

# On being the ›good‹ international student

## Navigating a regime of academic mobility

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**Abstract:** In 2019, around 22,500 students from India were enrolled in bachelor, master, or doctoral programs at German universities. Drawing on Glick Schiller and Salazar's concept of »regimes of mobility«, I argue that these young Indians navigate a transnational space characterized by a specific regime of academic mobility. Here, government and university policies as well as discourses about the need to study abroad for a successful (academic) career come together to portray academic mobility as inherently positive and create the figure of the ›good‹ international student. Analyzing the language of the regime of academic mobility, I show that who is considered a ›good‹ international student is connected to demands in the global and local knowledge economy and to racialized representations. Focusing on the case of Indian postgraduates in Germany, I illustrate the ambiguity of being sought after as ›talent‹ and ›brains‹, and how, in the context of changing representations of India, my respondents struggled to find a place in Germany that is not solely defined by their perceived value to the knowledge economy.

**Keywords:** academic mobility, regimes of mobility, racialized representations, internationalization, feeling out of place

Since the 1980s, internationalization has evolved into an unquestioned necessity in academia, both for institutions and for individuals (see Leemann and Boes 2012; de Wit 2002). But how do young academics navigate the demand to be internationally mobile and the multiple modes of belonging that come with it? In my doctoral research, I focused on Indian postgraduates in the university city of Göttingen in Germany (see Fuhse 2021). When I asked the students about their motivations for coming to Germany, they typically portrayed »going abroad« as an important step for career development and Göttingen as a ›natural‹ choice because of its long-standing history as a »city of science«<sup>1</sup>.

The concept of ›regimes of mobility‹ (see Glick Schiller/Salazar 2013) provides a framework for analyzing unequal access to mobility. As Glick Schiller and Salazar argue, it highlights »the role both of individual states and of international regula-

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1 | »Stadt, die Wissen schafft« is the official slogan of the city (see Stadt Göttingen).

tory and surveillance administrations that affect individual mobility« (2013: 189). Focusing on the specific case of Indian postgraduates, I use the term ›regime of academic mobility‹ to refer to the web of actors, structures, discourses, and imaginaries that produce, normalize, and regulate the mobility of students and researchers (see Glick Schiller/Salazar 2013; Baker-Cristales 2016). I show how the framing of student mobility as inherently positive is connected to global and local power relations and interests and how in this specific mobility regime the unequal access to mobility is legitimized on the basis of ›talent‹.

## THE REGIME OF ACADEMIC MOBILITY: AN OVERVIEW

The knowledge economy and its language of human resources form part of the larger framework which shape the practices and discourses in the regime of academic mobility. In this regime, supporting the mobility of ›talent‹ is based on an economic rationale: »As more research and innovation is performed outside Europe, the EU will need to access this knowledge. And to remain a major global player, the EU must promote itself as an attractive location for carrying out research and innovation and be successful in the global competition for talent (. . .)« (European Commission 2016: 60).

As part of the European Research Area, Germany strongly endorses this rationale and promotes itself as the »land of ideas«.<sup>2</sup> Due to demographic change, the argument runs, Germany is facing a pressing need to recruit skilled workers or »semi-finished human capital« (Khadria 2008: 30) – in other words, students. In 2019, there were 302,200 international students at German universities (see DAAD/DZHW 2020: 7). Today, almost certainly, every university in the country has a strategy for internationalization, as it is a central factor in accessing state funds. The value placed on internationality as a tool to promote scientific knowledge and innovation (see BMBF 2016) means that (prospective) scholars and scientists are facing (increasing) pressure to be mobile. In this environment, mobility has developed into a central element for individuals in the »academic life course« (see Winslow/Davis 2016; Leeman/Boes 2012).

Mobility is also affected by dynamics and discourses in (prospective) students ›home‹ countries and contexts. For middle-class youth globally, and in India in par-

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2 | The initiative was started by the German Federal Government and German business and industry in 2006 (see Land der Ideen).

ticular, going abroad is an important opportunity to accumulate social and cultural capital, and is becoming increasingly understood as part of the transition to adulthood (see Robertson 2015). These discourses act upon the students and create the feeling that they have to go abroad for their career, their family, and their future. But these positive representations of academic mobility obscure how the opportunities to go abroad are unequally distributed, and are influenced by local and global inequalities in the access to education and ideas of who, in fact, is considered ›talent‹.

## **ALL WE NEED IS ›BRAINS‹: THE LANGUAGE OF THE REGIME OF ACADEMIC MOBILITY**

Since its emergence as an important topic in higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, international academic mobility has been discussed in terms of ›brains‹ – from the ›brain drain‹ through to ›brain circulation‹ (see Saxenian 2005: 35) and ›brain gain‹ (see Chacko 2007: 135). This vocabulary remains ubiquitous today. The University of Göttingen's 2007 ›excellence strategy‹, for example, included measures for ›brain gain‹ and ›brain sustain‹ (see President of the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen 2011: 4).

The metaphor of the ›brain‹ portrays students and researchers as rational ›academic entrepreneurs‹ (Leemann 2010: 619) who are ›deterritorialised, disembodied and disembedded‹ (Kenway/Fahey 2007: 168). ›Talents‹ and ›brains‹ have no nationality, no gender, and no religion. In other words, the language paints a one-dimensional, dehumanized picture. Unlike refugees, who are often dehumanized and portrayed as ›less than human‹ (Esses/Medianou/Lawson 2013: 522), mobile academics, it could be argued, are often portrayed as ›more than human‹, as hyper-rational and without human attachments. At the same time, the seemingly objective language of the ›brain‹ not only obscures the fact that access to education is unequally distributed (see Jeffery 2005: 34), but also that the understanding of who is ›talent‹ depends on the preferences of actors in the receiving country, and these preferences are connected to racialized representations.

## **INDIA AND INDIANS AS PARTNER IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY: ›IT INDIANS‹ AND ›RAJ‹**

India has increasingly become associated with technological know-how since the 1990s, especially in the IT sector (see Radhakrishnan 2011: 3). The Indian Govern-

nment has worked hard to develop and maintain that image with campaigns like »Make in India«<sup>3</sup>. In Germany, where the history of Indian migration is relatively short – the first freedom fighters and a few students started coming to Germany in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – this association with technology led to the emergence of the »IT-Indian«, an image that was further entrenched by the German Green Card initiative in 2000, which provided employment visas for international IT specialists (see Gottschlich 2012: 8). Today, the stereotype of the »IT-Indian« has a significant impact on the perception of Indians in Germany. Several interlocutors had anecdotes about this. As Rohini, one of the Indian postgraduates, told me: »I had this encounter at the airport, somebody coming with a crashed laptop to me and like »Can you fix my laptop because its crashed?« and I'm like »No, I cannot. I have no idea« (Rohini, 18.08.2016)<sup>4</sup>.

The picture of India and »the Indian« is shaped by migration history and media representations (see Robertson 2015: 3; Jain 2018: 32). One prominent example is the character of Raj in the comedy series »The Big Bang Theory«. In the American series, Raj is portrayed as a stereotypical Indian who is close to his family and has an »Asian nature« – he is shy, humble and submissive (see Gottschlich 2012: 8). He is also a stereotypical scientist, a brilliant but socially awkward »nerd« or »geek«.

In these imaginaries, »Asians« are portrayed as a »model minority« (Ho 2014: 80) – successful and »good, law-abiding minorities who know their place within society and do not challenge their place in it« (Ho 2014: 8). This imaginary obviously differs from discourses about other categories of mobile people. Thus, in connecting with stereotyped understandings of the »other«, the regime of academic mobility creates inequalities between different categories of human movement and links specific characterizations and expectations to these categories.

## **FEELING OUT OF PLACE IN THE »LAND OF IDEAS«**

In the case of the young Indian postgraduates, the subject position of the »good« international student plays an ambivalent role. Being understood as a valuable »human resource« can lead to financial support and the feeling of being appreciated. Anisha pointed this out in our interview: »Germany (...) has become my first preference be-

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3 | The campaign was launched in 2014 and »devised to transform India into a global design and manufacturing hub«. (see Government of India).

4 | All names are pseudonyms.

cause I know here your talent is respected« (Anisha, 01.05.2011). Indeed, many of the young Indians I spoke to felt that they were welcome and accepted at their research institutes. But this feeling can and does change, and their ›Indianness‹ could become relevant in a totally different way. This happened in 2012, after the rape of a young woman in Delhi made international headlines. Suddenly, the focus changed, and at least for a while, India was no longer the land of technology but the land of violence against women. In March 2015, the perception of Indian men was critically discussed in the German and international media following social media reports that a female professor in Leipzig allegedly rejected a male Indian student for an internship, citing the Indian »rape problem«<sup>5</sup>. For my respondents, this change of focus meant being questioned by fellow students and colleagues about rape in India. Suddenly, they felt that being *Indian women* and *Indian men* became relevant categories – the women were perceived as potential victims, the men as potential perpetrators. The postgraduates condemned what had happened in Delhi, but many found themselves to be in a dilemma that Gilon, a doctoral researcher and history lecturer, summed up perfectly when he told me about an email he had written to one of his students in Göttingen:

I wrote that I'm myself ashamed of this incident. But unfortunately, Europe has found another rationalization for its representation of India, the orientalist representation. Because now, I mean it's how Nicholas Dirks argues about the caste, he says that it has helped the colonizers to evidentially prove that India is a savage country because of the caste system. This kind of incident is also kind of used as (a) possibility to rationalize such understandings. (Gilon, 19.01.2013).

For many of my interlocutors, the changing imaginary of who they were in relation to this incident – and to many others – made them feel out of place in Germany. These experiences led Rohini to conclude: »People from India want to go to America because it is easy to inculcate there. It's easy to be a part of the system and be lost in that crowd. Over here, if you really want to be inculcated into the crowd you are still being an ›*Ausländer (foreigner)*‹« (Rohini, 18.08.2016). These feelings are further complicated by the fact that they cannot be accommodated within the language of the regime of academic mobility, where studying abroad is framed exclusively in positive terms and in the dehumanizing language of ›brains‹. For if these Indian postgraduates are just (human) resources in the knowledge economy, they should have no problem finding a place in Germany, the ›land of ideas‹.

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<sup>5</sup> | The case was widely discussed in the German media. For example, »Professorin lehnt indischen Bewerber für Praktikumsplatz ab« (see Süddeutsche Zeitung).

## CONCLUSION

Analyzing the mobility of students in terms of a regime of mobility contextualizes their mobility in global and local power relations and interests, and it shows how the mobility of a sought-after category of people is governed by economic rationales and racialized notions of who is considered a valuable human resource. The focus on the language of the regime of academic mobility reveals that it only offers a specific subject position to the Indian postgraduates in Germany, a subject position that is connected to their perceived value as ›talent‹ and ›brains‹. These Indian postgraduates had ambivalent experiences as international students and researchers in Göttingen: they were grateful for the opportunities that coming to Germany meant for their present and future, but their lives there were also shaped by how they were positioned in different times and contexts – as men and women from a technological super-power and/or as the exotified other.

In this short paper, I was able to offer a glimpse of what it means to be an international and specifically an Indian postgraduate in Germany. In looking at the language of the regime of academic mobility, I opened up broader questions about the internationalization of higher education and the role that global, national and institutional interests play in it.

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