

# International student mobility : understanding the mobility patterns and adjustment strategies of Indian international students in NTU

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**NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY**

**SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL  
SCIENCES**



**International Student Mobility: Understanding the  
Mobility Patterns and Adjustment Strategies of  
Indian International Students in NTU**

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**Abstract:**

Migration studies may have been a well discussed and researched topic in the field of Sociology, but studies on international student mobility have been relatively few. Moreover, the influx of international students in the Singapore education system, especially in the higher education level, has caused much concern and controversy among the locals recently. In this paper, I shall discuss the motivations behind the arrival of Indian international students (from India) in NTU, exploring their process of adaptation to life here, as well as examine their projected plans after their respective courses of study. Based on their life and everyday experiences, this paper attempts to sociologically analyze their responses from an individual level, and subsequently deduce certain mobility patterns before and after their course of study. Concurrently, this paper also seeks to explain the adjustment strategies they use so as to better understand the challenges they face in their adapting process.

**Keywords:** Migration, International Student Mobility, Higher Education, Mobility Patterns, Adjustment Strategies, Life and everyday experiences

**Word Count:** 9998 words

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## **1. Introduction**

Ranging from the primary to tertiary levels, the influx of international students into the Singapore Education system recently has undeniably been an issue of concern. In line with the government's vision to transform Singapore into a high quality, regional educational hub of a 'Global Schoolhouse' (EDB, 2006), Singapore welcomed many international students yearly, with its peak of 95,500 in December 2009 (Asiaone, 2010). This influx of international students is set to rise at a faster rate, with the Singapore Government's aim of attracting 150,000 such students by 2015 (CNN, 2003). These students come from a variety of countries, each bringing their own cultural backgrounds with them. Residing in the cosmopolitan city-state of Singapore, all of these students share a common purpose: the search for better educational qualities and opportunities. (Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007).

The act of actively recruiting foreign students, internationalizing their education system and even exporting their education institutions abroad (NUS, 2010) is not a practice adopted solely by Singapore. Many other countries around the world have been internationalizing their education system since the World War Two (De Wit, 2008). Initially, there was a general South-North student mobility movement to four main countries in the Western Hemisphere, namely United States of America (U.S.A.), United Kingdom (UK), Germany and France. Between 1960s and 1970s, this mobility movement was strengthened with the increasing emphasis on aiding the less developed countries through scholarships. The intention was to provide assistance to these students in less developed countries, in hope of realizing their true potential, and as a form of exchange and cooperation between the countries. Subsequently, this move evolved into a form of 'trade' with the introduction of differential fees for international students and an active recruitment for them in the 1980s and 1990s. Eventually, it became an ever increasing and competitive global competition for international students, due to their willingness to pay a higher price for an education abroad. Today, this student mobility phenomenon has accounted for 2.1 million students in 2003, and is expected to reach the heights of 5.8 million students by 2020 (Fernandes, 2006). Hence, the original intention of this mobility has dramatically evolved from social cooperation to an economical competition between countries.

Countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and China have been described by Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) as "emerging contenders" to the international student markets. Currently, the U.S.A., Australia and the UK make up a dominant 45% of the total amount of

international students worldwide. However, since the fateful September 11 terrorist attacks, the U.S.A. has tightened their immigration policies and has been issuing much less student visas than before. Similarly, countries who had met with similar terrorist attacks such as the UK and Australia have since follow suit. Seizing this opportunity, these “emerging contenders” thus invested heavily on their educational services, increasing the use of English as the medium of learning, and marketing their multi-ethnic society and lower cost of living to international students. This has inevitably altered the traditional student circulation (South-North), causing a rise in the “regionalization” (South-South) of the international students, especially in the Asia-Pacific territories, though the former is still predominant (De Wit, 2008; Lagrée, 2008).

As an ‘immigrant society’, Singapore has an outlook of being relatively open to immigrants, evident from her immigrations policies and a multi-ethnic composition of the society today (Yeoh, 2007). In conjunction with the aggressive marketing campaigns and active recruitment of international students, the success in attracting them has accounted for 2% share of the global education market (Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007).

International students here account for at least 13% of the total higher education enrolment (Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007). Reasons for this success includes the use of English language as the medium of instruction, a location geographically favourable to internationally mobile students especially from India and China, strong economic performance and relatively high standards of living, the ability to provide a high quality ‘Western’ education in familiar socio-cultural environment and lastly, relatively lower cost of living and tuition fees. This influx of international students has also attracted many prestigious educational institutes abroad, such as INSEAD (France) and Imperial College (UK), all with the purpose of having a share of the growing market.

At the tertiary levels (specifically local universities only), the government has increased its intake of international students from 10% in 1997 to 20% in 1999 (MOE, 2006). Since then, the percentage has been capped at 20% for total student intakes, a move taken to allow priority for local students, and to admit only the best available talents overseas (Ng, 2009), of which a large percentage is usually from China and India. Nanyang Technological University (NTU) welcomes many of such students yearly, and has already a growing community of 7,800 international students from over 85 countries (NTU<sup>iv</sup>, 2010). Crucially, this number carries a significant portion of the total intake of students in NTU.

However, there has been an increase in debates, controversy and even hostility over the influx of these talents from overseas into Singapore recently (Ramesh, 2009). Locals have been concerned about the lack of educational opportunities in local universities, increased competition for the top available jobs in the job market, and more importantly, insecurity with regards to national identity. Incidentally, the recruitment of these talents mostly begins from the university level. Hence their experiences and interactions with the locals in their university days could be crucial to our understanding of these talents and subsequently, reduce the level of prejudice and hostility between the two groups.

In light of the discussion above, this paper will not be focusing on the sending or receiving countries, but aims to understand the motivations behind international students, how they come to the decision to study in Singapore, and subsequently deduce the patterns or trends in this form of mobility. Secondly, this paper will also discuss how they adapt to their host environment, the difficulties (if any) faced and strategies used to overcome them. Lastly, I shall conclude my paper by examining the projected future plans and the next choice of destination of these international students after their course of study. This will provide a more wholesome and complete mobility flow of these students, and attempt to deduce any patterns on their subsequent movements. In short, the purpose of this paper is to understand the mobility patterns of the international students and the strategies they have adopted to adjust to life in Singapore. I will be focusing specifically on the Indian international students<sup>1</sup> studying in NTU for a more in-depth research and discussion on these issues.

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<sup>1</sup> For this paper, the term 'Indian international students' refers to international undergraduate students of India nationality unless otherwise stated.



## 2. Literature Review

### i. Literature Gaps

The topic on migration studies has been well discussed and researched in the field of Sociology, but studies on international student mobility have been relatively few. Lagrée (2008) has speculated that the reason for the low number of relevant literature can be traced to the small percentage of less than 2% of international students among the overall world student population. Hence, although relevant research articles have been increasing recently, this issue may still not be of a major sociological concern. Also, many of these articles have concentrated on the quantitative aspects of this form of mobility (Fernandes, 2006; Kelo *et al*, 2006; Dreher and Poutvaara, 2005). These quantitative articles often analyze from a macro perspective, focusing on the trends and patterns of the student mobility in numbers (e.g nationalities, immigration quotas etc.). Subsequently, the dearth of qualitative articles on this issue has often been lamented by many scholars (Waters, 2005; Hazen and Alberts, 2006). According to them, this mobility is not merely made up by structural factors, but also the agency, meanings and impacts of the participants themselves in making the decision to study abroad. Therefore, by focusing on the micro aspects, namely the experiences of the international students, this paper would like to enhance the qualitative findings of these issues.

Secondly, although there are qualitative articles on the study of overseas Chinese international students (Waters, 2006; Li, 2010), studies on Indian international students have been scarce. After China, India is the second highest exporter of international students, contributing 5.7% of the overall international students in 2006 to 6.2% in 2009 (OECD<sup>2</sup>, 2009), yet we have little available knowledge of them. One of the rare articles on Indian international students as discussed by Tremblay (2005), explains that their mobility began with the international opening of its economy in the early 1990s. Most of these students were involved in the Information Technology industry and immigrated to many other countries upon completion of studies. However, there is an increase in returning Indian students recently, driven by the desire to serve their country and the growth in investment opportunities in India. In addition, India is similar to China as she comprises of people with very diverse cultural backgrounds and languages. Hence, it will be interesting to find out how Indian international students from

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<sup>2</sup> OECD stands for the abbreviation of Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), where the governments of 30 democracies work together to address the economic, social and environmental challenges of globalisation.

various backgrounds come together to adapt and adjust their way of life in Singapore, subsequently deciding on their next destination after completing their studies here.

## **ii. Analysis on Motivations of International Students**

Analyzing the current trend of student mobility from a macro perspective, Glüciü (1997) claims that the inequality, especially between the third and first worlds, is the key factor in facilitating this phenomenon. However, this generalization does not explain student mobility across first worlds, neglecting the many micro factors that perpetuate it as well. For example, individual factors such as desire to experience a new culture or pursuit of certain degrees not offered in the home country, can too facilitate this movement.

Hence, many research articles use a very simple, efficient yet easily understandable model to analyze the motivations and the decision making process of international students who study abroad: The Push-Pull Model proposed by Altbach in 1998 (Li and Bray, 2007). The push factors refer to unfavourable conditions in their home countries<sup>3</sup>, such as the lack of education opportunities and unstable political environment, while pull factors refer to favourable conditions that may attract potential international students to host countries<sup>4</sup>, such as scholarships, lower cost of living or better career opportunities after completion of studies. However, this model is ineffective in other aspects, notably in understanding and explaining the decisions of these students to remain in their host country, move to other countries, or even returning to their home country after they have obtained their degree.

Therefore, to examine their subsequent movements after their studies, Li and Bray (2007) suggested an extension to this model by adding pull factors of home country and push factors of host country after their studies. Family relations and increasing opportunities at home could be factors that encourage the students to return, while discrimination or the dislike for the culture and values of the host countries could compel the students to leave for other countries. In this way, this two-way push-pull model is more adequate in explaining the mobility movements of these students without underplaying the social and cultural factors, which the previous model might have neglected. Thus, the extended part of this model will be applied to analyze the mobility movements after their course of study.

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<sup>3</sup> Home countries refer to countries of origin of the international students.

<sup>4</sup> Host countries refer to countries where the international students choose to study and reside in.

In addition, Bourdieu (1986) has mentioned that acquiring distinctive credential qualifications has become increasingly important today. It is often used as a way to maintain boundaries of class privilege and accumulate different forms of capital (e.g. economic, cultural and social), especially when more people from the lower classes are able to gain access to educational services today. Using Bourdieu's idea, Waters (2005) argues that student mobility is inevitably a necessary mean to sustain the social reproduction of the middle classes, but often at the cost of the painful separation of families. Social class hence would be a variable that I would examine with respect to the mobility trends of the Indian international students.

### **iii. Adjustments and Strategies to Adapt in Host Countries**

The adapting process is not an individual process, but requires other subjects or tools to facilitate the students' assimilation into their host countries. Hence the formation of networks, such as friendship ties could be vital, especially in the initial period of this process. In terms of friendship networks of different nationalities, Bochner *et al.* (1977) identifies that the functional use of bi-cultural networks (friends from host country) helps the international student in language and academic work, while mono-cultural networks (friends of same nationality) assists in reaffirming the cultural identity and national loyalties through common activities. In addition, international students are more prone to divulge their personal problems and feelings to friends of the same nationality. Hence, this gives us a further insight on how international students use the different networks to adapt and negotiate their everyday life.

Trust networks can be a way to describe the friendships formed with international students of the same nationality. These networks operate on the basis of interpersonal connections of strong ties and trust, within which the resources and enterprises of the members are at risk to the mistakes or failures of others in the network (Tilly, 2007). As a minority in the host country, this form of network can help international students to adapt to their host country with their embedded relationship (being from the same culture or nationality). The sharing of resources and showing emotional support also help to respond to the challenges they faced in adapting. Hence, members in trust networks highly value obligations and responsibilities to one another. Otherwise, one may face sanctions such as exclusion should they ever dishonour the group or their members in any way. This specific form of network and ties could serve as a reference to the kind of networks that Indian international students might form in Singapore.

Collins (2010) made an ethnographic study on South Korean undergraduate students living and studying in Auckland, New Zealand. Using the idea that transnational subjects are ‘embodied beings’ of their home society, he detailed how these students managed to bring and retain some of their own culture and traditions while adjusting and adapting to life in their host country. Consequently, one of the easiest and most effective ways of assimilating into the host environment is through the involvement of extra-curriculum activities (ECAs) in universities. Students highlighted that it was a great help in mutually understanding each other’s culture and values faster (Toyokawa and Toyokawa, 2002). Hence it will be important to examine the choice, involvement and impacts of the myriad of extra-curriculum activities in NTU (NTU<sup>ii</sup>, 2010) on the Indian undergraduate students, and through analysis, determine if it does help their adapting process.

#### **iv. Projected Future Plans After Course of Study**

Li (2010) argues that the international students’ decision to remain in the host country depends on the alignment of prior expectations and reality of the host environment. These students tend to either return or move on to other countries if both variables are not aligned, even if they might be fully adapted to the host environment. Thus, during their long course of study, they constantly face varying factors that might change their original intention of staying or leaving the host country (Hazen and Heike, 2006). Subsequently, their decision making patterns may also alter after their course of study.

Before arriving at their study destination, the decision to study abroad is usually made by their parents, often against the will of the individuals (Lagrée 2008; Kell and Vogl, 2010). Relying on second-hand information from friends and internet, the decision was based mainly on cost-benefit analysis focusing on structural factors of the host country, such as economic costs and educational opportunities (Hazen and Heike, 2006). However, after receiving first-hand information on the way of life during their studies in the host environment, it would not be surprising that they may choose to stay instead of returning to their home country. The traditional ‘ideology of returning’ one day remains to be explored (Gmelch, 1980).

Lagrée (2008) has identified three ideal types of identity postures that international students may adopt after their course of study, subsequently affecting the way they think about their future. These three identity postures are ‘national’, ‘international’ and ‘cosmopolitan’, each varying in their emotional attachment and the probability of returning to their own country.

Using this concept, we can better identify the subsequent mobility patterns of the Indian international students in Singapore when they choose to adopt certain types of posture.

In short, I will be using the extended push-pull model to analyze mobility movements and the decision making process of Indian international students before and after their study in NTU. In addition, 'social class' will be used as a variable to aid our understanding in any mobility patterns of these students better. Next, trust networks will serve as a guide to understand how these students form friendships ties, adapt and live their lives in Singapore. Lastly, I will then focus on their decision making process on why and how certain identity postures are chosen so as to deduce their subsequent mobility patterns.

### **3. Methodology**

This research focuses on international students of India nationality studying in NTU. The reasons for choosing these students in this paper arise from the severe lack of literature on the second largest ‘exporting country’ of foreign students worldwide, their diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, and the concentration of these students in NTU besides students from China. Focusing on their life experiences, these in-depth qualitative data were collected through a series of semi-structured face to face interviews.

I specifically looked for Indian international undergraduates who only arrived in Singapore after their pre-university education in India as my respondents. These students are here with the purpose of obtaining a degree of at least three years in NTU, and are residing in Singapore during their length of study. Altogether, I managed to find a total of 12 voluntary respondents for my interviews, of which eight of them were males and four of them females<sup>5</sup>. The age of these respondents varied from 18 to 24. These interviews were conducted between January 2011 and March 2011, recorded with an audio device under the permission and knowledge of my respondents, and later partially transcribed. English was the sole language of communication for the interviews, with the occasional words from the Hindi and Tamil language. These words would then be later explained and transcribed into the English language by the respondents themselves. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and respondents were promised and agreed to full confidentiality (e.g. using pseudo names) before the interviews. Lastly, snowball sampling greatly helped me to conduct all the 12 interviews.

There were certainly challenges in collecting empirical data for this research. Firstly, I could not depend on just one Indian national friend for all my interviews as they might share similar experiences, which would affect the validity and credibility of my data. Hence, only two other interviewees per connection was allowed, which resulted in four different social circles of Indian international students. Secondly, I realized that there were many such students living on campus in different Halls<sup>6</sup> (NTU<sup>v</sup>, 2010). This could also cause my data to be very similar, especially for the section on how they adapted and adjusted to life in Singapore. Thus I would need to locate respondents who lived outside campus to increase the representativeness of the data. Next, their strongly accented English posed a challenge for me to decipher and transcribe the data due to my unfamiliarity with their accents. Thus I would often need to

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<sup>5</sup> Please refer to Appendix for the complete profile of the interview respondents

<sup>6</sup> Halls in short refer to the set of Hall of Residence in NTU, likened to student hostels. There are a total of 16 Hall of Residences in NTU, each comprising of a mix of local and international students studying in NTU.

either call or meet up again with them to clarify certain data. Lastly, terms such as ‘social class’ are highly subjective and hard-to-define. Due to my limited knowledge on the India society as well, I left my respondents to define, gauge and identify the terms themselves based on their better knowledge of their own society. For example, I allowed them to self-identify their own social class by prompting them with certain categories, such as middle or working class.

In addition, there were also a number of limitations on the methods used for this paper. The small sample size of respondents interviewed could not be taken to represent the wider Indian international student communities in NTU. However, this sample was able to reveal certain clear trends adequately. Also, the research was only restricted to NTU, and was not able to compare the accounts of these students with other such students in local universities such as National University of Singapore (NUS) or Singapore Management University (SMU). Accounts of such students from other universities could produce a very different data.

## 4. Findings

This section of the paper offers a compilation of the findings based on 12 in-depth interviews conducted with different Indian undergraduates in NTU. It is also organized in a way which will deal with the students' experiences of before, during and projected plans after their course of study in Singapore.

### i. Motivations of Indian International Students

Using the push-pull model (Li and Bray, 2007) to uncover the push factors of India society, there are a number of reasons why these students had considered heading out of their own country after their pre-university education. Most of my respondents cited reasons such as the poor educational facilities available for learning and research, lack of diversity in course choices and the poor reputation of India universities as the main factors for pushing them out of India to pursue their university education. However, the most important push factor for them lies in the lack of top university education opportunities in India, due to the intense competition in a highly populous nation. Arjun, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student, summarizes the highly competitive educational path in India:

“...there is too much competition for the IITs<sup>7</sup> in India. Only the top few students can enter...these students come from all sorts of backgrounds, but academically they are all too good...**if you are not in the top IITs in India, then the only other degrees more valuable than the NITs<sup>8</sup> are the overseas ones.**”

As IIT degrees are relatively scarce in India, students who cannot enter the IITs but can enter the other local universities in India, often seek for ways to edge themselves above other students facing similar situation. Thus, students frequently look abroad to pursue their university education so as to gain a slightly higher standing than the rest in any job markets.

Without doubt, an overseas university education will require a certain amount of financial resources to cope with the tuition fees and the cost of living abroad. Bina, a 2<sup>nd</sup> year middle class student commented:

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<sup>7</sup> IITs refer to the India Institute of Technology (IIT). There are a total of 15 IITs in India, of which 6 IITs (e.g. IIT Madras etc.) are highly reputable. A total of about 450,000 students sit for the IIT Entrance exams each year, but only approximately 13,000 of them could qualify for the IITs. – Website from StudyGuideIndia<sup>i</sup>.com

<sup>8</sup> NITs refer to the National Institutes of Technology (NIT). There are a total of 30 NITs in India. The NITs are considered to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> class of tertiary band below the top 6 IITs and the rest of the IITs. – Website from StudyGuideIndia<sup>ii</sup>.com



“I am lucky that my family can support my education and my cost of living in Singapore. It is really so expensive (living and studying) here! The tuition fees here cost seven times as much as I would need to pay for a comparable NIT degree...if not for my tuition grant, I don't think my parents can afford it too!...But my family always says that **education is the most important. Cost and distance are secondary.**”

Because of their substantial financial background, these middle class students from India are able to study and live in Singapore via their MOE tuition grant<sup>9</sup> and the various bursaries available from NTU. In order for their children to have a good education, and subsequently good job prospects, parents are willing to pay a very high price to ensure their children's success. However, students from the working class in India may not be that fortunate to participate in this mobility. Murali, a 2<sup>nd</sup> year working class student explained:

“...only way out for students (in the working class) like me is to get a scholarship. The **cost of living is too high** even with tuition grant.”

Consequentially, the obsessive pursuit for an overseas degree will certainly make huge impacts within the student's family. One arrangement is the painful separation of the family (Waters, 2005). However, most of the respondents reflected that the decision to study abroad was actually initiated by their parents. Raju, a 1<sup>st</sup> year student calmly shared that:

“...it was inevitable...It was actually **my parents who tried to persuade me** into this (abroad studies)...I eventually agreed (to them)”

After taking the decision to study abroad, these students then had to decide their impending study destination. All of my respondents had stated that factors of the university institution, rather than the country, would be more important in considering their study destination. Arjun, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student commented:

“Once you decided to go off home, it doesn't matter where...**If I have to adapt, might as well I go for the best (possible) institution...**Financial worries like cost

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<sup>9</sup> MOE Tuition Grant refers to the Ministry of Education Tuition Grant, which covers about 60% of the total tuition fees in NTU. The annual tuition fee for an unsubsidized international student is about S\$26,000. – Website by NTU<sup>iii</sup>. However, students under such grants are required to work for a Singapore registered company anywhere under a 3 year bond.

of living come close, **but not as much as institution. You can deal with other things later.”**

Unless there are outstanding issues in the country, for example political unrest or severe racism, these students will not be deterred by other factors of the country such as culture dislike or language barriers. These students strongly believe that with a better education opportunity, there will be better job opportunities available for them. Subsequently, they are willing to endure much of the hardships in adapting to any environment so as to receive their coveted degree eventually. Hence for the pull factors to study in Singapore, much of it has been based on the pull by NTU, followed by Singapore herself.

These students who arrived in NTU cited reasons of NTU having a ‘global reputation’, variety of course choices, English as the language medium for learning, better educational and accommodation facilities, and the easy accessibility to tuition grants and scholarships. Subsequently, Singapore’s pulling factors include having a multicultural society, an established Indian international students community, lower cost of living, safety and security, and lastly, geographically closer to India. However, the value of a NTU Singapore degree actually lies in the ‘international exposure’ that students gained from their time here. This actually gives them an edge in competing for better jobs against their India counterparts studying back home. Mohan, a 4<sup>th</sup> year student commented:

“The NTU degree has this ‘brand name’ that is well recognized back in India...more important is that **employers assume** that once we have gone abroad to study...**we can communicate better especially in English...more independent and confident...have more international connections...**these are the traits employers will be looking for as compared to students graduating in India.”

This is further confirmed by Sachin, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student, when I had asked him how he had changed as a person:

“Yeah, I realized that I have become more extrovert and articulate in talking to random people...make decisions better...more open to new experiences, and also become more confident as a person.”

All these information of studying abroad in NTU were thoroughly researched, collected and thought through by the students and their parents. In addition, advice from relatives, teachers, returning seniors and the internet were also sources of information. Thus the push-pull model helps in understanding why and under what conditions did they come to NTU in search of an overseas degree.

## **ii. Adjustments and Strategies to Adapt in Singapore**

Respondents have reflected certain fears and concerns prior to arriving in Singapore. Primarily, they were afraid that they would not be able to take care of themselves, and could not adjust to the food and local Singaporeans. This section thus reflects on the accounts of these respondents, and how they formed networks of friends to overcome their concerns and smoothed their transition into a new life in Singapore.

All of the respondents have praised the good work done by the Indian Social and Cultural Society<sup>10</sup> (ISCS) in helping them with the initial settling down in Singapore (ISCS, 2006). Representatives from ISCS would fetch these Indian international students from the airport, settled them down in (mostly) Halls, and offer them much advices such as the transportation system, places to locate Indian food and avenues to purchase their daily necessities in Singapore. However, the most significant contribution of the ISCS is to organize the annual event of ‘Milaap<sup>11</sup>’, better known as the Indian Orientation Camp (IOC) before the commencement of every academic year. This four-day annual IOC gathers freshmen of Indian ethnicity from India and other countries, conducts camp games and offers tours in NTU and Singapore for them to familiarize to their surroundings. The impacts of this camp were summarized by Sachin:

“We were highly encouraged to join this camp by our seniors because they said it was a good way to make friends. I certainly made a lot of fellow Indian (national) friends...during the camp, these seniors in ISCS would tell us stories of how we (Indian international students) helped each other in settling here...I think this camp has created some kind of **an unspoken bond** between us that we should help each other...”

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<sup>10</sup> ISCS is a student organization in NTU which organizes activities for Indians of all nationalities in NTU.

<sup>11</sup> “Milaap” is a Hindi word which means “meeting” or “union” in English.

As the camp was predominantly made up of international students from India, nationality became a basis for support and friendships between these students. Subsequently, certain obligations and responsibilities to their fellow countrymen were impressed upon them by their seniors, who had also been through this process of adjustment before.

There is also a common tradition of ‘ragging’ among undergraduates back in India. This activity serves as a way to ‘orientate’ the freshmen informally, while involving much physical violence and humiliation from the seniors for their own entertainment. This tradition was also brought over to Singapore by these Indian international students. Although ‘ragging’ here is of a much reduced level as compared to India, this activity is considered a precursor to the formation of a closer network of friends. Mohan shared that:

“It’s definitely not part of the IOC (formal) camp. Some of the seniors would just randomly call us into their rooms, and we had to do things like giving a formal introduction, performing a skit, write our names with our bums or even cook Maggie (noodles) for them. But that’s it, nothing more...I even **got to know my best friends** from there (‘ragging’) and we had a lot of fun being ‘punished’ at the same time.”

These students find that ‘ragging’ is an essential activity in getting to know more seniors and making a closer network of friends through a fun way. Many felt that once a freshman has gone through a session of ‘ragging’, he will have forged closer ties with their fellow freshmen and the seniors will be more receptive in helping them in the future. Subsequently, the ties in this closer network of friends would be further strengthened according to the various hall clusters they reside in, due to the close proximity with one another. Subsequently, these close-knitted networks of friendships functioned in ways to aid the settling down of these students in Singapore. Vivek, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student shared that:

“...we share almost everything. They would lend me money should I need it, loan me their laptops if mine is spoilt, take care of me when I’m ill...but I think the most important thing is that we support each other emotionally by confiding in each other, share our problems and concerns...**I trust them totally.**”

However, any forms of dishonourable acts by the members that damage the image of the Indian international student community will face exclusion or even condemnation from the group. Sachin recounted an incident that happened recently:

“The ISCS had organized an Indian cultural exchange night with the Indian students (from India) from NUS...some of the seniors from NTU became rowdy after having some alcohol, littered the place...started to verbally insult those from NUS and damaged some chairs in the Lee Kong Chian Theatre (in NTU). The school (NTU) got to know about this the next day...They (NTU) suspended the Hall applications of the ISCS organizing committee and all other activities of ISCS. Once we (other Indian students) got to know about it, we sort of **hate those seniors**...I heard some of them (other Indian students) even went to **scold those seniors**...”

All my respondents reflected that there were not many changes from their lifestyle with the one they had back in India, except for being ‘forced to participate in school or hall activities’ so as to earn points and secure places in Halls every year (NTU<sup>i</sup>, 2010). There was no need to join such activities back in India, but they ended up enjoying it and learnt many skills, such as communication skills and better understanding of the local accents. However, they still feel more comfortable in spending time with their fellow Indian international students, noticing that Singaporeans also prefer to communicate among themselves. This observation does confirm Hoare’s ethnographic study of a university in Singapore (Hoare, 2010).

They also felt that there are not many differences in lifestyles between their friends in Halls. Whenever they get together with their friends, they will engage in activities such as watching movies, online gaming, and drinking alcohol, usually during the weekends in NTU. Above all, studying together with fellow Indian international students is the most common activity engaged among my respondents. The first reason for this is the ‘fear of failure’. Gahima, a 1<sup>st</sup> year student commented:

“My parents have **invested so much** on me. I can’t fail them! I came from so far...I need to **get a good degree and repay them**...”

The second reason is the myriad of educational and job opportunities sighted in Singapore. Vivek commented:

“What drives the Indian community here is that there are **so many opportunities here as compared to India**, and you face much **lesser competition** here (than India)...”

Thus these students believe that by earning an excellent degree, one can have the opportunity to apply for a top job and subsequently, be able to provide for their families back home.

On the contrary, the lifestyle of students living outside of Halls is slightly different. They are not obliged to join these extra curriculum activities; thus their interactions with the locals are greatly curtailed. In addition, they still faced different challenges every day, such as household chores and cramping in small rooms with students of different nationalities, meanwhile having to balance their academic matters. Hence, students living off NTU could find themselves being more reclusive within their own close network of friends with the same nationality as they have to constantly work together to solve the different challenges in their student life.

In conclusion, the ISCS does help in the initial settling down, but activities like “milaap”, “ragging” and the close proximity of hall clusters fostered stronger ties and networks within the Indian international student community. These ties served to solve the challenges faced by these students in adjusting to life in Singapore through collective efforts within the network. Sanctions of exclusion and condemnation were imposed if any of the members brought shame to the community. Lastly, the lifestyle of these students was organized around their academic pursuits, but varies much in terms of staying on and off campus.

### **iii. Projected Future Plans After Course of Study**

Initially, half of the respondents I interviewed said that they initially had the intention to return to India straight after their course of study here. However, among the six, all but one changed their intentions after their stay in Singapore. Most of them had decided to remain in Singapore to serve their bonds because Singapore exceeded most of their expectations. Mohan stated:

“I like the way of life in Singapore and (her) standard of living. There are also so many good companies here which can add value to my résumé...like to stay with my (India) friends which I am close with for a few more years before deciding my next destination.”

In order to understand their choice of next destination after their studies here, we have to use the extended push-pull model as mentioned earlier and analyze their decision making process (Li and Bray, 2007). Pull factors that will attract them back to India are only their family and better job opportunities. The only push factor of Singapore indicated by one of my respondent is the monotonous lifestyle here. Factors influencing them in moving to other countries include better job opportunities and further studies. Generally, all but one said that they plan to remain in Singapore after their studies for the time being.

After having first-hand experience living here, these students feel that they are in a better position to decide on their future destinations themselves. Their parents still have certain say, but it is still ultimately up to the individuals. These students based their decision more on individual preferences such as dislike of culture or lifestyle. As for family arrangements after their studies, Imran a 4<sup>th</sup> year student mentioned:

“Of course my parents would like me to return (India), but the decision (of next destination) is **ultimately up to me**. I could either bring them over, or maybe even return home someday, but definitely not now...there is a common understanding that the family will be reunited someday somewhere.”

Their families seem prepared to be separated even after their children's course of study. This could be an eventual impact from their stay in Singapore.

There are no conclusive patterns from the mixed responses to which ‘identity postures’ these students would adopt after their course of studies (Lagrée, 2008). Three of my respondents reflected a strong sense of desire to return home at the earliest opportunity and serve the people. Coupled with their search for familiarity, they reflected characteristics of the ‘national posture’. Six others felt they can live anywhere in the world but still wished to return to India when they got older displayed traits of the ‘international posture’. Finally, Ayesha, a 1<sup>st</sup> year student, represented the rest of the respondents who chose the ‘cosmopolitan posture’ with this statement:

“**I don't think an Indian (national) must return or stay in India today**. Maybe in the past but no longer (today)...I can stay anywhere in the world as long as I am happy, I have a good and well-paid job and a good life.”

Therefore, the alignment of expectations and reality is a useful way in measuring the chances for these students to remain in Singapore after their studies. Using the extended push-pull model and analyzing their decision making process, their subsequent choice of destination is ultimately down to individual factors. The ties of family and nationalism could affect some of their decisions, but it still does not stop them in adopting a global outlook on life.



## **5. Discussion of Findings**

### **i. Mobility Patterns of Indian International Students Arriving in Singapore**

As mentioned earlier, the India society provides many push factors for these students to seek an overseas degree. However, the most salient push factor, which is the lack of top educational opportunities, is a result of the highly intensive and competitive educational paths in India. As it is perceived that only the top IIT degrees can stand out among all other local degrees, there seems to be a phenomenon of credential inflation in the India society. It is little wonder that Indian students look for an overseas degree to distinct themselves.

The middle class, having relatively more economic capital, are thus able to have more educational options and exercise their 'rights' as consumers (Waters, 2006). They are mostly driven by the threat of failure, fearing that their children will not be able to maintain status quo, reproduce class privileges and secure themselves against uncertain political and economic futures, should they fail to acquire good paper qualifications. Hence there is a need to distinct their educational investments from the lower classes by making their degrees more scarce and valuable to the society (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, acquiring an overseas degree is a form of strategy to accumulate distinctive cultural capital through education for the middle class. Incidentally, most of my respondents identified themselves as from the middle class. This route offers a form of escape and the avoidance of failure for them and their family.

This strategy does alter the mechanism of the India labour market. By increasing the value of the degrees in the labour market, graduates will now have to obtain degrees that can distinct themselves from the other degree holders. The component of 'international exposure' gives much weight to overseas degrees, making them stand out against other local degrees. From the findings, respondents claimed that employers in India often prefer to hire students with overseas degrees as the employers perceived advantageous traits in them, such as international connections (social capital) and vigorous personal development, as compared to their local undergraduates. This disadvantage of local Indian undergraduates searching for job opportunities in India has also compelled the lower classes to go overseas for their degrees in order to move up the social classes. Unfortunately, their only way of heading abroad to study is via the scholarships route.

These structural factors have inevitably caused the difficult separation of families. But the dispersal of the household enables the accumulation of different forms of capital concurrently within the family to maintain status quo (Waters, 2005). The student's parents accumulating economic capital for them to accumulate more cultural and social capital for the family, explains why parents are the ones that initiate the decision for their children to study abroad. This kind of family arrangements has become an accepted way of life and a mean to achieve the ends for the middle class in India.

Returning to the pull factors that attracts the Indian international students to Singapore, I argue that what attracts them to Singapore are the advantages of the institution (NTU) rather than the country herself. Based on my findings, all my respondents placed much more importance in the education institutional pulling factors than the country's, as they are prepared to stay anywhere in pursuit of a good degree. Subsequently, Singapore's use of the English language as the medium for learning and geographically being close to India has also caused a 'regionalization' (De Wit, 2008; Lagrée, 2008) of Indian international students to study here .

In short, I argue that the mobility patterns of Indian international students studying here are mostly from the middle class who cannot enter the IITs, attracted by the institution (NTU) rather than Singapore, and are enticed by the easy accessibility to tuition grants and scholarships. They usually face the stress on impending threats of failure, and are asked to study abroad by their families so as to accumulate various forms of capital to distinct themselves from lower classes. Students of the lower classes can only be here via their scholarships, and are here to improve their social class. Contrary to Li and Bray (2007), I also argue that for the pull factors in the push-pull model, one should focus on institutions rather than the country, so as to better understand the reasons for the arrival of international students.

## **ii. Trust Networks as the Primary Strategy for Adjustment in Singapore**

Respondents reflected that they did not remember facing many problems with the initial adjustment period. In fact, they were eased into life in Singapore by the ISCS initially. The ISCS also organized the 'milaap' camps, where they found friends of the same nationality and were conditioned into supporting one another through the stories told. This helped them to form bonds of friendship, resulting in obligations and responsibilities as a form of duty to one another based on national ties. Thus contrary to a generalized form of trust networks by Tilly

(2007), I argue that these bonds of friendships are the first level of trust networks among the Indian international students in NTU.

The activity of 'ragging' serves as a precursor to the second level of trust networks: smaller groups of close tight-knit friends of the same nationality. Using the concept of 'embodied beings' (Collins, 2010), the Indian international students bring over the traditions of 'ragging', and values such as respecting the hierarchy of seniority to Singapore. These freshmen partake in 'ragging' under the seniors' orders, but end up forming stronger friendship ties with other freshmen to form a smaller, closer group of network. Most of my respondents claimed that 'ragging' is essential in creating a unique form of identity among their group after going through the process together. Subsequently, the ties within the group are further strengthened according to the various Hall clusters they reside in. Due to their close proximity, they are more likely to deal with the problems and challenges in adjusting to life in Singapore collectively, mainly by sharing resources and offering emotional support.

From the fateful cultural exchange night recounted by Sachin, some seniors dishonoured the Indian international student community with their contemptible acts. In retrospect, they have threatened two valuable resources of the community, namely the Hall rooms and the ISCS. Hall rooms are precious assets for many Indian international students as it is much cheaper to live on than off campus. In addition, the ISCS remains an important student organization for the community to gather, strengthen cultural identities and national loyalties through their activities. Therefore, these seniors faced sanctions such as exclusion and condemnation from members of their own community as these resources may no longer be shared (Tilly, 2007).

Due to the usefulness of the trust networks, coupled with no significant lifestyle changes as compared to back in India, my respondents did not identify any specific individual adjustment strategies. However, they did mention that their lives are organized around academic activities like study groups so as to achieve academic success. The reasons are down to their fear of failure, less competition and more job opportunities as compared to India. Another minor change to their lives here is the mandatory involvement of ECAs in order to retain a place in Halls. Although respondents reflected that they did learn some of the values and practices of Singaporeans, the apparent segregation and lack of interaction between these two groups have not aided the Indian international students in their adapting process greatly. This is contrary to the positive relationship between ECAs and the adapting process (Toyokawa and Toyokawa, 2002).

Opposite to the arguments of Bochner *et al.* (1977), there is no need for the Indian international students to use bi-cultural networks as they did not face problems of language here and they used mono-cultural networks to solve academic problems. Even when both the groups of Singaporeans and Indian international students are compelled into one setting such as ECAs, there is still a lack of integration between them. Both groups are self-sufficient on their own.

The Indian international students depend heavily on trust networks of their own nationalities to solve their adjustment challenges collectively, especially so for those living off campus. Hence I argue that these students are eased into their trust networks via existing structures such as ISCS, 'Milaap', 'ragging' and Hall clusters. Instead of using cross cultural networks, they use the two different levels of trust network for different purposes. The functional use of the first level is to strengthen communal spirit, such as the reaffirming of cultural identities and national loyalties. The second level of trust networks, referring to the closer group of friends, helps in overcoming individual adjustment challenges, such as lack of resources or emotional distress. Their lack of individual adjustment strategies produced a 'uniform way of life' among the community, but varies between those living on and off campus.

### **iii. Mobility Patterns After Course of Study in Singapore**

In line with Li's (2010) argument, my findings suggest that many of my respondents change their intentions of returning back to India during their course of study in favour of remaining in Singapore. This is because Singapore has exceeded their expectations with a better standard of living and more job opportunities as compared to India.

With regards to their decision making process, two changes can be identified based on my findings. Firstly, the power to decide on their next destination has been shifted from their parents to the individuals. Having first-hand experience living here, my respondents feel that they are now in a better position to decide their own future. They also feel that their parents will now give them greater autonomy, having proven to them that they can live independently away from home. Secondly, the consideration of their next destination has also greatly shifted from structural to individual factors, such as preference for a particular culture or country (Hazen and Heike, 2006). These shifts in decision making paradigms can help us understand and predict their impending choice of destinations better.

Applying the extended push-pull model to their decision making process, there are unfortunately no clear, deducible patterns on the subsequent mobility of my respondents based on their mixed responses. Those who choose to adopt the ‘national posture’ identity possess an extremely strong attachment to their country and family, hoping to return at the earliest opportunity. Though the majority of my respondents have chosen to adopt the ‘international posture’, they still hope to assert their culture and national belonging in their subsequent destinations, and will only return should they ‘succeed’ in their own terms. For those who have decided to take on the ‘cosmopolitan posture’, their total detachment from India propels them to become ‘rootless’ people, satisfied in living anywhere with material conditions as their primary importance (Lagréé, 2008). Unlike China who offers economic rewards for overseas students to return home (Shen, 2010), India offers no such incentives. Thus my respondents’ main consideration in choosing their next destination heavily hinges on attractive job and further studies opportunities. Also, it depends on the emotional attachment the individual has for the country and their desire to search for intangible rewards, such as familiarity with their home environment.

Although there are no clear patterns of mobility after their course of study, criterias such as individual preferences, job and study opportunities, material importance and emotional attachment to the country gives us hints on predicting their ensuing movements. The separation of the family can be permanent as a result of their overseas studies, but that does not necessarily mean that family ties have drastically weakened (Shen, 2010), as all my respondents would like to bring their families over to their next choice of destination. However, the ‘ideology of return’ (Gmelch, 1980) may no longer hold true as tangible rewards seem to be far more enticing than emotional ties among the younger generations today.

## **6. Conclusion**

In line with the Singapore government's vision of a 'Global Schoolhouse', the ever increasing number of international students choosing to study in Singapore marks a significant step towards this goal. This 'regionalization' process (De Wit, 2008; Lagrée, 2008) has brought students from many countries in the Asia-Pacific region to not only acquire her high quality education services, but also to reside in the small city-state of Singapore.

Besides international students from China, Indian international students make up the second largest proportion of international students in the Singapore higher education level (Yeoh, 2007). These Indian international students come from various cultural, religious, language and economic backgrounds, all arriving with the purpose to obtain a well-recognized international degree in Singapore. Today, many of them live among Singaporeans, and some have even chosen to move into the Singapore labour market, contributing to our economy tremendously. Unfortunately, we have very little knowledge and qualitative literature on these students, especially on aspects such as their mobility patterns before and after their course of study here, and how they have adjusted to life in Singapore as an international student.

My findings here have shown that the mobility patterns of Indian international students studying here are generally from the middle class who wished to obtain a comparable degree with those from the IITs after their pre-university studies. They are primarily attracted by the education institution rather than the country, and the tuition grants and scholarships issued in Singapore. These students usually face the threat of failure back home, and are asked to study abroad under parental orders, undertaking the difficult yet inevitable decision of separation from their family. In their adjusting process to life in Singapore, they depend heavily on two different levels of trust networks of their own nationalities to solve different adjustment challenges and problems collectively. These Indian students do not have any specific individual adjustment strategies, but are eased into structures that allow them to form their own trust networks and subsequently, producing a 'uniform way of life' among these students. Lastly, from this research, there are no clear deducible mobility patterns of these students after their course of study here. But various important individual factors, such as the preference of job and further studies opportunities, material importance and the level of emotional attachment to their country and family can allow us to predict their eventual destination. It is not indisputable that they will return to their country and the separation from their family can thus be a permanent effect from this mobility.

There are certainly areas that this paper would like to further explore for future research. Firstly, it is highly possible that Indian international students who are living in the NTU Halls can lead a different lifestyle from other such students studying in other local universities here. From my findings, I have shown that students residing in the Halls lead a very different lifestyle from those who stay off campus. Thus, it is also worthwhile to examine students from other local universities, many of whom may not have the luxury of Halls, on any institutional or structural factors such as university cultures and regulations that might affect their adjusting process in Singapore. Secondly, a female respondent from this research indicated that she faced mild gender discrimination from her own community in NTU. As gender preference for males in India is widely reported, especially in the rural areas, it will be interesting to explore how students as an 'embodied being' (Collins, 2010) bring over certain values and beliefs from their culture, and how female Indian international students deal with the 'double challenge' of gender discrimination while adjusting to life here. Lastly, other variables such as the diminishing yet still relevant caste systems and the 'north-south' divide of India (Polgreen, 2010) can also play significant impacts on these students' mobility patterns and adjustment process in Singapore.

The wider significance of this research aims to improve the current theoretical frameworks in understanding the mobility patterns and the adjustment process of the international students. The extended push-pull model (Li and Bray, 2007) cannot be merely restricted to structural forces between countries, but must also consider factors of the education institutions and individuals. In addition, trust networks (Tilly, 2007) should not be over-simplified into one generalized level but two, each with its own functional use. Secondly, policy makers dealing with immigration policies in Singapore can tap on this research to further understand what is required to retain these talented international students, in order to develop and strengthen our economy and social fabric. Once their needs and wants are satisfied, these students can then be better prepared and willing to assimilate and integrate into our society.

In conclusion, this research hopes to ignite interests in mobility studies on international students in Singapore, and subsequently enhance the scarce sociological literature on them. In view of the government's stand on attracting even more international talents to Singapore, coupled with the increase of scholarships issued and the growing competitiveness in various societies, issues with regards to international student mobility will be a prominent area for sociological research in the future.

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## 8. Appendix - Details of Respondents

<b>Respondent (Psuedo name)</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Year of Study</b>	<b>Hometown/ Religion</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Type of Scholar -ship*</b>	<b>Self- Identified Social Class</b>
Arjun	M	21	3	Chennai/ Hindu	English, Hindi, Tamil	A	Middle
Sachin	M	20	3	RaeBareli/ Hindu	English, Hindi	A	Middle
Bina	F	20	2	Delhi/ Hindu	English, Hindi	A	Middle
Karisma	F	21	2	Chennai/ Hindu	English, Hindi, Tamil	A	Middle
Murali	M	19	2	Muzzafarpur/ Muslim	English, Urdu	B	Working
Raju	M	21	1	Faridabad/ Hindu	English, Hindi, Punjabi	A	Middle
Ayesha	F	18	1	Delhi/ Hindu	English, Hindi	A	Middle
Gahima	F	18	1	Chennai/ Hindu	English, Hindi, Tamil	B	Middle

**Imran	M	22	4	Ratnam/ Muslim	English, Urdu, Hindi	A	Middle
**Kumar	M	24	4	Bhopal/ Hindu	English, Hindi	B	Working
Vivek	M	21	3	Bengaluru/ Hindu	English, Kannada	B	Middle
Mohan	M	22	4	Jamshedpur/ Hindu- Punjabi	English, Hindi	A	Middle

\* Denotes Types of Scholarships:

- A – MOE Tuition Grant
- B – SIA-NOL Scholarship

\*\*Denotes that respondent does not stay on the NTU Campus in Halls