Negotiating cosmopolitan ambitions: The everyday social lives of South Indian student and young professional migrants in the UK

‘If you stay in India it’s ok, but if you go global you’ll meet a lot of people and your knowledge will improve. It will help in the future, like professionally and career wise, but also life-wise’ (Kaalan – engineer).

There is an undeniable desire amongst many educated Indian young people to study and work abroad. As Suven, a young engineer who participated in this research, explained: ‘If you ask anyone who’s at university in India and is reasonably good in studies, there is no question – everybody wants to go abroad’. Factors influencing the decision to study or work overseas include a lack of access to higher education or opportunities for career progression at home, historical links between the home and destination country, and perceptions of superior educational or professional standards abroad (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002: 82), with each of these impetuses reflected in the narratives of the 25 student and young professional migrants from Tamil Nadu, South India interviewed towards this research.

The quotation from Kaalan which began this paper is an example par excellence of a common thread which emerged from participants’ narratives – the ambition to ‘go global’ as a key motivating factor in the life-changing (and in the case of students, very expensive) decision to study or work in the UK. A ‘cosmopolitan’ outlook and experience was posited as an essential outcome of the UK work or study venture - an ambition reinforced by the self-presentation of UK universities as globalised spaces where a multi-national and multi-ethnic student body mingle happily on glossy prospectus pages, and by corporations whose international orientations are fore-grounded in marketing campaigns.¹ In common with the middle-class Indians in Batnitzky et al.’s study, who viewed a period working in London as a ‘resume’ builder (2008: 62), international exposure was understood as a marketable attribute which enhanced future prospects: ‘I want to work here at least a couple of years... Let me gain a couple of years’ experience because then it looks very good on your CV – you can go back and do whatever you want’ (Sharuk – media professional). A period spent working or studying overseas was additionally seen to signify personal development. Monesh, an engineer, explained that international experience has allowed him to ‘see life in a different perspective’ and to ‘grow as a person’, while Bala, an engineer, speculated that spending time overseas would make him a more attractive marriage partner: ‘If the girl is educated – a modern career girl . . . . If you have lived abroad you will be more exposed to those values and not be expecting her to stay in the house, so they will appreciate that’. As such, international experience is configured as capital: ‘It is the social benefits of gaining new knowledge, skills and education in another place that matter most’ (Findlay et al., 2011: 4), with ‘one of the uses of this symbolic capital [being] to represent international study [or professional experience] as a distinguishing identity.

The notion of cosmopolitanism emerged strongly from the accounts of student and young professionals who viewed their migration to the UK in these capital building terms.

¹ Such as a recent UK television advertising campaign for a financial services provider, which features customs from around the world with the tagline, ‘the world’s local bank’.
But while cosmopolitanism, ‘in its most fundamental sense, implies openness to difference’ (Datta, 2009: 353), debates around who is ‘open’, and to what and to whom have concerned scholars, with robust criticisms of the traditional association between the cosmopolitan and the elite world traveller emerging through accounts of ‘working class’ and ‘ordinary’ cosmopolitanism (Lamont and Aksartova, 2002; Werbner, 1999). As with Datta’s (2009) London-based Polish respondents, participants in this study blur the ‘elite’ and ‘ordinary’ cosmopolitan divide. With a few exceptions, participants were middle-class, occupied positions of economic and social advantage in their country of origin, and experienced privileged mobility as authorised entrants to the UK through formal immigration channels. But as Datta notes, cosmopolitanism is ‘spatial’ and ‘situated’ (356). For postgraduate students or recent graduates in particular, localities of everyday life correlated more closely with those of ‘ordinary’ or ‘working class’ cosmopolitans, with many living in ethnically diverse, low income neighbourhoods of UK cities where short-term rental accommodation was cheap and plentiful. However, participants’ talk around their expectations of the UK work or study venture suggested engagement with a more traditionally elite understanding of cosmopolitanism as ‘an intellectual and aesthetic stance toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrast rather than conformity’ (Hannerz, 1996: 103), which positions ‘the cosmopolitan’ in contrast to ‘the ethnic’ or ‘the transnational’ (1990: 240): ‘Cosmopolites reject the confines of bounded communities and their own cultural backgrounds’ and instead ‘embrace a global outlook’ (Binnie et al., 2006: 7).

This paper examines how this particular understanding of cosmopolitanism frames participants’ perceptions of themselves and others as cosmopolitan or not through talk and practice around UK social networks. The paper begins by introducing the research and its participants. It goes on to consider everyday socialisation amongst these migrant participants, grouping them into two ‘types’; ‘self-conscious cosmopolitans’ whose networks are wholly or predominantly cross-ethnic, and those who are embedded in more ethnically homogenous networks, whom self-conscious cosmopolitans commonly derided as ethnic-parochial, or as ‘clannish’ or ‘cliquey’. Participants’ talk around these networks is then explored, in particular how the reality of social networks in the UK setting is negotiated in relation to the professed cosmopolitan ambition. The final section asks whether participation in largely co-ethnic social networks represents a ‘failure’ to realise the cosmopolitan ambition, or simply reflects a narrow understanding of cosmopolitanism which does not take into account the host of ‘ordinary’ cosmopolitan encounters these young migrants experience in their everyday UK lives.

The research and its participants

Twenty-five student and professional migrants were interviewed between March and September 2011. Additionally, observational work was carried out at a number of social events organised or attended by participants. Student migration is a major immigration flow to the UK (Mulley and Sachrajda, 2011: 2), and India ranks only behind China in the list of

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2 One participant was from an impoverished ‘scheduled tribe’ community, and though in receipt of an Indian government scholarship, relied on a part-time job in a care home for the elderly to meet UK living costs. Another described how his family had mortgaged their assets to allow him to study in the UK.
top non-EU student sending countries with, in 2009/2010, 38,500 Indian students attending UK universities (UKCISA, 2011). Skilled employment migration to the UK is a smaller but nonetheless significant stream. Of the almost 114,000 work entry visas issued to non-European Economic Area (EEA) nationals in 2010, just under half were issued in the Tier 1 (Highly Skilled) and Tier 2 (Skilled) categories (Blinder, 2011: 3), with India, again, an important sending country at the vanguard of skilled labour migration within the globalised information technology sector (Khadia, 2006: 175). Of the 25 participants in this study, 14 were in employment at the time of research, with 6 of these 14 entering the UK as Tiers 1 or 2 visa holders. The remainder of employed participants had completed postgraduate study at UK universities, and remained in the country under the terms of the 2-year post-study work visa (PSWV) then available to international postgraduates. 7 worked in engineering or computing, while the remaining 5 were employed in the health care, media and marketing sectors. The remaining 2 worked in the service sector while seeking employment relevant to their studies. A further 11 participants were current postgraduate students at UK universities, with most studying engineering or computing related degree courses.

The research took place in the Midlands and South West of England, in urban locations which are home to universities and/or ‘hi-tech’ industries with a demand for skilled employees. Participants were in their 20s or early 30s at the time of the research, and 19 are male and 6 female, reflecting a trend for student and professional migrants to be ‘young and male’ (Blinder, 2011: 4–5). Gender and professional or student migration is an under-researched area (Iredale, 2005: 157), and although the sample is of insufficient size to make meaningful inferences, it is perhaps reflective of the gender imbalance in Indian higher education and subsequent access to highly skilled occupations (Azam and Blom, 2008: 6). Other factors may include the male-domination of sectors associated with non-EU student and professional migration – engineering, computing and the sciences (Iredale, 2005: 156); while some female participants themselves speculated that their under-representation may be due to social expectations that young Indian women prioritise marriage over overseas work or study. For the majority of these migrants, their planned stay in the UK was temporary. Most envisaged returning to India after gaining their qualification or a few years work experience, and expected that their overseas experience would assist them in ‘climbing a few rungs of the career ladder’ back home (Bala). Others stated themselves willing to move wherever attractive work opportunities presented themselves.

**Co- and cross-ethnic friendships and the cosmopolitan experience**

‘You come here to learn about different cultures and you can’t just sit in your own group. *Most of my friends are White and English – my best mate is White*’ (Samuel – postgraduate).

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3. The PSWV scheme ended in April 2012, and non-EU postgraduates who wish to remain in the UK now must secure a job before graduation and apply for transfer to an employment visa (UKBA, 2011).

4. An exception is the medical sector, with women accounting for more than half of doctors migrating to the UK (Kofman and Raghuram, 2006: 293).
For participants like Samuel, a multi-ethnic social network was an important aspect of the cosmopolitan experience, and he was part of a minority within the sample whose social networks in the UK were drawn predominantly from non-Tamil ethnic backgrounds. These participants were self-consciously cosmopolitan in their outlook and behaviours, with cross-ethnic social networks functioning as a crucial point of differentiation from other migrants, whom they characterised as non-cosmopolitan and ‘failing to make the most’ of the international experience: ‘They just stay inside this little Tamil circle – what was the point of coming here?’ This correlation between cross-ethnic social networks and a worthwhile overseas experience is close to the ‘official’ view of universities and of scholarship concerned with international student welfare. Within these understandings, cross-ethnic or cross-national network-building correlates with academic and social success, and ‘helps all individuals toward a higher level of maturity . . . [and] help[s] both home and international students to become better citizens of the world’ (Pritchard and Skinner, 2002: 346). To employ Putnam’s influential distinction, within these terms the ‘successful’ student migrant is expected to build ‘bridging’ rather than ‘bonding’ networks so far as ethnic difference or similarity is concerned (Putnam, 2000, 2007).

For some participants, the formation of cross-ethnic friendships was a deliberate strategy and ethnically bound settings were actively avoided. Shreya, a postgraduate, described how ‘at fresher’s week a guy from the Hindu society asked me to join and I said ‘sorry’ and just walked away – I don’t want to mix with Indian people’. For others, networks had developed more circumstantially. Suven attempted to meet co-ethnics on arrival in the UK by posting a notice in his university’s student’s union, but on receiving no responses, ‘got on’ with making friends of other nationalities: ‘Most of my friends are from Italy, Spain, France, and English [sic]’. He had since met a number of Tamil people in the city: ‘I ended up meeting people in a supermarket, because they’ll be pushing the trolley and speaking Tamil! So you just have a chat with them’, but had not pursued further contact as ‘they are more family people with the wife and kids, not students or young graduates like me’, illustrating that other identifiers such as age, work, and current life experience were prioritised over ethnicity in constructing a UK friendship network. While Suven conceded that, given the chance, he may have built more co-ethnic friendships, he had come to greatly value the benefits his ‘cosmopolitan’ network afforded:

‘Because of the set of friends that I have my life is just a little different. Because they’ve [Tamils with co-ethnic networks] got the opportunity to hang around with Tamil people – let them enjoy. For me, it’s luck or unlucky, I don’t know, but I don’t have that. So, in that sense, one day I will miss eating idly [South Indian snack] every day, or speaking Tamil every day, but at the same time that’s given me the opportunity to explore so many other cultures though my group of friends . . . That gave a, let’s say, international exposure’.

Cosmopolitan orientations were also attributed to backgrounds by some participants. Suven attended an Indian boarding school where, ‘all my friends were from different states and different countries’, so ‘experiencing something different was always part of my life from childhood’, while Samuel felt that his ‘Westernised’ upbringing and a period of his

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5 ‘Indian’ and ‘Tamil’ were used interchangeably in Shreya’s interview narrative.
teenage years spent at an international school in the Middle East had left him ‘able to mix with anybody’. A reification of ‘Tamilness’ was also evident in these participants’ narratives. An essential ‘Tamil’ character was constructed, from whom participants differentiated themselves in terms of their own (perceived) a-typically Tamil interests or personality traits. Suven described himself as ‘not your typical Tamil guy’ and said of his interest in classic Hollywood cinema: ‘It would be very difficult to convince a Tamil guy to come and watch . . . They want the masala type movie with song and dance – for them a movie without that will be boring!’ Shreya explained that she ‘love[d] to visit galleries . . . if I had Indian friends and asked them to come and see the gallery, they’d say no . . . And I love to do national parks, but I don’t know any Indians who’d like to do that’; while Samuel informed me that he ‘like[d] to go for Argentine tango class and stuff like that’, before exclaiming (unprompted by me), ‘I know! I’m really weird for a Tamil!’

For the remaining majority of participants, UK friendship networks comprised only or predominantly other Tamils. Writing on the international student experience, Ramchandran notes that ‘factors such as language barriers, lack of familiarity with conventions and practices, and a fear of being ignored encourage international students to form smaller groups based on language and cultural background’ (2011: 206), with each of these factors replicated in the findings of this research. For others, feelings of alienation and ‘difference’ in the UK setting encouraged embeddedness in co-ethnic networks. Sharuk described socialising with Tamils as ‘a way of cheating homesickness’, while Kulam, a young medical professional, said: ‘I would imagine an English person coming across another from England in say . . . Mongolia . . . they would look at each other and just smile basically . . . It’s just a natural feeling thing’. Feelings of ‘comfort’ and ‘naturalness’ in the familiarity of co-ethnicity were particularly expressed by participants who lived with Tamil housemates. For the Greek students in Petridou’s study of international student life in London, preparing familiar food from home together in their halls of residence ‘creates family bonds’ (2001: 94) and ‘reconstructs the sensory totality of the world of home’ (89), and a ‘family atmosphere’ was similarly achieved amongst Monesh and his Tamil housemates through cooking and eating South Indian meals together:

‘We like to cook in a group. Like someone is cleaning the vessels, someone cuts the vegetables, and one chap makes the food for everyone . . . We sit around at the same table and have a nice dinnertime all together, and we’ll be chatting for thirty minutes or so . . . We can eat our food in our way and just relax’.

Around half of the participants were also members of associations aimed at expatriate Tamils in the UK, which Dinish (postgraduate) described as a ‘joint Tamil family’, providing practical support, a space in which festivals were celebrated, and a ‘homely atmosphere’.

For these migrants, friendships with members of the British population were not necessarily undesirable, but had often proved elusive. This was sometimes attributed to a simple lack of opportunity, with Monesh for instance noting that there were very few British students in his university department. However, migrants’ perceptions of ‘differences’ between themselves and the host were also referenced. Several participants said they disliked drinking in bars or clubs, ‘which is where the British people meet’, and, in common with Ryan and Mulholland’s (2012) findings from research amongst French professionals
living in London, national stereotyping emerged in participants’ understandings of cross-ethnic social relationships. A reified version of the British character as ‘cool’ and ‘reserved’ was situated in opposition to the ‘warm’ and ‘friendly’ Tamil who is ‘always very willing to chat’ (Bala). Hari, an IT worker, found it hard to imagine his cordial but distant relationships with British colleagues blossoming into friendships as, ‘there’s a coolness there’, while Ashan, a marketing professional, had experienced differing expectations of hospitality and openness: ‘They say an Englishman’s home is his castle – well that castle is guarded very closely!’ These real or imagined barriers were contrasted with the ease of meeting fellow Tamils and quickly building close co-ethnic friendships:

‘If you are just chilling on a bench in the city centre, another Tamil guy sees you and it is just ‘hi’ . . . It starts on like that only. And his friends will become our friends, and the group grows on and on’ (Pratheep).

**Cosmopolitan dreams and ethnic reality?**

‘My friends are Tamil. I mean, it’s nice, and we have a lot of fun, but I’m hardly having that cosmopolitan lifestyle’ (Neena – postgraduate).

How is the empirical reality of, predominantly, co-ethnic social networks negotiated in relation to the cosmopolitan ambition? Those embedded in ethnic networks were described by self-consciously cosmopolitan participants as ‘clannish’, ‘narrow-minded’ and ‘cliquey’, with Samuel even linking ‘failure to mix’ in the student migration context to broader anxieties, expressed by sections of the majority population and UK media, around the supposed failure of multiculturalism (Lennard, 2011: 22): ‘[They] act more Indian in this country then back home! In places like Bradford I got the shock of my life that people call it Bradistan! If you come here you’ve got to integrate’. However, despite this pathologisation the reality appears more complex. In one exceptional case, the maintenance of a wholly co-ethnic social networks was a deliberate strategy. This postgraduate student had unfortunately had a very negative experience in the UK, including suffering repeated racist abuse from some deeply unpleasant White British neighbours. This has encouraged his ‘retreat’ into a tight-knit group of Tamil friends in order to help him ‘endure’ the remaining months before his planned return to India. In all other cases though, participants with largely co-ethnic social networks did display a cosmopolitan orientation – ‘I like to interact with everyone . . . I like to meet all different peoples, not only from India, but from everywhere’ (Kaalan) – and reported a pre-arrival expectation that friendships would be built with student or colleagues from British or other national backgrounds. Pratheep for instance, explained, ‘I came here because I wanted to know this culture’, and pre-arrival was ‘excited of how am I going to meet the people?’ Despite their characterisation by some of the self-conscious cosmopolitans, ‘failure’ to realise this ambition, or to realise it to the extent they had hoped, did not necessarily denote ethnic-parochialism or a non-cosmopolitan outlook amongst those participants whose social networks were more ethnically bounded.

In addition to the factors of language, cultural unfamiliarity and lack of opportunity for cross-ethnic socialisation described earlier, for many participants with predominantly Tamil
social networks, this was not by design, but stemmed from instrumental choices around living arrangements on arrival, and practical support networks which extended back to pre-migration locales. The role of ethnic networks and the social capital accessible through these networks in supporting migration and settlement is well-documented (Erel, 2010; Evergeti and Zontini, 2006; Haug, 2008; Ryan et al., 2008), and these migrants were no exception. Prior to their migration, participants had spoken to contacts in the UK, or visited online social networking groups to ascertain ‘how Tamil people can live here? Is it ok? Can we get jobs?’ (Puneeth), and most had landed in the UK armed with phone numbers and addresses of young Tamils already living here. Kaalan for example, was met on arrival by a friend of a friend from his undergraduate programme in Tamil Nadu: ‘He had called him and said my friend is coming – please take care of him for the first week’. Often, temporary stays in shared accommodation with co-ethnics whilst settling in, morphed into longer-term arrangements:

‘I just arrived at the airport and gave the taxi driver the postcode. Everyone from Tamil Nadu was gathered to see this new one coming in! They took me inside their home. I could just mingle up quickly, so that was not a problem for me, and they liked it too, so they just told me, ‘yeah we can share going onwards – not a problem’. They were a friend’s brother’s friend’s contacts from home’ (Pratheep).

A common mismatch between young migrants’ expectations of cosmopolitan social networks and the actual UK experience of largely ethnically-bounded social networks is observed by Pritchard and Skinner: ‘although they usually come to the United Kingdom with high hopes of making new friends and of broadening their range of experience, their lack of personal adjustment is disappointing in human terms’ (2002: 323). For some participants, co-ethnic friendship networks appeared to be unproblematic, with Ashan feeling that although his closest friends were other Tamils, his interaction with British and international colleagues was enough to ensure ‘a good balance and a good experience’. But for others, the sense of disappointment reported by Pritchard and Skinner was felt keenly, particularly amongst postgraduates who were acutely aware of the financial sacrifices their families have made to enable migration and the consequent need to ‘make the most’ of their UK venture. Alongside Neena, quoted at the start of this section, Monesh was ‘sorry to say’ that all of his close friends in the UK are also from Tamil Nadu, while Pratheep reported that he ‘d[idn’t] feel like [he was] in the UK’ due to his exclusively co-ethnic friendship group. But are these participants justified in their feelings of disappointment or frustration, or is this simply a reflection of a narrow understanding which precludes the possibility of characterising other kinds of intercultural encounter as cosmopolitan?

While friendships with the British host may have proved frustratingly elusive, most participants whose social networks were predominantly Tamil, did, nonetheless, experience socialisation with other international student or young professional migrants from a variety of ethnic or national backgrounds. While Puneeth lamented that he had not befriended any ‘real British people’, he had met ‘lots of Chinese, Africans, all sorts’. Similarly, during his studies Sharuk got to know course mates from ‘Africa, Asia, and some even from South America’, and attended events such as Vietnamese New Year celebrations arranged by the diverse members of his university’s international student society. Sussman finds that Hong Kong migrants in Canada form ‘close friendship networks born out of the anxiety of being
young immigrants together’ (2010: 85), with, in the case of the Tamil migrants in this study, this bonding quality of a shared migrant experience functioning across, as well as within, ethnic boundaries. Rabesh, for instance, explained that he had developed close friendships with migrant co-workers from a range of countries: ‘They are going through the same thing as you – being away from home and family in a new country’, echoing Moroşanu’s findings that young Romanians in London form cross-ethnic social networks with other young migrants based on the shared experience of ‘coming here alone’ (2011: 99), and Ryan’s and Mulholland’s (2012) observation that French migrants in the capital befriended other migrants who are ‘in the same boat’ and are thus ‘willing to invest’ in networks with potentially transitory memberships. Another form of cross-ethnic socialisation occurred between the Tamil participants and other Indian students from different regional-linguistic backgrounds. Monesh had been a committee member of his student union’s society for Indian students, and had enjoyed the opportunity to mingle with migrants from other Indian regions and to share his own Tamil heritage: ‘Many are from the north part of India and different peoples, so it’s a mixed bag over there. So, we take Tamil songs . . . [and] people got to know things about Tamil culture from other parts of India as well’ – an instance of Werbner’s notion of ‘the Indian subcontinent and its global diaspora(s) . . . [as] a vernacular cosmopolis, divided by religion, nation and language, and yet nevertheless united by mutually comprehensible popular aesthetics’ (2011: 108).

A common misconception amongst those self-conscious cosmopolitans within the study was an assumption of path dependency between ethnic social networks and ‘only doing Tamil things’ (Krithic). It is true that the Tamil friendship groups I encountered did spend time engaged in ‘ethnic’ activities such as watching Tamil films, trips to London’s East Ham and Tooting neighbourhoods to visit the Tamil-run shops and temples, and participating in events arranged by Tamil associations. However, it was also clear that ethnic social networks did not preclude cosmopolitan consumption practices. Most of those embedded in ethnic networks also took part in leisure activities in ‘non-Tamil’ spaces – albeit often with other Tamil people. Tamil friendship groups watched Hollywood films, went on day trips to the countryside or the monuments of London, and, if finances allowed, took forays to European destinations. Pratheep’s travel plans during his stint in the UK included ‘France, Vatican, Rome, and at the end I will go for Russia and Germany too. I’m here for quite a while, so I just want to cover the most of things and all the places available over here’. Co-ethnic networks also, in some cases, enabled cross-ethnic interactions, with a Tamil student association’s cricket team playing regular matches against ‘local boys’ and Pakistani students. Food is another important everyday site of intercultural encounter (Duruz, 2011), and while familiar foods played a key role in some participants’ making of a Tamil space within the home, when out and about most become ‘gastronomic cosmopolitans’ and enjoyed a varied array of cuisines: ‘We’re into all the restaurants around here . . . Italian, Chinese . . . We go to ‘Frankie and Benny’s’ [UK restaurant chain with an American diner theme] every Sunday, or for the proper English breakfast’ (Monesh). Although cosmopolitan food consumption has been robustly critiqued as a superficial encounter with the ethnic ‘other’ (Hage, 1997; Molz, 2011), it is worth noting here for its deviance from self-conscious cosmopolitans’ such as Samuel’s imitation of his ‘cliquey’ peers as saying, when faced with international cuisine, ‘Oh yuk! I only like Tamil food!’
The claims of some of the ‘self-conscious cosmopolitans’ that they were less concerned with ethnicity than their peers who were engaged in largely co-ethnic social networks are also disrupted by the former’s ready evocation of ‘Tamilness’ as a marked category; as ‘special, different, other’ (Brubaker et al., 2006: 211). By speaking about a ‘Tamil character’, or typical Tamil leisure preferences or interests, from which they, in turn, differentiated their own character or interests as ‘a-typically Tamil’, these participants attributed to ethnicity a structural fixity and therefore ontological reality (Fox and Jones, 2013: 386). An essential Tamil ethnicity was evoked in strongly exclusionary terms, seemingly at odds with the ‘openness’ inherent to the Hannerz-ian cosmopolitan vision. As such, ethnicity, far from becoming an experiential irrelevance, continued to constitute the lens through which they viewed themselves (albeit in terms of distinction) and others. Of course, those participants whose social networks largely comprised co-ethnics engaged in marked categorisations of ethnicity too: in their evocation of national stereotyping and the oppositional ‘British’ or ‘Tamil’ characters as explanation for their frustrated attempts to build friendships with members of the host population. But for these participants, Tamil ethnicity largely functioned as an unmarked category, ‘the normal, default, taken-for-granted’ (Brubaker et al., 2006: 211), through the continuation of comfortably familiar social networks established for quite instrumental purposes on arrival in the UK.

Furthermore, each participant, whether self-consciously cosmopolitan or not, lived, worked, or studied in a multicultural urban environment. Therefore, as well as the experiences described above, everyday life involved a host of inter-cultural encounters offered simply through traversing public spaces (Anderson, 2004; Radice, 2011), using public transport (Wilson, 2011), and ‘rubbing along’ with neighbours (Hudson et al., 2011) in the diverse city. Such encounters were highlighted in participants’ narratives in both negative and positive terms: Dinish for example complained of the ‘rowdiness’ of ‘Black teenagers’ on the bus and Hari commented on ‘the number of Pakistanis around here’, while Rabesh admired the ‘diversity and tolerance’, and Monesh the ‘multicultural-ness’ of their respective adopted cities. But while these encounters are clearly cosmopolitan within the frames of reference of ‘ordinary’ or ‘working-class’ cosmopolitanisms forwarded by Werbner (1999), Lamont and Aksartova (2002), and others, they were not presented as such by participants. Living through these encounters did not seem to contribute to realisation of the ambition for international exposure or to temper disappointment at a perceived failure to fully realise the cosmopolitan ambition, or, in the case of self-conscious cosmopolitans, mediate pathologisation of others for their perceived failure to do so.

**Unknowing cosmopolitans?**

In this paper I have described everyday socialisation among 25 Tamil student and young professional migrants in the UK. Through their talk and practice around social networks, these migrants engage with elite-focused, Hannerz-ian understandings of cosmopolitanism, positioning themselves and others as ‘international’ or ‘ethnic’. A minority within the sample, who I have called ‘self-conscious cosmopolitans’, defined their ‘worthwhile’ UK study or work experience through their cross-ethnic social networks, and differentiated themselves from those whose social networks were more ethnically bound, whom they characterised as ‘clannish’ or ‘cliques’. This dialogue of failed cosmopolitanism was
additionally reproduced by many of those who participated in predominantly co-ethnic social networks, despite these frequently operating alongside a range of other attachments: to other Indians within Werbner’s ‘vernacular cosmopolis’ (2011), and to other migrants from a range of ethnic and national backgrounds.

While the self-conscious cosmopolitans often attributed the co-ethnic networks of their peers to ‘choice’ or a reluctance to ‘leave their comfort zone’ (Shreya), in reality all participants expressed cosmopolitan orientations and a desire to build cross-ethnic social networks. Some though, had seen this ambition frustrated through perceived ethnicised differences in character and leisure preferences, and the understandable pull of practical support, comforting familiarity, and shared cultural reference points offered through co-ethnic networks. It is also evident that participation in ethnically bound networks did not preclude cosmopolitan consumption, with Tamil friendship groups frequently engaging in exactly the kinds of activities characterised as abhorrent to their supposed ethnic-parochial tastes by their self-consciously cosmopolitan counterparts. Indeed, this evocation of ‘Tamil tastes’, and other forms of marked characterisation of ethnicity, call into question the very claim to cosmopolitanism by these self-consciously cosmopolitan participants, or at least their claims to be somehow more cosmopolitan and less ethnic than their co-ethnic networked peers. An ethnic-lens persists in these migrants’ self-understandings and understandings of others through ethnicity-focused distinction and reification.

Additionally, through virtue of living in diverse urban environments, participants with ethnic social networks were just as likely as those with cross-ethnic networks to experience a range of mundane and unthinking cross-ethnic encounters in their everyday lives. As Heibert observes, cosmopolitanism is contextual, and ‘people are not easily classified . . . interact[ing] in mono-cultural contexts in certain aspects of their lives (e.g. friendship networks) and cosmopolitan ones in other aspects (e.g. at work)’ (2002: 213); an understanding concurrent with Glick Shiller et al.’s challenge to oppositional positioning of ‘openness’ and ‘rootedness’, which acknowledges the possibility of a ‘cosmopolitan dimension’ occurring simultaneously with ‘the maintenance of ethnic/national ties’ (2011: 400). But with close inter-ethnic friendships perceived as the raison d’etre of the cosmopolitan experience by these migrants, a host of other experiences, alternatively and equally definable as cosmopolitanism, were disregarded, both in characterisations of the ethnic-parochial ‘other’ by self-conscious cosmopolitans, and in these ‘others’ own self-understanding. Narrow and elitist understandings of what it is to be cosmopolitan prevailed. These young migrants were ‘going global’, just not necessarily in the ways they imagined pre-arrival, or continued to imagine in UK lives tinged with frustrated ‘cosmopolitan’ ambition.
References


