained the same.

Initially it was difficult… When I came back here, the basic set-up was sort of stuck
on how it was when I left one and half years back. I had changed, but nothing else had
changed. I still had to inform them where I was going.

From this extract we can see how the matrix of intelligibility or understanding between Neha
and her parents changed. She constructs her parents’ home as a place where she can no longer
easily slot into family life; her ‘familiar’ place of home becomes ‘unfamiliar’ and she locates
her parents within the unintelligible matrix. What followed was a period of learning and
adjustment, on both sides.
Initially it took a bit of time to get used to it [living back with her parents]. So then I realised I had to get into this phase of family life. And it worked well in the end because my parents adjusted a bit and I did too, so there was a bridge.

Parental pressure was, however, not only experienced by returned women; some males felt constrained too. Ketan, who had also done a one-year programme in the UK and then returned to India, said:

It’s different, you know. There, I didn’t have to ask permission: I just went out… you would just go out with friends and see how the night goes. Here, they [parents] ask: Where are you going? Why? For how long? When are you coming back? So many questions!

In the wider social space of Delhi, gendered differences in degrees of freedom to move around the city away from parental and other surveillance were clearly apparent. Many respondents, especially daughters from well-off families, lived in gated communities and had no access to the wider city or walking around without the help of the family’s driver. For men, freedom to roam the city was more easily accessed, usually through possession of a small motor-bike which enabled them to go out and meet friends in cafes and eating-places.

Alcohol often featured in these contrastive accounts of student life abroad and family-centred life in India. Pooja, who had evidently enjoyed her student days in London, talked first about the contrast in drinking cultures, and then about her lack of access to casual mobility in Delhi:
If you come home staggering, they [parents] will say: what is wrong with you? People judge you here… They criticise you… Why do you drink? You’ve done so many shots, so many drinks. Why are you staying out late? Girls don’t do that!

[…]

London’s my second home. Give me a ticket to London and I’ll run there right now. I really miss it. I miss walking, I miss the winter, I miss wearing my coat and going for a walk… Certain things you can’t do here [in Delhi]; such as, you can’t walk on the road… And you can’t be out late at night.

Like other returnee women, Pooja felt that she was forced to act in the way expected of young women of the Indian upper-middle classes. True, the ‘new’ highly educated Indian woman values university education and a ‘modern’ outlook, but she must also maintain a sense of decorum and respectability. Drinking, smoking and dancing – some or all of which may have been practised abroad – do not fit into the hegemonic construction of urban middle-class femininity (Radhakrishnan 2009).

**Conclusion**

This paper has analysed international student migration as a gendered process. Using a mixed-method and multi-sited research design comprising an online survey of Indian study-abroad students and in-depth interviews with Indian students in Toronto and with parents and returned students in New Delhi, we have provided answers to three main research questions.

First, in terms of the characteristics and motivations of the students responding to the survey, we found few gender-differences in their reasons for studying abroad, but a clear difference in socio-economic background. Male students came from a wider socio-economic spectrum – significantly fewer had university-educated parents than the female respondents.
The in-depth interviews nuanced these differences and shed light on the often difficult intra-family discussions that take place prior to study abroad. Particularly for postgraduate study, winning a grant or scholarship gives the students increased leverage in these negotiations with parents, changing their ‘social location’ within the family.

Evidence to illuminate the second research question – about gendered experiences whilst studying abroad – came from in-depth interviews supplemented by participant observation in Toronto. Both genders faced challenges in performing their ‘Indian’ masculinities and femininities within the academic and social spaces of Canadian universities. Although some students were able to ‘adapt’ better than others, many were turned back into their Indian friendship groups as a result of finding their behaviour, and the expected behavioural norms of the hegemonic ‘white’ Canadian society, mutually unintelligible. These findings evidence the theoretical purchase of concepts such as ‘performing gender’ (Butler 1990), ‘matrix of intelligibility’ (Butler 1993) and ‘strange’ or ‘out-of-place’ bodies (Ahmed 2000).

Our third research question was about students’ return to India as a gendered process. Most men considered return home as permanent, whereas most women were hesitant about going back, and those who had returned were unsettled and thinking of further moves abroad. This contrast was explained by reference to two structural forces, the Indian labour market and parental care obligations, both explicable within a ‘gendered geographies of power’ framework. The Indian labour market still poses obstacles to graduate women aiming at a professional career, especially in traditional ‘male’ preserves such as science, engineering, business and academia. Secondly, the Indian patrifocal family regime requires the son (and his wife) to care for his parents in their old age. Hence in interviews with parents, those with sons abroad expressed a stronger sense of loss and of longing for their return to follow the
prescribed path. This does not mean that female students feel ‘detached’ from their parents, and in families with no sons, care duties would fall to the daughter.

Further intersections between gender and mobility emerged when we examined post-return lives in New Delhi, where the spatial organisation of this sprawling yet segmented city creates a mosaic of gendered spaces of (im)mobility for men and women subjected to the variable surveillance exercised by the parental household. Other things being equal, those subject to the strictest control were returned females who were financially dependent on their parents and who were looking for a job and/or waiting to get married. Returnee men had greater access to mobility throughout those areas of the city where they wanted to circulate. Gender therefore becomes a significant marker of inequality as regards mobility post-return (Cresswell and Uteng 2008).

Lastly, the diversity in the students’ experiences across the three time-space locations reveals the importance of temporal dimensions over the life-course. For instance, the experiences of Prita (in Canada) and Pooja (returned to India) reveal two different gender performances which in turn reflect their respective ages, levels of education, and accumulated experiences before, during and (for Pooja) after studying abroad. Location can be important at multiple levels: not only the difference between, say, Toronto (Prita) and London (Pooja), but also in terms of living space – a campus-based student dormitory versus a shared flat out in the city.

We conclude with two recommendations for further research. The first is predictable: a plea for more gendered analyses of student mobility/migration. Especially where students move between countries with different regimes of gender power relations, the encounters that take place are likely to be, to a greater or lesser extent, ‘strange’ rather than ‘familiar’ (Ahmed 2000). Second, we advance the potential of the GGP model for further analyses of shifting gendered subjectivities in migration studies. It appeals to us as an attractive general
framework and one to which researchers can add other concepts for more specific and in-depth analysis.

Notes

1 Of course, the concept of the researcher’s positionality as an ‘insider’ can never be absolute; it shifts over time and is subject to negotiation, not least because of the researcher’s role as a researcher (see Bilecen 2014; Carling et al. 2014).

2 These statements cover the main rationales for study abroad, according to previous research (Findlay and King 2010; Findlay et al. 2006).

3 It is worth noting that the response figures for the first four factors on Table 4 are remarkably similar to those for UK students studying abroad (Findlay and King 2010: 27), indicating the existence of shared values and motivations for university students in different countries.

4 This is not a reaction limited to female students who traverse international cultural boundaries of young-adult sexual behavioural norms. Young male students from ‘sexually conservative’ countries have expressed and experienced similar dissonance when faced with a social environment where having extra-marital sex and/or multiple sexual partners was not only accepted but encouraged – for example Baas (2012); Collins (2010).

References


### Table 1 Indian students abroad by study programme and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme of study</th>
<th>Males (n=87)</th>
<th>Females (n=70)</th>
<th>Total (n=157)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business studies</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social sciences and humanities</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEM subjects</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ survey; \(X^2\) (df2) = 14.3667, \(p = 0.001, <0.01\)

### Table 2 Indian study-abroad students by gender and parents’ education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University education</th>
<th>Males (n=87)</th>
<th>Females (n=70)</th>
<th>Total (n=157)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother only</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father only</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ survey; \(X^2\) (df3) = 14.5224, \(p = 0.002, <0.01\)

### Table 3 Indian study-abroad students by gender and mother’s education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother’s education</th>
<th>Males (n=87)</th>
<th>Females (n=70)</th>
<th>Total (n=157)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University-educated</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not university-educated</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ survey; \(X^2\) (df1) = 13.0282, \(p = 0.0003, <0.01\)
Table 4 Online survey respondents’ rating of study-abroad decision factors (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision-making</th>
<th>‘Very important’</th>
<th>‘Very’ and ‘somewhat important’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was determined to attend a world-class university</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want an international career and this was the first step towards it</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I saw study outside India as an opportunity for a unique adventure</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My family was very keen for me to study abroad</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I saw study outside India as a first step towards living abroad after graduating</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ survey. Mann-Whitney two-sample tests were run for each of the five factors, both for ‘very important’ and for ‘very and somewhat important’, and none were significant.