

1 Gendering International Student Migration: An Indian Case-Study

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3 **Abstract**

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

17
18 **Keywords:** international student migration, Indian students abroad, gendered geographies of
19 power, embodiment, performativity, return migration

21 **Introduction**

22 Although there is plenty of evidence that gender has been increasingly 'mainstreamed' into
23 migration research (see Lutz 2010; Mahler and Pessar 2006), this is not the case with
24 international student migration/mobility (ISM). This lacuna is confirmed by a recent
25 bibliographic survey of ISM (Riaño and Piguet 2016) which cites only two 'gender'

26 references (Geddie 2013; Holloway et al. 2012), to which we add two more (Martin 2014;
27 Salisbury et al. 2010). In this paper, we contribute to remedying this deficit, based on a
28 mixed-method study of the motivations and experiences of Indian students studying in
29 ‘Western’ universities. Our paper also speaks to the theme of this special issue – international
30 academic mobility and inequalities – by focusing on the *gendered differences* in Indian
31 student mobility abroad. Note that, in contradistinction to Bilecen and Van Mol (2017), we
32 prefer the term ‘differences’ to ‘inequalities’, in view of the value-judgements implicit in the
33 latter. Whilst the embedded patrilocality of Indian families does imply gendered inequalities
34 in the treatment of, and opportunities for, student-age sons and daughters, in other respects
35 the gendered experiences of study-abroad and return are more subtle, and hence require a
36 more nuanced interpretation.

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

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

48

49 **The Indian context**

50 The second biggest source country for international students after China, Indian students
51 abroad (217,000 in 2012; UNESCO 2014) were overwhelmingly concentrated in Anglophone
52 countries: USA (44.7%), UK (17.4%), Canada (6.5%), Australia (5.4%) and New Zealand
53 (4.4%). This distribution indicates a powerful postcolonial legacy of the British Empire
54 (Madge et al. 2009).

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

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

73 In the archetypal middle-class Indian family, boys are groomed to be breadwinners
74 and future household heads. They are strongly expected to get married, have children and

75 take care (or have their wives take care) of their ageing parents (Chopra 2005). Girls, by
76 contrast, are prepared for motherhood and household management, and are spatially confined
77 within the private sphere of the parental household.

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

87

88 **Theoretical underpinnings**

89 These remarks about Indian family structures and gendered decisions about student
90 (im)mobility fit into the wider analytical frame of the *gendered geographies of power*
91 advanced by Mahler and Pessar (2001), which is the main theoretical setting for this paper.
92 The gendered geographies of power (GGP) framework built on earlier important work in the
93 1980s and 1990s which brought in women as subjects of migration research. Hondagneu-
94 Sotelo (1994: 3) urged migration scholars to examine ‘how gender relations facilitate both
95 women’s *and* men’s migration and settlement’ (emphasis in original). Donato et al. (2006)
96 stressed the importance of viewing the entire migration process as a deeply gendered
97 phenomenon, in which it is not just that women and men migrate for different reasons and are
98 subject to different structures, constraints and opportunities, but that male and female
99 migrants are constructed as highly *relational* to each other. This relationality shows that

100 gender patterns prior to migration shape the patterns and processes of migration, as well as
101 the other side of the coin – that migration, including return migration, can play a fundamental
102 role in reshaping the ‘social orders, geographies of inequality, spatialized subjectivities and
103 the meanings of difference across multiple scales’ (Silvey 2004: 491).

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

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

116 The final element is *social location*, which situates migrants in different hierarchies
117 of power and inequality as they traverse one location to another, across international borders
118 and between different societies. In an interesting self-reflexive narrative, Ghosh (in Ghosh
119 and Wang 2003) reveals that before she left India to study abroad, her social location was on
120 the lower rung of the family hierarchy – in accordance with the Indian patrifocal system.
121 However, when she returned home, she found that people, both within and outside the family,
122 paid more attention to what she said, sought her advice, and asked her about her experiences
123 abroad. Going abroad and returning improved her standing in the family hierarchy.

124 Intersectionality also underpins this analytical framework. The concept of
125 intersectionality is used to theorise the relationships of power between different social
126 locations: gender, ‘race’, sexuality, age, and so on. Recent (re)interpretations of
127 intersectionality envision intersections of identities in terms of *performativities*: ‘a more fluid
128 coming together in which positions, identities and differences are made and unmade, claimed
129 and rejected’ (Valentine 2007: 14). The appeal of GGP to the present study is that it allows
130 the exploration of gendered power relations and ‘performances’ of gender in and across
131 multiple scales and sites. Thus far, however, the GGP framework has been little used in
132 empirical studies of migration (but see McIlwaine 2010), and not at all in studies of
133 international student migration.

134 Our focus on performances of gender, identity, friendship and family takes
135 inspiration from Judith Butler’s two landmark books – *Gender Troubles* (1990) and *Bodies*
136 *that Matter* (1993). According to Butler (1990: 140), gender ‘is not a fact’ but ‘an act, a
137 performance’. Put differently, ‘there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender;
138 [it] is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’
139 (1990: 25). However, the ‘performative act’ of gender is not merely about repetition or
140 routine; it reflects deeper cultural structures and ontologies, including ‘the regulatory
141 practices of gender coherence’ that pertain to a particular culture or social formation (1990:
142 24). Its situationality unveils fragments of a partially hidden habitus, and also reflects the
143 constitutive conventions and historical meta-narratives of culture, ethnicity and class which
144 appear as externally fixed.

145 Closely linked to this emphasis on the performativity of gender are two further
146 crucial notions which inform our epistemological approach in this paper. As an *embodied*
147 performance, gender is considered by Butler (1990: 139) ‘*a corporeal style*’ (her emphasis),
148 but as Indian student bodies traverse different spaces and cultures they encounter different

149 meanings and behavioural practices of masculinities and femininities. The bodies which
150 match the gendered and racialised standard of the place in question become the *subjects* and
151 those which do not, mutually constitute the *object* of that space (Ahmed 2000: 3). As we shall
152 see, the gendered and embodied experiences of Indian students abroad can lead to ‘strange
153 encounters’ in which bodies are seen, and felt, as either ‘in’ or ‘out of’ place – although these
154 positionalities are always fluid and subject to negotiation. Butler (1993: 3) refers to this in
155 terms of *matrices of intelligibility*: the creation of an exclusionary matrix within which the
156 ‘subjects’ are accepted and understood, but which ‘requires the simultaneous production of a
157 domain of object beings... who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject’.

158

159 **Methods**

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

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

172 In order to qualify for the survey, respondents had to self-identify as ‘Indian’ and to
173 be either currently studying at a university or other higher education institute abroad, or have

174 recently completed (within the past five years) foreign study (and resident either abroad or
175 back in India). Respondents answered from many countries, but mainly from the UK, USA
176 and Canada, as well as ‘returnees’ in India (29% of the total). Australia, where it is known
177 that there are many Indian students (Baas 2012), was under-represented, due to the networks
178 of contacts utilised for distributing the survey. We cannot claim that the survey results are
179 statistically representative; hence they should be interpreted with care.

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

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

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

197 Most interviews in Toronto took place in neutral locations in and close to the
198 university campuses, such as empty offices, quiet corners of public spaces and cafes.

199 Although the topics of the interview were similar to those on the questionnaire, the main
200 purpose of the interview was to explore in more detail the students' experiences of study and
201 social life in Canada. For the qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts, partial use was
202 made of NVIVO software, but greater reliance was eventually put on carefully selected case-
203 histories, chosen to represent broader themes emerging from the narrative material.

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

211 Fieldwork in New Delhi involved collecting interviews from two additional groups:
212 students who had studied abroad and who had recently returned to live and work in India (21,
213 11 women, 10 men); and 22 parents of students currently studying abroad. Again, most
214 interviews lasted around an hour, but some were much longer – for instance the interviews
215 with parents in their homes turned into more extended social occasions with refreshments
216 offered. We feel that the parents' perspectives bring unique insights into the gendering of
217 Indian ISM. For the returnee student interviews, the questions related to time spent abroad,
218 the return decision and post-return experiences.

219 In sum, this paper is based on 65 interviews and 157 questionnaire responses, and
220 focuses on those findings which shed light on the *gendered experiences* of Indian students,
221 drawing on selected parts of the online survey, as well as illustrative examples from the
222 Toronto and New Delhi fieldwork.

223

224 **Students' backgrounds and the decision to study abroad**

225 From the online survey, we observe a slight male majority (55%). The mean age at the time
226 of the survey was 27, equal for men and women. The most common level of study was
227 master's (45% overall), followed by bachelor's (19%) and PhD (16%). Some small
228 differences can be noted: males were more likely than females to be master's students, 48%
229 vs 41%; and females were more likely to be doing a PhD, 19% vs 13%. Contrasts are more
230 evident in the subject-field of the programme: 56% of males were studying STEM subjects
231 (31% females), whereas 50% of females were studying social sciences, media and humanities
232 programmes (23% males). Table 1 presents these results. These proportions are not
233 unexpected; they reflect third-level gendered patterns of study in Indian higher education as
234 well as globally.

235 When we turn to parental background, an interesting difference arises (see Table 2).
236 Significantly more female study-abroad students had highly educated parents than males,
237 whose parents were of more diverse educational backgrounds. Some 54% of male
238 respondents have mothers who are university-educated, and 75% have fathers with university
239 education. By contrast, 80% of female respondents have university-educated mothers, and
240 78% have university-educated fathers. Males were much more likely to have neither parent
241 university-educated.

242 Referring to one of the key constructs of the 'gendered geographies of power'
243 model, the differing status of parental education places males and females in different *social*
244 *locations*. Women who study abroad are more likely to have university-educated parents, and
245 especially graduate *mothers*, than men (Table 3). This finding resonates with research in
246 other contexts, for instance Hong Kong students in Canada (Waters 2006) and UK Erasmus
247 students doing a year abroad in Europe (Findlay et al. 2006). Looked at from a different
248 angle, the data suggest that men are less likely to be put in a 'social-location' position of

249 disadvantage for study abroad by virtue of their parents' lack of higher education. Having
250 said that, it is clear that the majority of respondents come from broadly middle- and upper-
251 class backgrounds.

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

256 More interesting than the gender contrasts, therefore, are the gradations of
257 importance attached to the five factors. The first three are pre-eminent, the last two much less
258 so. The desire to attend a so-called 'world-class' university and the idea of study abroad as a
259 step towards an 'international career' are, we would argue, closely linked. The third factor,
260 study-abroad as a 'unique adventure', is seen as 'very important' by 44%, but this rises to
261 84% when 'somewhat important' is added, suggesting that this is seen more as an ancillary
262 rather than a primary factor for choosing to study abroad.³

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

267

268 **Negotiating decisions across gender and generation**

269 Data from the survey revealed few differences between male and female students in their
270 decision-making processes to go abroad beyond a wider range of social backgrounds of the
271 men. However, interview insights from the students and their parents probe the often difficult
272 and protracted negotiations that took place between sons/daughters and their parents in order
273 to get permission to go, and thereby help to explain the gender-muted survey result. The main

274 axis of gender differentiation around which these discussions turn is the contrast between
275 family expectations of sons versus daughters.

276 Our earlier description of the typical Indian patrifocal family system revealed how
277 gendered geographies of power and control are imbricated in Indian middle-class family life;
278 a son or daughter moving away from home is seen by parents as a loss of the power of
279 control. We found that some parents, usually the most highly educated, accept this with an air
280 of inevitability; for others, there remains a general resistance to the idea of studying away
281 from home.

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

294 Upon completing his Master's at a university in New Delhi, Nitin spoke of feeling
295 pressured by his parents to get a job, so that he then could get married. But he had other ideas
296 – about doing a social-science PhD abroad. This would only be feasible if he could secure
297 funding, which he did on the third application, although he felt frustrated by his parents' lack
298 of moral support.

299

300 Well they were not very eager about my doing a PhD at all... especially in social
301 science. Maybe they were happy because I was happy, not because they were happy
302 about it... They don't see any future [laughs]. There is a sort of uncertainty in their
303 mind regarding my future – job, marriage, things like that... they don't see anything
304 of that happening with me doing a PhD for five years.

305

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

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

319 In the early part of his interview, Kailash, who was a leading spokesperson for his
320 residential community on the outskirts of Delhi and a professional social worker, talked of his
321 initial displeasure at his daughter's determination to do research abroad. But then his friends
322 and local community members made him realise that he was doing his daughter a disservice.
323 He recalled a conversation he had with one of his closest friends:

324

325 My friend said, ‘Kailash, if you don’t let your daughter go, then I say to you, give
326 me your daughter, I will make sure she goes to study abroad’.

327

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

331

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

338

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

345

346 **Gendered spaces of socialisation abroad**

347 Study abroad is an academic and social arena in which Indian international students talk
348 about their gender-differentiated outcomes in their everyday lives in Toronto. We pay

349 particular attention here to the *gender performances* of Indian students and their evolving
350 *gender identities*. We mobilise Butler's (1990: 17; 1993: 7) concept of *matrix of intelligibility*
351 for its potential to construct a coherent gender identity discourse, which varies across space
352 and time as regards what is 'acceptable' or 'expected', and what is not. The somewhat
353 parallel notion of *bodies in, and out of, place* (Ahmed 2000: 39) physicalises the
354 'strangeness' of 'different' bodies, which are then 'othered' and seen to both look and behave
355 in a way which is not consonant with the dominant set of performative norms.

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

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

368

369 I really liked the theatre side... [but] in the theatre club all my friends were from
370 here [i.e. 'white' Canadians]. There were no brown people; I was the only brown
371 girl. So it was really hard... this culture... different, [...] I was brought up a secluded
372 Indian girl and they were more open and outgoing... So it was really different in that
373 way... Here, when they are 19 or 20, they are always going out drinking and

374 partying, crazy and wild... and all these things were new to me... I didn't really
375 want to get into those things.

376

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

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

390

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

396

397 Prita was interviewed several times during the course of the Toronto fieldwork, and
398 observations and discussions with her over this extended period confirmed that her choice not

399 to become sexually active was felt by her not to make sense to the theatre crowd. By contrast,
400 this choice was intelligible to her Indian friends, including the men she spent time with, who
401 perfectly understood her behavioural boundaries. Prita's case can be considered as a counter-
402 hegemonic narrative to the sexual liberation of student-migrants when they move to a
403 'Western' country with liberal views on sexuality (Ahmadi 2003).

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

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

416

417 I think that [in India] there is a level of physical contact [between male friends],
418 but... here [in Canada] you have to be careful of that. You also have to be careful
419 what you say – that you wouldn't call someone fat or something like that... I think
420 that all of us [in India] used to hug each other, fool around with each other... it was
421 a typical kind of young [male] thing. We weren't really aware that our physical
422 contact might be considered... might be gay.

423

424 With these words Mayank (who, incidentally, was living with his Indian girlfriend in Toronto
425 – unknown to both sets of parents) lamented the loss of the easy and relaxed physicality
426 shared amongst his male friends in Mumbai, where being friends involved giving each other
427 hugs, holding each other’s hands and arms, and, to use his word, ‘roughhousing’ (‘horse-
428 play’). These actions were well within the standard performance of Indian masculinity but lay
429 beyond the matrix of intelligibility of Canadian heterosexual male friendship.

430

431 **Gendering return and post-return**

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

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

445 For most women interviewed, however, return was experienced or imagined as part of
446 a migration trajectory still to be continued. Most were under some sort of pressure to return –
447 due to the completion of their studies and visa expiry, or the desire/obligation to be close to

448 their parents, or because of job prospects – but in general they lamented their need to return,
449 and looked forward to ways that would lead them to jobs and lives outside of India.

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

469 The case of Nitin illustrates the basic dichotomy of being 'out of place' abroad and
470 looking forward to being 'in place' upon return home. We spoke earlier about Nitin's
471 negotiations with his parents about studying abroad. Here we pick up his story towards the
472 end of his five-year stay in Toronto, studying for a PhD and working as a teaching assistant.

473 Despite the length of time spent in Canada (four years at the time of the interview), Nitin said
474 he felt ‘out of place here’ and talked at length of his frustration in not ‘connecting’ with the
475 local students he taught classes to: ‘I don’t get their jokes... and they don’t get my references,
476 for example I can’t make references to cricket’. By contrast, ‘I can talk to my Indian friends
477 and they understand’. Nitin’s circle of friends in Toronto was small, and limited to other
478 Indians. Like Mayank, quoted earlier, Nitin found it challenging to navigate different social
479 constructions of masculinity and male friendship, and was anticipating a return to the familiar
480 practices of ‘home’ where the ‘intelligible matrix’ of male friendship would make him feel
481 more comfortable in performing a more homosocial masculinity. But for Nitin, there is a final
482 twist to his story. His strongly expressed desire to return to his family and friends has to
483 confront the reality that they are located in different places. His parents are in Kerala, waiting
484 for him to come home, get married and start a family. But his friends are from his earlier
485 university years in Delhi, 2000km from his parents’ home, or they are scattered in many
486 places since many of them, too, have moved since graduation. Where, and what, then, is
487 home for Nitin?

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

492 Toronto-based PhD student Arpita works in a science discipline and fears that if she
493 returned to India she would be held back in her research path because the field is dominated
494 by men. At the same time, her mother, who lives alone in Kolkata, has multiple health
495 problems and limited support locally. But Arpita survives on a PhD scholarship which leaves
496 no room for savings or expensive flight tickets. Arpita has limited options: stay in Canada, try
497 to arrange long-distance support for her mother, but be consumed by guilt; or return to India,

498 put her studies on hold and jeopardise her long-term career prospects. Arpita's case reveals
499 how the migration of one or more people changes the ways of 'doing family' when family
500 relations and duties are stretched between far-distant places, posing difficult challenges for
501 the administration of intergenerational care (Raghuram 2012).

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

513

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

517

518 From this extract we can see how the matrix of intelligibility or understanding between Neha
519 and her parents changed. She constructs her parents' home as a place where she can no longer
520 easily slot into family life; her 'familiar' place of home becomes 'unfamiliar' and she locates
521 her parents within the unintelligible matrix. What followed was a period of learning and
522 adjustment, on both sides.

523

524 Initially it took a bit of time to get used to it [living back with her parents]. So then I
525 realised I had to get into this phase of family life. And it worked well in the end
526 because my parents adjusted a bit and I did too, so there was a bridge.

527

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

531

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

536

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

543 Alcohol often featured in these contrastive accounts of student life abroad and family-
544 centred life in India. Pooja, who had evidently enjoyed her student days in London, talked
545 first about the contrast in drinking cultures, and then about her lack of access to casual
546 mobility in Delhi:

547

548 If you come home staggering, they [parents] will say: what is wrong with you? People
549 judge you here... They criticise you... Why do you drink? You've done so many
550 shots, so many drinks. Why are you staying out late? Girls don't do that!

551 [...]

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

556

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

563

564 **Conclusion**

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

569 First, in terms of the characteristics and motivations of the students responding to the
570 survey, we found few gender-differences in their reasons for studying abroad, but a clear
571 difference in socio-economic background. Male students came from a wider socio-economic
572 spectrum – significantly fewer had university-educated parents than the female respondents.

573 The in-depth interviews nuanced these differences and shed light on the often difficult intra-
574 family discussions that take place prior to study abroad. Particularly for postgraduate study,
575 winning a grant or scholarship gives the students increased leverage in these negotiations
576 with parents, changing their ‘social location’ within the family.

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

587 Our third research question was about students’ return to India as a gendered process.
588 Most men considered return home as permanent, whereas most women were hesitant about
589 going back, and those who had returned were unsettled and thinking of further moves abroad.
590 This contrast was explained by reference to two structural forces, the Indian labour market
591 and parental care obligations, both explicable within a ‘gendered geographies of power’
592 framework. The Indian labour market still poses obstacles to graduate women aiming at a
593 professional career, especially in traditional ‘male’ preserves such as science, engineering,
594 business and academia. Secondly, the Indian patrifocal family regime requires the son (and
595 his wife) to care for his parents in their old age. Hence in interviews with parents, those with
596 sons abroad expressed a stronger sense of loss and of longing for their return to follow the

597 prescribed path. This does not mean that female students feel ‘detached’ from their parents,
598 and in families with no sons, care duties would fall to the daughter.

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

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

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

622 framework and one to which researchers can add other concepts for more specific and in-
623 depth analysis.

624

625

626 **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).

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Table 1 Indian students abroad by study programme and gender

Programme of study	Males (n=87)	Females (n=70)	Total (n=157)
Business studies	18	12	30
Social sciences and humanities	20	35	55
STEM subjects	49	22	71

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

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

University education	Males (n=87)	Females (n=70)	Total (n=157)
Both parents	45	51	96
Mother only	2	6	8
Father only	20	5	25
Neither	20	8	28

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

Mother's education	Males (n=87)	Females (n=70)	Total (n=157)
University-educated	47	57	104
Not university-educated	40	13	53

Source: Authors' survey; X^2 (df1) = 13.0282, $p = 0.0003$, <0.01

Table 4 Online survey respondents' rating of study-abroad decision factors (%)

Decision-making factors	'Very important'			'Very' and 'somewhat important'		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
I was determined to attend a world-class university	58	58	58	82	82	82
I want an international career and this was the first step towards it	58	54	56	74	74	74
I saw study outside India as an opportunity for a unique adventure	47	40	44	84	84	84
My family was very keen for me to study abroad	15	13	14	31	30	31
I saw study outside India as a first step towards living abroad after graduating	22	18	20	43	33	38

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.