

PERSPECTIVES

**AFTER THE PERFECT STORM:
INDIAN STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA**

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After the perfect storm: Indian students in Australia

Janaki Bahadur

It was a perfect media and foreign affairs storm. The scandal of attacks on defenceless Indian students Down Under made international headlines in mid-2009. At first glance, the crisis seemed to trash Australia's reputation as a safe place where aspirational and middle-class Asian parents could send their children to pursue their studies. In the process it imperilled a multi-billion dollar Australian industry in the midst of an economic downturn when every export dollar was needed.

But as the months go by, the complexities of what really happened – and what it means – are starting to emerge. With Australia's Foreign Minister Stephen Smith to visit India in mid-October, and a visit by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd likely before long, it is timely to take stock and look beyond the storm – including at what good it might accidentally have achieved.

Any attack on an Indian student anywhere in Australia continues to be found newsworthy in India, and more often than not depicted as involving racial motives. Such incidents and coverage undermine the assurances given by the Australian Government to India's External Affairs Minister SM Krishna that 'firm action' would be taken to stop such incidents.

The initial hysteria which led to street protests on both sides of the Indian Ocean may have receded. But unfortunately much of the Indian media appears to have made up its mind about Australia. This means that high-level visits to India, such as those in September by various senior Australian Commonwealth ministers and Victorian Premier John Brumby, could do as much to raise scepticism as to assuage hard feeling.

Certainly there are many informed Indians who do not take the media claims too seriously. These people realise that Australia is still a friendly, welcoming place. They will say that India's 24-hour news channels simply have to have a sensational story.

But the power and pervasiveness of the Indian media cannot be lightly dismissed. The last 10 years have witnessed the establishment of 300 cable channels, including at least 30 news channels broadcasting in almost all of India's 22 official languages, and all in savage competition with each other. And the frenzy of India's media growth is only going to get bigger. Television is expected to grow from an A\$3.7 billion industry in 2006 to one worth A\$10.8 billion in 2010. And this in the midst of an economic slowdown. Meanwhile, newspapers sell 90 million copies a day, across 12 languages.

Much of the world first noticed the Indian media's astonishing growth during last November's terror attacks at the Taj hotel in Mumbai. Amid images of the smoking cupolas of the luxury hotel, viewers were barraged by the profusion of cameras, microphones and journalists all looking for an exclusive angle – most from the Indian media.

As for Australia, it got a taste of the power of the Indian media in 2007, with the case of the wrongful detention of Indian doctor Mohammed Haneef on terrorism-related charges. That case was given 24x7 coverage, with some reporters keeping vigil at Haneef's Bangalore residence – telling viewers who came in, who went out and even what food was being eaten there. The reports put pressure on Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to lobby Australia to ensure that Haneef received fair treatment.

Canberra ought to have seen the warning signs then. Some of the more scrupulous migration agents had been informing both the media and government about the problems looming for the droves of Indian vocational students coming to Australia. Governments were beginning to notice. But maybe the problem was just too hard. And the money was good. Whatever the reason, nobody rocked the boat enough to prevent what happened next.

The storm broke in May and June 2009, with stories of bashings, a stabbing with a screwdriver and torching of cars by alleged 'racist Australians'. The degree of anger among many Indian students suggested a more deep-seated problem, and a story that the Australian media had been ignoring.

The network that focused most on the unfolding events was Times Now, the most watched English-language news channel in India, and an institution more in the vein of Fox News than CNN. Times Now has triumphed over its competitors by pursuing stories with a nationalistic angle, especially those involving discrimination against Non-Resident Indians living in the West. The network's *raison d'être* evokes the Hindu nationalist war cry of the 1990s which influenced, among other things, the decision of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party to test

nuclear weapons. We are proud Indians, and we are not going to be pushed around anymore, was the message.

In that context, Times Now's coverage was predictably one-sided: Indians were the victims and Australian racists were the perpetrators. It was the young lawyer Mohandas K Gandhi being thrown off a train in apartheid South Africa all over again. The White Australia policy was dragged out of the history books. Australia was depicted as a dangerous place for people of colour.

Times Now ran a prominent link on its website titled 'Racism Beyond Shame'. Meanwhile more credible news institutions such as *The Economic Times* newspaper repeatedly described Australia with headings like 'Land of Racism'. The London-style tabloid *Mail Today* went even further with its creativity, using headlines like 'Aussie Gangs Spew Racist Venom' and then, for want of proof, referring to the fictitious skinhead gang in the early Russell Crowe movie *Romper Stomper*.

That the evidence of racial motivation in most attacks was thin on the ground never bothered India's media barracuda. Never let the facts get in the way of a good headline, as all hacks know. As a practising journalist commissioned to write stories about the issue for both Indian and American media, I can attest to this. My American editors treated the story with balance and sobriety. My Indian editors' handling of the story tended to amplify outrage against Australia.

According to Nalin Mehta, an expert on India's new media and graduate of La Trobe University in Melbourne:

This was a story that had emotion, nationalism, victimhood, muscle-flexing – journalistically it was too sexy in some senses for anyone to go beyond its immediate contours at least in the initial run. This was especially so for Indian television where most debates were conducted by anchors whose minds were totally made up on the story and there was little room for nuanced discussion.

What was wrong with the Indian television anchors' line? For a start, as someone who has lived in Australia for the past seven years, I can honestly say I have never been the subject of a single racist slight, let alone a physical attack. It could be because Indians here have yet (or had yet) to be stereotyped due to their hitherto small numbers. The personal security I have enjoyed here contrasts markedly with my experience in the United States, where I studied in

the 1990s and was twice mugged in New York City. Neither incident involved racial abuse. Any racial element – both my muggers were black, whereas I am Indian – was purely incidental. The motivation was economic.

However, when I spoke to some of the Indian students who say they have been attacked by racist Australians, I was surprised by their inability to accurately describe their assailants. Media reports have suggested that Middle Eastern youths were involved in some of the violence. If that is so, then at the very least it puts a somewhat different spin on allegations of 'White Australian' racism.

Like any multicultural and immigrant society, this country has long suffered from violence between rival ethnic groups bringing the feuds of their own country to these shores. The problem of alcohol-fuelled violence, on the other hand, has long been acknowledged as Australia's own. Yet drunken louts are no respecters of any race. They will just as soon strike or abuse a white man or woman as a black one. If racial epithets are used they are more likely to reflect what Australian commentator David Penberthy calls 'casual racism' of a kind prevalent in many countries including in India, rather than any calculated Ku Klux Klan- or skinhead-style white supremacist violence.

But in India's overcrowded media market, with too many channels chasing too few stories, reality takes second place to sensationalism. As the days passed the fabric of the initial shock story came under strain, yet the reports continued. Yes, Indian students were being attacked in worrying numbers but police believed the attacks were mainly opportunistic economic crimes, the equivalent of my New York muggings, which understandably had never made news.

Even if it was true that most attacks were not racist, perhaps the Australian authorities erred in the way they said so. Delhi-based political and strategic analyst Prमित Pal Chaudhury says the Australian reaction, especially by police representatives, gave a 'see no evil' impression of official policy. He quotes a British diplomat forced to respond to attacks on foreigners in Britain in the 1970s and who concluded that: 'You never say "no racism was involved". You can say some or little, but never none, because it's as much a matter of perception as it is actual fact.'

It did not seem to matter that the established Indian community in Australia came out in force to argue that Australians in general were not racist and that the country's mainstream universities were safe. The damage was done. For example, a friend who is an Oxford-educated Rhodes scholar and high up in the Indian media now believes Australians are

‘nowhere near as racially tolerant’ as Americans or British, and have ‘very little awareness of Asia’. She could not be more wrong; I know many Australians who know India well, including remote towns and villages known to few urban middle-class Indians. The curiosity of many Australian travellers, and their desire to reach out from geographical isolation to be accepted, makes them more tolerant of cultural differences than are most Western nationalities. Yet it will now take a long time for many Indians to realise this.

At the crossroads of fact and perception, and the way this story was handled, are real people, some 93,000 young Indians trying to better themselves by crossing the Indian Ocean, for whatever reason – educational qualifications, Australian permanent residency or both. Just because their story has been distorted and manipulated doesn’t mean they have no reasonable concerns.

Who are these students? As the story gained momentum, I talked to some of them to find out, people like management student Baljinder Singh, 25, from Karnal in semi-rural Haryana state north of Delhi. Many students like him are living away from home for the first time in their lives. On their streets back home cowbells can still be heard at night; it is an old India, light years away from the changes taking place in the big Indian cities, let alone from modern Australia. They speak broken English and most of them would not be able to gain entrance into mainstream universities, whether in an Australian city or New Delhi.

Students coming from such places tend to have a romantic view of what living in the West must be like, and education agents prey on that. It’s too late when the naïve Indian student finds himself living far from the love and support of family in the rougher neighbourhoods of outer Melbourne, doing tough jobs at petrol stations and 24-hour eateries to make ends meet.

Worse still, the vocational education on offer to an unacceptably large number of Indian students turned out to be a shoddy product: oversold, overpriced and disappointing.

There was a time, long after the White Australia policy officially ended, that Indians had extreme difficulty getting visas to visit or study in this country. Then came the country’s first education ‘revolution’, when fee-paying foreign students were invited to shore up the faltering finances of Australian universities in the 1990s.

In Delhi at that time the change was manifest in the arrival of a dedicated official education representative at the Australian High Commission. Officials would privately express concern about the forged academic records used by many would-be students. But as time went on,

standards seemed to become less important. The lucrative potential of education became clear, and everyone – Indian and Australian – wanted a piece of the education action.

About all that many applicants seemed to know about Australia was cricket and kangaroos. All too many of them lived up to the galling cliché about Indians: that we are a nation of visa hunters. Thousands of Indian youths began to see college in Australia as a quick and easy route to permanent residency – and the Australian government basically encouraged them, changing the rules to accommodate such ambitions while filling temporary skill shortages. It proved a risky short-term fix.

Perhaps it was the economic boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the skilled labour shortage it caused, that created an education system in which foreign students were little more than economic fodder. A lot of money was made, both in Australia and by education agents in India, and a lot of Indians now have a residency stamp in their passports. But at what cost?

In May this year, Baljinder Singh discovered what it's like to become a statistic. Walking near the railway station in a Melbourne suburb, Singh was attacked by two hooded youths. He was stabbed in the stomach. The attackers said nothing and stole little. He has no idea what motivated their viciousness.

However, he is frank about his motivations for coming to Australia under the education program. He wants a permanent residency visa. And he says he knows personally at least 100 other young Indians from Karnal alone who were helped by education agents to come to Australia with the same aim.

Baljinder's parents have left it to him to decide whether or not to stay in Australia. Yet despite experiencing the worst this country has to offer, this resilient young man is keen to remain here: 'I will stay, naturally. First I want my PR (permanent residency) and then I will worry about what kind of good job I can get.'

The vast majority of Indian students in Australia do not attend the old sandstone universities. They can't afford to, and most of them don't qualify even on basic English proficiency let alone prior academic achievement. Instead, they are herded – or gravitate – towards barely recognised vocational schools where the courses on offer include accountancy, management, cookery, motor maintenance and hairdressing. Frequently it is mutton dressed up as lamb. Outright fraud involving phoney diplomas is not unknown.

Indians now account for more than 93,000 or more of the 415,000 foreigners studying in Australia. More than half are based in Victoria, according to a study by Access Economics. Seventy per cent of them attend vocational schools. The fact that most attacks on Indian students have taken place in Melbourne is no coincidence.

The city's older universities go to great lengths to orientate and support their students. Those studying at vocational colleges largely have to fend for themselves. And because they generally come from lower socio-economic backgrounds that means living in rougher parts of town, and having to hold down late-night jobs in service stations and fast-food joints in order to survive financially. As in any city anywhere in the world, risks to personal safety rise dramatically in marginal neighbourhoods late at night.

Baljnder Singh works long hours as a cook in a Melbourne bar. He needs the money, but also needs to clock up the hours to qualify for permanent residency. He knows plenty of Indian students who work for less than the minimum wage. The qualification requirements for residency foster this kind of exploitation.

Ironically, their story would remain untold, and Australia's policies largely unquestioned, had it not been for the incessant hunger for news from the many 24-hour news channels on cable TV in India. The Indian media greatly overplayed the racism angle, but inadvertently they exposed a real and serious problem with vocational education and visa rules.

But what of the impact on Australia-India diplomatic ties, a bilateral relationship that in recent years was just starting to reach its potential? Delhi-based editor and analyst Prमित Pal Chaudhury does not think these were harmed, largely because the Australian government responded quickly and seriously once the storm broke. He believes Australia will continue to edge out Britain as the number two foreign nation (after the United States) for Indians to study in, emigrate to, or visit, and that the wider relationship will continue to grow.

My own judgment is that, while damage was done to Australia's image in the eyes of many Indians, the furore will ultimately have positive results. The government interventions it is leading to will end up benefiting the genuine Indian students, Australia's education system and wider social harmony, and Australia-India relations more broadly. Already the crisis has galvanised the Australian government to examine the reasons many students come to Australia, the route they take, and the standards of education they are being offered. This will almost certainly bring changes to education as well as to immigration policy.

In another twist, the media sensation is also starting to result in a more sophisticated understanding of Australia for some Indians. The uproar has exposed the gap between the unrealistic expectations of many Indian students and the unsustainable greed of those institutions that were out to grab education dollars with little concern for students' interests. It has also revealed that different kinds of Indian students come to Australia, with different hopes and motives.

The controversy has been a wake-up call for the authorities in Australia, right up to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. The Indian government, no less than the Australian one, cannot afford to ignore – or be seen to ignore – the plight of its citizens when they face violence abroad. The media will not let them. Indians have long memories, and their media will readily reprise this issue at every opportunity. The current sequence of high-level Australian visits to New Delhi, with much talk of forging a deeper strategic relationship and a deeper collaboration on education, needs to be backed up with action. Otherwise this current Labor government risks going the way of past Australian governments, which typically began with good intentions to develop stronger ties with the subcontinent but somehow never really got there.

With billions of dollars on the line, the Australian High Commission in New Delhi saw the benefit of quickly bringing a group of Indian journalists to observe the experience of Indians in Australia for themselves. Most returned with a much more nuanced idea of the country and its people than that with which they had started. But this is a drop in India's media ocean. It remains to be seen whether most of the Indian media will revert to running stories about Australia mainly when a cricket test match between the two countries is on the horizon.

In any case, the solution will involve a lot more than media visits. While of course the security of every person studying in Australia can never be guaranteed, Australia now knows it needs to focus much more on the welfare of its foreign students if it hopes to protect the profits it makes from them or to translate their presence into a positive for its diplomacy. This will mean much better regulation of the vocational colleges and perhaps deliberately slowing or tightening the student intake, so as to ensure that those who arrive are well prepared to cope with the challenges of living in a different society.

People like Baljinder Singh are determined to make a future in this country but with recent changes to the migration laws which have removed some vocational trades from its skills priority list, around 40,000 foreign students' futures' are in limbo. And many back in India may opt out of becoming a part of the Australian vocational education system altogether if they cannot be assured of permanent residency.

Anecdotal reports from education agents suggest that Indian applications to come here for vocational studies are already down. There are also reports that some students have chosen to leave. But so far the data is vague, and one open question is whether the troubles involving vocational and residency-seeking students will greatly affect the numbers coming to Australia for university education, especially in the long run. The enrolments for 2010 will tell part of the story. But the enrolments in 2020 will say much more about the real meaning of this year's controversy.

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