

# Students, Migrants or Citizens: the Violence of Liminal Spaces

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Half a decade ago, after a spate of violent incidents in 2009 and 2010, where Indian students had been assaulted and robbed and one student, Nitin Garg, had been murdered, Indian students and taxi drivers held a big rally in Melbourne which made front-page news in India. The rally followed a number of demonstrations calling for greater police action and protection. The attacks had already attracted condemnation in the Indian media; for example, the influential Indian news magazine, *Outlook*, ran a cover story titled 'Why the Aussies hate us' (*Outlook*, 2010), concluding that Australia needed to examine its racial biases and the hangovers from the White Australia policy.

This violence happened in the context of a massive growth in education exports. In 2009, Australia was host to more than 630,000 international students worth approximately \$17 billion to the Australian economy (Marginson, 2010). Students from Asia and India were the largest educational consumers and more than 90,000 Indian students resided in Australia with almost half living in Victoria. While some of these students were from wealthy backgrounds, others were exploited by unscrupulous employers, landlords and vocational education providers, living in squalid, crowded conditions and working in illegal jobs that paid below minimum wage to survive. The fact that the completion of some vocational degrees made it easier to apply for permanent residence visas led to public consternation and calls to regulate the VET sector.

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Almost 1450 Indians were reported as victims of crime during 2007-2008 in Victoria (Overland, 2010). The feeling in India, expressed by wide coverage in the Indian media, was that these attacks were due to racial prejudice. The police force in Victoria and the State government, on the other hand, claimed that most attacks were opportunistic; an opinion supported, to some extent, by a report written in 2011 by the Australian Institute of Criminology which concluded that the location of the victims was statistically more important than their ethnicity but went on to comment:

International students in the main are a particularly vulnerable group due to a range of factors including demographic characteristics and a lack of economic security together with relatively limited options of employment, housing and transport. The types of employment, areas of residence and evening activities (including both shift work and use of public transport) are specific areas of risk for international students that appear to explain some of the incidence of robbery for Indian students, in particular (Larsen et al 2011, p. xvi)

Indian students meanwhile complained that police lacked sympathy for victims and did not take their reports seriously. Some claimed that officers refused to lodge reports of criminal incidents; in May 2009 the Deputy Police Commissioner of Victoria said that Indian students were soft targets because they were passive, travelled alone late at night and carried expensive gadgets (Johnston et al, 2009). He also advised Indian students not to talk loudly in their own languages in public places (The Age, 2009). Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan responded by turning down an honorary doctorate from Queensland University of Technology in June 2009 saying: 'My conscience does not permit me to accept this decoration from a country that perpetrates such indignity to my fellow countrymen' (Doherty 2009).

The cases cited above show that global trade, in intangibles such as education, raise numerous legal and human ramifications. Simon Marginson points out that as globally mobile people, international students fall between two national jurisdictions. They cannot gain access to citizen protections and entitlements while away from home, but they lack the rights of citizens in Australia (2010). International students are taxpayers and consumers but they are not citizens, migrants or, frequently, even legal workers in the country in which they study. Their fluid and liminal status, without access to most of the human, legal, civil, industrial, political and educational rights available to citizens of their host countries, makes them peculiarly vulnerable to economic and racial exploitation. As Gail Mason argues, the

reluctance, and in some cases complete refusal, of many Australian institutions and politicians to directly acknowledge that prejudice is a factor in *some* of the violence that is experienced by Indian students ‘dismisses India’s very real concern that its citizens are good for making curry, driving taxis, paying fees, serving at petrol stations or running late night convenience stores but not good enough – or important enough – to command us to acknowledge that cultural intolerance and chauvinism do exist in this country’ (Mason, 2010).

The articles in this issue of the *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal* deal with these issues from various perspectives. Amit DasGupta, Consul-General of India in Sydney at this time, was one of the key players in defusing potential violence in the suburb of Harris Park where many Indian students lived. His paper is a fascinating account demonstrating that genuine conflict resolution must include the widest range of stakeholders in a community. Shanthi Robertson situates the so-called Indian student ‘crisis’ as a case study of the local consequences of various global and regional processes including the commercialization of international education and its interlinking with labour migration; the marketization of citizenship; and the cultural imaginaries of class and mobility flowing between India and Australia. Heather Goodall’s paper uses evidence from rural Australia to argue that, despite the specific urban focus of the political concerns around the attacks, students enrolled in regional universities who work as casual and contract labourers in rural areas, are also subjected to exploitation via long term structural vulnerabilities, particularly where recruitment is racialized. Michiel Baas’s article draws on over a thousand media reports of that period to shed light on the position of Indian students in the wider debate on skilled migration, multiculturalism and the ongoing commercialization of higher education in Australia and the role of academics, journalists and others in the ‘othering’ of Indian students. Jakubowicz and Monani consider the policy implications of considering international students as rights bearing bodies, thereby extending the humanist compact from national citizens to include a category of non-citizens who contribute to Australian society economically and socially. Together they provide a fascinating picture of a controversial and troubled period for both Australia and India.

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