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## **Living happily ever after or ending up in another crises? Bohemian lifestyle migrants in Varanasi, India.**

### **Introduction**

Lifestyle migration means a phenomenon where people move abroad in order to live a relaxed and more meaningful life. Usually lifestyle migrants move from affluent industrialised countries to less affluent countries where living costs are low and climate pleasant.

My recently completed PhD dissertation (Korpela 2009) focuses on bohemian lifestyle migrants in the city of Varanasi in India. In this paper, I first discuss what the bohemian lifestyle migrants in Varanasi mean when they criticize 'western' life. Above all, I elaborate on the phenomenon in regard with global capitalist order and the significance of India in such an order. Eventually, I discuss whether the Westerners' escape to better life has been successful or whether they have ended up in another stressful crises situation. I also elaborate on how voluntary their lifestyle eventually is and what are their options in case they ever want to permanently return to their countries of origin.

### **Who, Where and When?**

Varanasi is a holy city of Hinduism, with over a million inhabitants, situated on the banks of the river Ganges. The Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi come from Europe, Israel, Canada and Australia, amounting to 200-300 during the popular season which starts in October and ends in May. Most of them are from middle class origin. 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'. The Westerners have initially come to India as backpackers but they now return year after year. In Varanasi, they live in the same houses and have all the necessary household utensils there. For many, the lifestyle has lasted for years, even for decades. Typically, the Westerners work for a few months in menial jobs or sell Indian textiles and handicrafts in markets and festivals in their countries of origin and then spend the rest of the year in India, living on the money they have earned in those temporary jobs. Most of them are twenty to thirty-five years old but some are forty to fifty, with men forming the majority. In Varanasi, they all live in one particular area within walking distance of each other, renting apartments in local houses. Most Westerners in Varanasi play Indian instruments, some do yoga, meditation or charity work. A lot of time is spent socialising with friends. I define the Westerners in Varanasi as lifestyle migrants because they claim to have found a relaxed and more meaningful life in Varanasi. More precisely, I define them as bohemian lifestyle migrants because of their artistic and spiritual aspirations: they are located in a holy city of Hinduism, they are interested in spiritual matters and most of them study Indian classical music (for definitions of different kinds of lifestyle migrants, see Benson & O'Reilly 2009).

My study is ethnographic: the methods I used are participant observation and interviews. I conducted the fieldwork in 2002-2003 for thirteen months. While in Varanasi, I participated in the everyday activities of the Westerners and kept a detailed field diary. The very intense social life of the Westerners includes parties and concerts as well as frequent visits, cooking, eating and hanging out together. In addition to participant observation, I interviewed



44 Westerners who were staying in Varanasi for at least two months (most for longer) and who had been there for long periods before as well.

### **Big Bad West**

My interviewees in Varanasi often said they had felt unsatisfied with their lives in their countries of origin and explained their stay in India as a choice to search for a better and more interesting life. When I asked them why they had left their countries of origin, they often described them in very negative terms. In this talk, 'the West' often became understood as one, that is, my interviewees did not only talk about their countries of origin but about 'the West' in general<sup>1</sup>. In the following, I elaborate on the 'West' that they criticised and wanted to turn away from.

Q: Why you do not want to stay in your country of origin permanently?

I don't like this mood of all people becoming old the same, the same trouble, the same way: buying a TV, buying a house, getting a very big ....[loan] ... and after you work 10, 12, 20 years for paying for 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 player and one very beautiful screen" [...] a 'beautiful car' and you pay a lot of money, another loan... (Anton, 32<sup>2</sup>)

The lifestyle in the West is not for me [...] People end up just working and they don't seem to really know why they are working any more. It's for the second car or the third fridge or the new, bigger television or... (Paul, 47)

When I asked my interviewees what they do not like about the West, all of them mentioned consumerism. Freedom is a significant aspect in their anti-materialism: loans tie one to a job. Moreover, loans and possessions tie people to specific locations and my interviewees want to avoid such a situation: consequently, one should own only what one can easily carry along.

Another central theme in the answers to the question dealing with the negative aspects of the West is the critical attitudes towards wage work that most of my interviewees displayed: most of them saw having a permanent job in very negative terms.

Q: Why don't you want to stay in your country of origin?

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

It's not possible, working every day. Every day waiting for the five-week holiday. It's not possible. (Ricardo, 41)

The main argument against work among my interviewees is that work would tie them to unwanted routines. In today's flexible labour markets they are actually ideal workers since they do not even want permanent contracts. Instead of feeling oppressed, the Westerners in Varanasi feel they have the power to decide when to work. In other words, they explain their lack of permanent jobs in positive terms, emphasising their own agency, although the other side of the

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<sup>1</sup> When the Westerners in Varanasi criticise 'Western lifestyles', national differences seem to disappear. Moreover, on closer look, the criticism is aimed at certain kinds of middle class lifestyles and values. In fact, such a lifestyle exists not only in the West but among middle classes everywhere, including India (see e.g., Eriksen 2004, 389).

<sup>2</sup> After every interview quotation, there is a pseudonym name and the correct age of the interviewee.



coin may be that permanent jobs are not available to them. From an outsider point of view, working on temporary terms leads to a highly insecure situation. The Westerners in Varanasi, however, refuse to worry about financial securities like a pension. Yet, again, the other side of the coin is that they might not be able to do much about such things anyway: in the current economic systems, an increasing number of people cannot get permanent jobs even if they wanted to and those working with ‘unconventional’ contracts or on their own are not necessarily entitled to the same social security benefits as those who are permanently employed (see e.g., Rifkin, 1995; Moisala et al. 2004; Lehto et al. 2005).

Nevertheless, the Westerners in Varanasi typically claim that finding temporary jobs is easy for them.

If I want a job, it's easy in the West to get a job, to survive, make some money (Sebastian, 26)

Such comments surprise me. There are plenty of unemployed people in Western societies and I doubt many of them would share my interviewees' views on the easy availability of jobs. In practice, this must mean that my interviewees who say so belong to networks that help them to get jobs. In this sense, they are not marginal outsiders but have connections to resources and networks that they can use to their own advantage. Therefore, although the Westerners in Varanasi criticise the current economic system, instead of jumping out from it, they use the system to their own benefit. In addition to occasional wage work, many of them sell goods<sup>3</sup> they have bought in India in markets and festivals in the West. Such business seems to bring good profits, especially since it is usually done in the informal sector, thus avoiding paying taxes. Therefore, the Westerners in Varanasi are able to negotiate a beneficial situation for themselves within the current global capitalist order of things where money earned in the West lasts long if used in India where living costs are low.

When the Westerners in Varanasi talk about their lifestyle choices, they construct a very positive discourse and put much emphasis on individual choice. Their lifestyle and the choices they celebrate, however, also have structural constraints. As Nigel Fountain puts it: ‘in the 1960s the young dropped out, in the 1980s they are dropped out’ (Fountain 215 in McKay 1996, 52), and the latter seems to apply also in the new millennium. The Westerners in Varanasi say that they wanted to escape a lifestyle that in their view was dull and stressful but one can also argue that especially the young ones use the critical discourse as a coping strategy in a situation where they have realised that they cannot reach the standard of living that their parents have, at least not in the near future. An interesting similarity with the colonial era is the fact that then, India offered jobs for the younger sons who did not have career opportunities in Britain when the older sons inherited the family land (see e.g., Cohn 1987, 432). In very similar terms, also now India seems to serve as a relocation destination for young people who might not be employed in their countries of origin or who have been disappointed by the lack of opportunities there — with the significant difference that now they are not employed in India either and they do not even want to have (permanent) jobs. All in all, India is not an arbitrary choice for them.

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. bedsheets, necklaces, clothing, handicraft.



## Cheap India

My interviewees often saw leaving their country of origin as their only option to improve their lives as in their understanding, there is no space for an alternative lifestyle in the West. A couple of them, however, disagreed with this: according to them, one can lead an 'alternative' lifestyle also in the West but it is a lot easier to maintain such a lifestyle in India.

Q: How is life in India different from your country of origin?

A: Some people I know there [in Europe] make very beautiful things but then, it takes your whole life...I mean it takes many years to build [that life]. Here [...] for us, it's less expensive, we can study, we can live as we like [doing] art [...] much more easily than in Europe. (Laura, 25)

Q: Why do you not like living in your country of origin?

A: [...] The alternative is always there. [...] You can also find the alternative without coming to India. [...] But sure it is harder, sure everything is more expensive, you have to work harder to have a nice life. (Iris, 33)

The reasons given for not being able to have a nice life in the West are simple. The Westerners in Varanasi often referred to the rat race: everything is expensive, thus one has to work hard in order to get money, and as a result, one does not have time to enjoy life, and eventually one becomes unhappy.

The fact that India is a cheap country for Westerners is not insignificant in this lifestyle. Even people who are poor in their countries of origin can act rich in India, at least in Varanasi. Living costs are very low in Varanasi; with less than two hundred euros a month, one can afford a rather comfortable life there. In fact, although the Westerners claim to oppose consumerism and materialism, they do not live very ascetically in Varanasi. First of all, although they initially arrive in Varanasi with just a backpack, they gradually accumulate goods — mostly household utensils, mattresses, carpets and bedsheets — which they store in huge tin boxes while they are away from Varanasi. Moreover, they can afford eating in restaurants, using laundry services, getting their clothes sewed by tailors and buying relatively costly Western food products (for example, tofu, yellow cheese, olive oil and brown bread). Some Westerners also hire household help, in most cases a cleaning lady, and some women get massages regularly. Being served, if one can afford it, is common in Indian cultures, and labour is cheap and easily available. Thus, it is not very surprising that the Westerners use such services. However, they could not afford them in their countries of origin and India thus allows them a higher standard of living.

The Westerners in Varanasi thus live rather privileged lives compared to many locals and even compared to many middle class people in their countries of origin. Most of my interviewees also admitted that they are materially richer in Varanasi than they would be in their countries of origin.

Q: How is life in India different from life in your country of origin?

A: Here we have a much better way of living than if we were in our country of origin. Like the food, it's a very good quality of food, we have every day whatever vegetables we want. When I want to buy cheese or milk, then I buy it, or honey or, very good products. If I was in Europe, it would be very expensive and I could not get it. Like I don't drink tea every day with honey in it, I put sugar, it's cheaper. Many things like this. (Laura, 25)

Some Westerners who have children mentioned that people in the West often think that their children learn to be non-materialistic in India but in fact the opposite may easily happen as everything is cheap there, and therefore children often get new toys.



Economic capital is indeed interesting in the case of the Westerners in Varanasi. They possess rather little economic capital in Western terms but rather high economic capital in Varanasi terms. In terms of economic rationality, they have actually made a rational choice by moving to India, where their money lasts longer and allows them a higher standard of living than it would in their countries of origin.

Q: Why don't you want to stay in Europe?

A: [Here] I don't have to suffer from economic pressure. [...] In Europe, the cost of living is so high, it's very difficult. (Marcel, 31)

In many ways, the Westerners' stay in Varanasi is a question of economic rationality and privilege; a matter of taking advantage of the capitalist order of things where they can earn money in the West and then spend it in India where it lasts longer. Moreover, in spite of celebrating an anti-materialist discourse, many Westerners in Varanasi constantly plan how to earn money and without money they could not maintain their lifestyle at all.

Nevertheless, although many Westerners in Varanasi admit the significance of economic factors and acknowledge their privileged position in India, they emphasise that being in India is not (merely) a question of cheap living costs but an escape from the West in search of a more meaningful life. Cheapness facilitates the lifestyle but the main point is their criticism of Western societies.

### **Living Happily Ever After?**

The Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi are privileged actors taking advantage of the capitalist world order. They are privileged also because as holders of Western passports they easily obtain visas to India (and many other places as well). However, their life is not necessarily as easy as it may first seem. They say they have found a more meaningful and happier life in Varanasi. Their ideal is an easy and relaxed life. Instead of worrying about the future, the emphasis is on enjoying the present. From an outsider point of view, however, their position is ambiguous, and one can ask whether their escape has been successful or whether they have ended up from one crises situation to another.

### **Does It Ever End?**

Q: Why don't you want to stay in your country of origin? Or in some other Western country where you have lived?

A: No, it's not that I don't want to but, this is what interests me now. To learn this [music]. After, I'm sure, I won't live all my life in Benares, for sure. (Stefan, 32)

Q: Do you feel you belong here [in Varanasi]?

A: [...] I think India has called me because Mother India has something to show me and when it will be finished, I will know. I think one time it will be finished. (Sara, 32)

Only a few of my older interviewees planned to stay in Varanasi<sup>4</sup>, whereas the rest considered their sojourn there temporary. In the long run, living a mobile life is energy-consuming and one may eventually want to settle down or at least slow down. In more abstract

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<sup>4</sup> Even the older interviewees who were planning to stay in Varanasi, regularly left the city for long periods in the West.



terms, the ambiguous status has to be solved eventually. It is, however, not necessarily easy. The ethos among backpackers is that their experiences are beneficial, a form of cultural capital that can be used, for example, for finding jobs when they return to their home countries (Desforges 2000; Noy 2004; Caprioglio O'Reilly 2006, 1013). But what happens when backpacking has resulted in lifestyle migration?

Occasionally, some Westerners get tired of Varanasi and say they will never come back but very often, they appear again after some time. In fact, there are many who have tried to settle down back in their countries of origin but who return to Varanasi after a few years when settling back has proved to be too difficult. It is not easy to adjust to everyday life and routines in one's country of origin and to find one's place there after being away for long. Among other things, it is not easy to explain a gap of several years in one's curriculum vitae. Therefore, becoming a lifestyle migrant at a young age involves a risk; it may turn out to be difficult to return in case one ever wants to do so.

I have met so many kinds of people in these years of travelling, I'm used to meeting all kinds of human beings, all different. If you live in one country all the time, in the same place, you meet only one kind of people. (Iris, 33)

The Westerners in Varanasi have gained a certain cultural capital during their travels and stays in India. Above all, they have met many kinds of people and they are able to survive in different places and cultures. It is, however, not necessarily easy to turn such cultural capital acquired abroad into a marketable asset, for example, when searching for employment (see e.g., Ong 1999). Although the Westerners in Varanasi claim it to be easy to find temporary menial jobs, those are not the kinds of jobs they would like to have if they stayed in the West permanently. It thus seems that they have ended up in a rather ambiguous position; the relaxed life in Varanasi does not come without costs.

My data does not provide answers to the question of what would be a successful return. There are some clues which hint that a typical 'solution' would be to open a shop selling Indian goods and handicrafts in the West. Such a business venture would provide income, still allowing one to travel to India every now and then. In addition, one would be one's own boss, which is crucial since the Westerners in Varanasi embrace independence. Moreover, some of those who have been studying music or some other art in India manage to make it a profession in the West, for example by playing fusion music that combines Indian music with other styles. Some others are able to utilise other skills that they have learned during their travels, for example by becoming yoga teachers or massage therapists in the West. Some may start studying or working while others simply continue travelling. One solution, at least for some time, is to rent a good apartment in an upmarket middle class housing area in Varanasi and continue a more settled life there<sup>5</sup>. If one has children, their schooling forces the families (or at least the mothers) to settle down in one place, while small children easily travel along with their parents.

## Conclusion

The Westerners in Varanasi claim to have found a more meaningful life in India compared to life in their countries of origin. If one scratches the picture a bit deeper, however, one sees that to a great extent, it is actually the cheap living costs and the easy living that comes with it that attracts them in India. In other words, although they appreciate many aspects of Indian cultures,

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<sup>5</sup> I noticed the trend of moving to better houses in 'modern' areas while I was back in Varanasi in 2009.



one can see their lifestyle also in economic terms; the Westerners are utilising the capitalist world order where India is a place where they can afford to live a relaxed life. Their Indiascape is thus a part of global economic inequalities, and although they criticise consumerism and 'money mindedness', at the same time they utilise the capitalist world order to their own benefit. And eventually they are very privileged actors in the capitalist order of things.

The Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi hold a very positive discourse about their lifestyle. However, in this paper I have shown that in some sense they have ended up from one crises situation to another one. They clearly take advantage of the global capitalist order of things but it is eventually not a friendly regime; the lifestyle of freedom comes with costs as it may prove to be difficult to return to one's country of origin permanently if one ever wishes to do so. The Westerners in Varanasi try their best in the current capitalist order of things but not everyone necessarily wins; the imagination and reality do not always correspond.

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