

Mari Korpela
University of Tampere, Finland
mari.korpela@uta.fi

Living between India and the West: The community of Westerners in Varanasi

There is a fisherman somewhere on the beach by the south sea. An American tourist comes to him and asks: “What are you doing?” The fisherman replies: “I am relaxing. I catch fish every day for an hour, and then I sell it.” The American gets excited to give him advice: “If you fished for eight hours a day, you could buy a big boat and you could make more money. Then, you would be safe and you could relax”. The fisherman looks at him and replies: “That’s what I do now”.

An interviewee told me this anecdote when I was doing fieldwork in Varanasi, India. The story illustrates well the attitude of Western people who have moved to India in order to live a relaxed and ‘more authentic’ life there. Due to its exoticism and cheapness, India has been a popular destination for young Western travelers since the sixties. The golden years of hippies have been over for a long time but India still attracts thousands of Westerners each year. Some of these people are not just short-term tourists but end up visiting India frequently for long periods. Typically, they work for a few months in simple jobs or selling Indian textiles and handicrafts in their home countries and then spend the rest of the year in India, living on the money they have earned in those temporary jobs. In India, they gather to certain places. A popular destination is Varanasi¹ in northern India. As a holy city of Hinduism, Varanasi has become a symbol of traditional Hindu India and a sign of Eastern otherness (Eck 1983). The long-term Western sojourners come from Europe², Israel, Canada and Australia, amounting to 200-300 at the same time. I refer to these people as ‘Westerners’ due to the fact that in Varanasi, differences between various Western nationalities seem to disappear when opposed with the ‘Indian other’. Most of these people are 20-35 years old but there are also many 40-50-year-olds there, men form the majority. The popular season for Westerners in Varanasi starts in October and ends in May³. They return to the same houses year after year and have all necessary household utensils there. Most play Indian instruments, some do yoga, meditation or charity work, yet, a lot of time is spent socializing with friends. The most common activities include cooking and eating, playing music and smoking hash together.

In this paper, I describe how the Westerners in Varanasi explain their motivations and the lifestyle choices they have made. I illustrate some characteristics of their community in Varanasi. I argue that although these people are highly individualistic actors, they also search for communal values. The community is manifested with shared practices and unspoken rules, and moments of leaving and returning are particularly significant. In the end, I argue that the phenomenon can be called lifestyle migration although these people do not seem to fit into any categories; they are not tourists, migrants or travelers, and how to label them is indeed a tricky question. This paper is based on my ongoing PhD research. I conducted fieldwork for over a year in Varanasi in 2002-2003. I interviewed 54 people and kept a detailed field diary there.

¹ Population about two million.

² French, Italians, Germans, Spanish, Scandinavians, Greek etc.

³ The summer months are extremely hot and wet.

Mobile Lifestyle

The Westerners in Varanasi view the world as an open arena where they can move freely according to their preferences. In addition to having traveled extensively in the past, their future plans often involve many geographical locations, not only their country of origin and India. Movement is an appreciated, and even expected, way of life for them, and they view sedentary life in rather negative terms.

I don't think I will ever settle down. I always say that divine god gives the roots to the trees, for us it is giving feet, we can go from places to places. So I like to go from place to place. I like to stay few years here, few years there. (man 40⁴)

I very much feel like a gypsie, I don't feel really bound to one place and I think life is travel. I mean our forefathers who were hunters and gatherers, they could never ever live [...] in one place. I think this is in our brains and that in modern cultures, so many people are so unhappy probably because of the fact that people in their education are made to forget their real roots. They forget their roots, they have this longing inside but they fulfill it watching TV, they watch discovery channel or whatever [as...] compensation for this. (man 48)

The lifestyle of these people is transnational, or more precisely translocal. I consider the term 'translocal' more appropriate because these people often move between various locations also within one nation state. For example in India, many of them spend time in Goa and/or the mountains of the north in addition Varanasi. However, constant movement can become tiresome and one may want to have a break every now and then. For many of my interviewees, Varanasi has become a temporary sanctuary.

Because I'm much moving, so when I arrive in Varanasi, every time I [feel] that finally I can rest, I can have routine and make what I like to do. (woman 33)

While in Varanasi, the life of these people is very local and belonging to the tight community of Westerners there becomes very significant for them. They appreciate movement but at the same time, they long for local belonging - albeit temporarily.

Why this lifestyle? Motivations and Explanations

Most of the long-term Westerner sojourners in Varanasi have ended up there by chance. Typically, their first trip to India was supposed to be a kind of an initiation rite between youth and adulthood, between upper secondary school and further studies/work. However, they liked India so much that they decided not to return to their home countries permanently. Instead, they returned to the West only in order to make money, and then went back to India. Many of them have lived in this way already for several years. Most explain their repeated stays in India as a lifestyle choice although they have not made a clear decision but have ended up in Varanasi gradually. All in all, they are very convinced to have found an ideal lifestyle.

Many of the Westerners in Varanasi claim to have felt frustrated with their lives in their home countries. India offers a chance to search for something different –and better.

⁴ After every interview quotation, there is the gender and age of the interviewee.

People go to work, have this six weeks holiday [...] I was really unsatisfied with this life, I felt trapped. (man 45)

I get this overwhelming feeling in Canada that people are [...] doing a prison sentence. They are in, they got this amount of time they gotta do. They are just trying to get through this the best they can [...] It's all about making the time go by. (man 26)

They view the ancient and mystic city of Varanasi as a particularly suitable place to lead a more meaningful and authentic life. Many of my interviewees oppose materialism, consumer-oriented life and above all, the busy life of the West. In Varanasi, they are happier because the pace of life is slower and they do not own many material goods.

I don't like this mood of all people becoming old the same, same trouble, same way: buying TV, buying house, making very big[loan] ... and after you work 10, 12, 20 years for paying this [...] They chain you for all your life and after they start to say "ok, you have the house but you need also one big DVD and one very beautiful screen" [...] "beautiful car" and you pay a lot of money, another loan... (man 32)

The quotation above refers to middle class materialism as if it was the only possible way to live in the West. The Westerners in Varanasi often aim their criticism at 'western lifestyles' but at a closer look, they are criticising certain kind of middle class life and values. In fact, such a lifestyle exists not only in the West but among middle classes everywhere, also in India⁵.

The 'Western' life that these people criticise is characterised by dull routines whereas in Varanasi, they emphasise freedom and courage to be spontaneous. Above all, enjoyment is a key word for them.

I will invest my time into enjoying *good* of life. (man 26)

I've understood that life should be a celebration. (man 45)

However, these people are not as carefree as it seems since they constantly have to plan from where to get money to be able to return the following year. Nevertheless, having a permanent job is seen in very negative terms by all of my interviewees.

You have to go to work at nine o'clock in the morning and work five days a week, few weeks holiday. To me it just felt like bad choice in life to work all the time. (man 36)

The above quotation argues against the protestant work ethic but we should not forget that in today's global economy, not everyone is needed to work. In the flexible labour markets these Westerners are ideal workers since they do not even want permanent contracts. Instead of feeling oppressed, they feel they have the power to decide when to work. Many of my interviewees pointed out that when they need a job, it is easy to find one. Being able to find work quickly requires that one is well-connected and not marginalised in the society. Therefore, in spite of criticising the West a lot, these people preserve their ties there and take

⁵ It should be noted that most of the Westerners in Varanasi come from middle class families themselves (and they are all white and appear to be all heterosexual).

advantage of the capitalist economy. In fact, their lifestyle would not be possible without their ability to make money in the affluent industrialised countries.

The fact that India is a very cheap country for Westerners is not insignificant in this lifestyle. Living costs are very low in Varanasi⁶, and although these Westerners claim to oppose consumerism and materialism, they do not live very poorly in Varanasi. Their standard of living is lower than it would be in their home countries: for example, they have simple gas stoves and very little, if any, furniture and no hot water in their apartments. However, they can afford eating in restaurants, using laundry services, getting their clothes sewed by tailors, buying Western food products (tofu, mushrooms, cheese, olive oil, brown bread) etc. In other words, they live rather privileged compared to many locals –and even compared to many middle class people in their home countries. Most of them also admit themselves that they are materially richer in Varanasi than they would be in their home countries.

On several occasions, the attitudes of the Westerners in Varanasi reflect rather extreme individualism. In many ways, leaving their home countries has empowered them – and especially women- as individuals.

When I was child, I thought I have to do what everybody do [...] Everybody has a job, everybody gets married, everybody gets a career...But when I started to live here, I realized that it's best when I do what I want. I should do what I want. (woman 31)

It is remarkable that these people have gone to India to realise their individuality. Indian cultures are usually not characterised in individualistic terms but quite the opposite. The point is that as outsiders –far away from home and commitments there- the Westerners are able to gain such freedom although it definitely does not apply to local people in Varanasi.

Life in Varanasi: Intensively Together

The Westerners live within a walking distance from each other in Varanasi, many even in the same buildings, and they socialize with each other on daily bases. Their everyday life is very relaxed. Days are spent without strict plans, yet, their daily routines are very similar. Most Westerners practice music for a few hours every day and have lessons several times a week. Household tasks (cooking, cleaning and doing laundry) take much time too. At sunset time, the Westerners gather to tea stalls by the Ganges River, and one can easily spend 1-2 hours there chatting with friends. Very often, a few friends spend the evening cooking and eating together. On weekly bases, there are bigger dinner gatherings and parties. None of these Westerners have televisions and there is no night life in Varanasi, therefore hanging out together is an important entertainment. When I asked a Western man when would be a suitable time to visit him, he replied 'My house is like a coffee house; people are coming and going all the time!' His words illustrate well the intensity of being together and the easiness of visiting each other among the Westerners in Varanasi.

Being welcome to visit others at almost any time is an unspoken norm among the long-term Western sojourners in Varanasi. There are also other such behavior norms and rules, for example certain (gender-specific) style of clothing and sharing. During my fieldwork, I ended up changing my wardrobe entirely, which clearly eased my access to the community. I was also offered countless lunches and dinners when I happened to visit someone at the time they

⁶ One can live a rather comfortable life there with 200 euros a month (including rent).

were eating. In fact, people regularly cooked more than they would eat themselves in order to be prepared for surprise guests. Eating together is a central activity among the Westerners in Varanasi. In their living circumstances, cooking takes a long time and asks for a lot of effort, therefore, it is practical to cook and/or eat together⁷. Yet, sharing food is also a classical example of creating and manifesting bonds of belonging.

Nevertheless, one has to be careful with whom one shares. In a way, the community has characteristics of a gift economy. Reciprocity is another unspoken rule. With the reciprocal relationships a net of vague interdependencies is created. In such a fluid and temporary community, it is particularly important to be careful of whom to include in the circle of sharing, that is, it is important to keep the boundaries clear. Sharing with outsiders would be waste since one could not expect anything in return. For example, I was advised not to be too friendly to certain people because if I was, they would come to eat with me every day.

The Isolated Western ‘Ghetto’ in Varanasi

The Westerners in Varanasi have found an ideal life in India but not *with* Indians. Once I was walking with another Western woman in the street in Varanasi in May. We accidentally met a French woman who got very happy to see us: “It is so nice to see you! I thought there is nobody left in Varanasi any more in this heat.” It is rather revealing that although there are about two million inhabitants in Varanasi, for this woman, there was ‘nobody’ there when there were no Westerners. Even when these people emphasise individuality and personal choices, almost none of them would like to be in Varanasi if there were no other Westerners there. Their relationships with local people are mostly instrumental: they interact almost solely with music teachers, house owners and shopkeepers but very rarely do they have Indian friends. Their community is like an isolated ghetto in Varanasi: they do not live physically isolated from locals but they create their own separate social space there.

In addition to distinguishing themselves from locals, the long-term Western sojourners distinguish themselves from tourists in Varanasi. This is manifested in clothing, accommodation, activities and simply by avoiding contact with them. The long-term sojourners usually ignore tourists if they happen to be present in the same place, and tourists are not invited to the activities of the long-term sojourners. From the tourists’ point of view, the long-term sojourners may seem unfriendly and rude. From the point of view of the long-term sojourners, however, their behavior is a practical choice: one gets tired of constantly explaining to new people about one’s life in Varanasi. The long-term sojourners feel it is a waste of time and energy to socialize with short-term tourists again and again.

Farewell: Becoming a Community Member by Leaving –and Returning

The Western sojourners in Varanasi are compelled to leave when their visas expire and/or when they run out of money. Leaving, however, does not mean breaking one’s ties but actually strengthening them by making them visible. This happens first of all in farewell parties which are a central activity among the Westerners there. In one such party a man sarcastically mentioned that the ‘star of the party’ was happy to leave whereas he himself would be very sad if he was leaving. I, however, argue that instead of departure, belonging is celebrated in such parties. The ‘star of the party’ was not happy to leave but happy to belong.

⁷ The Westerners have small gas stoves and very few own a fridge. They also do not have micro wave ovens, mixers or other electric kitchen equipment.

Bonds are constructed in a very tangible way also when packing: one gives away whatever food products are left and whatever does not fit into the luggage and storage boxes. Those who stay in Varanasi the longest always benefit materially from being the last ones. The next season, they have a particular - continuing- relationship with people whose food and goods they have received earlier. During the last days, one also returns borrowed dishes, pays one's debts etc. Such activities illustrate that one has been a part of a larger collectivity and that one is committed to maintain those relationships in good terms. The latter one is important if and because one is planning to return.

One aspect of the community of Westerners in Varanasi is that once defined a community member, one is expected to return. When people were asking towards the end of my fieldwork whether I would come back in October or November, they refused to listen to my efforts to explain that I might not come at all the following season. It seemed to be impossible that someone would decide not to return. Nevertheless, it is crucial that people leave: leaving is an opportunity to return later. In fact, one establishes his/her status as a community member by coming back, preferably several times. People, whom one hardly knew the previous time, suddenly become one's good friends when one returns to Varanasi. I experienced this also myself. A few people acted as my good friends once they realized that I had been in Varanasi previously although we had hardly known each other then. First, I found their bad memory amusing but then I realized that it was not really a question of 'remembering wrong': it was my coming back that mattered, not our previous friendship, or lack of it. A crucial point is that nobody could mistake me for a tourist any more. Leaving and returning are therefore important occasions to manifest and construct communal belonging. Such an emphasis on the continuity of the community of Westerners in Varanasi reveals that these people are not temporary tourists. How should we label them then?

Tourists? Travelers? Migrants?

Nation states do not appreciate or even understand the kind of life that the Westerners in Varanasi lead. A European woman told me how she and her boyfriend had been refused to enter Reunion as tourists because they did not have a ticket back to their home country, only to India. Whether this story is true is not very crucial here; what matters is that mobile people do encounter problems because of their lifestyle. Many Westerners in Varanasi complain about having lost social security benefits in their countries of origin due to their long absences. Sometimes, they cannot even get treatment in public hospitals in their home countries since they have dropped out from the system. Leaving the social security aside, even buying a private medical or travel insurance can be difficult –if not impossible – if one does not permanently live in any country.

Nevertheless, as citizens of industrialized Western nations, these people are very privileged. In addition to the financial privilege, they easily cross borders and get visas. Citizens of 'third world' countries, for example Indians, could never live like them. Hutnyk argues that 'alternative travel' to places like India is a privilege of Western middle class youth who have time and money to search for themselves in the 'third world' (Hutnyk 1996, ix-x). The Westerners in Varanasi are obviously a part of this phenomenon as well although they are not any more searching for themselves: they claim to have found what they were looking for. They have become lifestyle migrants in Varanasi where life is authentic and ideal. Yet, at the same time, they keep on moving and they have not settled down in Varanasi permanently.

These people spend several months a year in Varanasi. India seems to encourage such lifestyle migration by issuing very long tourist visas (from 6 months till 5 or even 10 years). However, permanent residence permits are not issued which means that the Westerners who spend much time in India regularly have to go through the hassle of renewing visas and they have to earn their living outside of India. Officially they are defined as tourists (or occasionally as students) despite their long stays in the country.

Although the Westerners in Varanasi often utilize tourism infrastructure (internet cafes, tourist restaurants, tourist quotas in train reservations etc.), they are not really tourists: they are not sightseeing in India but living everyday routines in Varanasi. Yet, despite their long stays in Varanasi, they are not locals either, and they are also not aiming to 'go native'. They seem to 'fall' between categories: they are not tourists or migrants or locals but escape all definitions. We can call them lifestyle migrants but also that term can be misleading as it misses the lifestyle of constant movement between various locations. However, the difficulty of definition bothers above all outsiders: for the Westerners in Varanasi their blurred identities and status is not problematical. They are not troubled with labelling dilemmas: they simply live their lives the best they can, which means a lifestyle of pleasure; movement according to their own individual preferences. The following interview quotation says it all:

M: What do you think, what kind of people stay in Varanasi for a long time?

I: Lucky people. (man 31)

Bibliography:

Eck, Diana L. 1983. *Banaras. City of Light*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
 Hutnyk, John. 1996. *The Rumour of Calcutta. Tourism, Charity, and the Poverty Representations*. London: Zed Books.