This is the published version:

Rodrigues, Usha M. 2009, To go or not, Nxl, pp. 1-1.

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In the past 10 days, a leading story in the Indian and Australian media has been the protest by Indian students in Melbourne, demanding that the racially-motivated attacks on them and their fellow students be stopped. Since then, every assault on a student from India is promptly reported by the media unlike the past two years, when thousands of such incidents were not newsworthy.

**Ground reality**

As a result, Indian parents who want to send their son/daughter to Australia to study further are panicking. Even students already in Australia are receiving numerous phone calls a day from their parents; many asking them to return home. Many young Indians face are wondering about the future of their dream of studying and possibly migrating to Australia, now that it has been branded a ‘racist’ country. The reality is that assaults on Indian students in Melbourne are not new. It has been on the rise for the past two-three years for two reasons: the deteriorating law and order situation in Melbourne, particularly around the public transport system and, two, the doubling of Indian students coming to Melbourne.

“In 2007-08, 1,447 people of Indian origin were victims of crimes against the person such as robberies and assaults, an increase from 1,082 the previous year,” according to Victoria police. Overall, 36,765 people were victims in this category of crime in 2007-2008. Calling the issue (crime against the person) being “symptomatic” of what is happening in the community as a whole, the Chief Commissioner, Simon Overland, has defended the use of the term ‘soft targets’ for Indian students, particularly if they carry laptops, mobile phones an MP3 players. The Victorian Police Chief Commissioner admits that some of the crimes are racially motivated, but he believes that many of the robberies and assaults are simply ‘opportunistic’ because a lot of international students work and study late at night and travel home by trains with their mobiles and laptops. The population of Indian students in Melbourne had doubled to 46,000 in 2008.

There is no doubt, violence of any kind should be condemned and authorities in Australia and in India should do everything possible to ensure Indian students’ safety in Australia. And, for those who are keen to study in Australia, it is vital to find out as much about life in Australia as possible from a number of
sources; people and the Internet. Relating how a fellow student was told that Toowoomba is in Melbourne (Toowoomba is about 1500 km north-east of Melbourne), Anuradha Vasudev, a student in Queensland says that Indian students need to do their research before coming to Australia, particularly about the institution they are going to, its location, and the support services it provides. Indian students need to be prepared to work hard — often work and study — because the cost of living is more than the bank deposits students show to get their student visas to travel to Australia, also she says, adding that Indian parents and students should not solely rely on what the local agents say.

University representatives too warn against relying on local agents, although they defend their own track record and vigilance in place at their institutions to monitor the local agents they employ. In fact, in recent times it is the agents of vocational education and training colleges, who have come into greater scrutiny, some of whom may be paid as much as Rs 75,000 to recruit an Indian student. Many Indian students are attracted by the lure of studying a vocational course such as cookery and hair-dressing in Australia, because these two-year-long courses give them the points to later apply for permanent residency under the Australian government’s skilled migrant programmes. However, question marks have been raised about the quality of service some of these colleges provide. A number of them are under investigation for sub-standard services and corrupt practices.

Learn to adjust

“Finding work and accommodation can be hard for international students, with little knowledge of local conditions and without relevant rental history, a requirement for renting outside the educational institution’s housing facilities”, says Shivangi, a postgraduate student from Melbourne. As for public transport, Priya says, there is always a degree of risk when one uses public transport. “Buses and trams in Melbourne are relatively safe, but bus stops and tram stops are not, because they are not manned, there isn’t any security… usually, there are junkies and other degenerates hanging around in groups near stations and bus stops… It doesn’t matter what race you are, they’ll ask you for money or cigarettes. It is how you answer them and how you handle the situation that matters… since anything can trigger them.”

Priya also thinks that both Indian and Australian authorities should provide ‘correct’ information about living in Australia such as crime statistics, information about safe and unsafe areas in the cities. She would advise her friends and relatives they should “learn to be alert and on the watch, like you would be in any new country. Try and avoid travelling at night.” Rohit, an undergraduate student in Queensland, says that it is not a “war-field”, Australian authorities should provide increased security for students. He also thinks that educational institutions should promote Indian students’ integration with local people, instead of treating them as a separate group with their own ‘orientation’ programmes for example, rather than being part of the mainstream student activities.

Rohit also questions the impact of the media and films like “Slumdog Millionaire”; he has been called 'slum dog’ at least five times recently. Rohit, who works on-campus, says it can be difficult to adapt to local conditions and sometimes he doesn’t feel safe even in a smaller city like Toowoomba. Arjun, a postgraduate student in Melbourne, warns students from India: “Be polite, pay attention to personal hygiene and avoid talking too loudly in public.” One of the residents in Australia, who migrated to Australia for a better life and to study further, believes that although Australians are warm and friendly, their interaction with people of diverse backgrounds is complex. “They have a very anglo-centric view of the world and they are very untrustyworthy of anything different… the popular culture has a ghetto mentality, its highly ethnocentric and generally follows herd instincts…as an Indian I feel Australians love Indian food, want Indian money but not the people.”

Amin (name changed) also points out that alcohol is glorified in Australia, “there is a culture of binge drinking”, which along with consumption of drugs among certain groups of people can lead to higher crime rate in certain parts. He also suggests that the Indian consulate provide state-specific guides like “latest information on important contact details, areas to live, tips on how to manage student life, what to
latest information on important contact details, areas to live, tips on how to manage student life, what to do in various situations, typical problems faced by Indian students.” Most of the Indian permanent residents interviewed felt a sense of disgust and shamefulness at the lack of action on this matter where such a large number of Indian students have been assaulted in Australian cities. Many refused to discuss the issue; others said that immediate and strong action was needed to “protect” Australia’s education industry and its image in the rest of the world. Indian students pump A$2 billion into the Australia economy.

All students and Indian permanent residents believed that both the Indian and Australian governments and educational institutions should organise racial harmony campaigns for general population, where educating public about various cultures should be the aim. Universities and educational institutions should be interested in more than recruiting students. In the current situation, all that was needed was “a letter signed by the Vice Chancellor sent out to all Indian on-campus students’ parents, assuring them of their child’s safety and well being at the university,” says Prof Raj Gururajan of University of Southern Queensland. All students and residents are bemused by the inadequate coverage in the Australian media, and the sensational coverage in Indian media.

From one perspective, Australia is a racist country but, when specifically asked, everyone agrees that Australians are quite friendly and welcoming compared to many other countries. The key is more integration and knowledge of each other’s cultures and a dose of reality check about each others’ needs — why Indian students want to study in Australia, and why Australia wants Indian students to come to Australia.

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