

# WESTERNERS IN SEARCH OF A BETTER LIFE IN INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

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This report introduces research examining Westerners who spend long periods of time in the city of Varanasi in northern India year after year. Here they claim to have found a more meaningful and interesting life than in their homelands. The study discusses the phenomenon within the framework of lifestyle migration arguing that it is important to pay attention to transnational lifestyles that are not elitist but nevertheless based on Western privilege. In addition, the study examines communality among the Westerners arguing that they form a tight, yet fluid, community in Varanasi. The Westerners lead highly mobile lives, yet the community is very significant for them in a particular place and at a particular time.  
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Keywords: communities, lifestyle migration, India, Westerners, transnationalism

### *Finding the field*

When I was in my third year at university, I decided to take a break from my studies and travel to India for eight months. During my trip, I stayed in the city of Varanasi in northern India for a few weeks and met many Westerners about my age who had already been in India several times for long periods. They reminded me of hippies, yet the hippie era had been over for decades. Their lifestyle fascinated me: it had never occurred to me that instead of continuing my studies after secondary school, I could have chosen to hang out in India. I wrote a postcard to my friend in Finland: "I have found paradise!" I did not, however, stay in paradise but returned to Finland to continue at university.

When it was time to do my master's thesis, I decided to return to Varanasi in order to conduct research on how European women negotiate their place as Western women in an Indian environment. During the course of interviews (Korpela 1999), some respondents mentioned they had found a new family among the Westerners in Varanasi. I was puzzled by their comments. What did they mean by 'a family'? After finishing my thesis, I decided to conduct further research in order to examine what that 'family' meant. I defined the family as a community.

After having written my research plan, I contacted a Finnish professor asking for some guidance. I told him about my plan to study the community of Westerners in Varanasi. He listened to me politely but eventually gave his verdict: "I don't think it is a community". I left his office feeling even more puzzled than I had felt when arriving there: should I throw away my research plan? I had intended to focus on the construction of community among the Westerners in Varanasi only to be told by a respected academic

that the group in question was not a community at all. But I was stubborn and decided to continue on the path I had chosen. At the time, I was not able to defend myself against his comment but I later realised that communities can be defined in various ways and the professor's definition was definitely very different from mine. In my dissertation, based on a conceptualization of the term developed after extensive reading, one of my main arguments is that the Westerners in Varanasi indeed do form a very tight, yet temporary, community. In fact, the relevant question is not whether a community of Westerners exists or not in Varanasi, but what kind of community it is and how it is constructed. In my understanding—following Vered Amit's definition (2002a; 2002b)—communal relationships do not need to be all-encompassing; they can be temporary and partial, yet still significant for the members.

### *Conceptualising communities*

Since the founding of sociology and anthropology, scholars have believed that communities are under threat: first by modernisation, then by globalisation (see e.g., Dyck 2002: 106). In spite of such concerns, communities have nonetheless persisted and are significant even in our present age. People still seem to find communal belonging emotionally rewarding. However, both real-life communities and their theoretical conceptualisations have changed over the years. The famous community scholar, Anthony Cohen, writes that nowadays, people are associated with each other often only for limited purposes. He writes that “‘community’ has become a way of designating that something is shared among a group of people at a time when we no longer assume that anything is necessarily shared” (Cohen 2002: 168–169).

Nowadays, many communities are voluntary and based on a limited purpose (Amit 2002a, 2002b). Moreover, each individual has multiple communal associations instead of one all-encompassing one (Amit 2002b: 16; Kennedy and Roudometof 2002: 15; Delanty 2003: 131). In classical sociology, individualism was seen as a threat to communities whereas nowadays, individualism plays a very significant role in the construction of many communities as many of them are based on individual choice and individuals' search for identity and personal self-fulfillment through collective participation (Delanty 2003: 120–122; Amit 2002a: 16). The emphasis on individualism as well as the fluid, temporal and voluntary nature of many contemporary communities are taken into account in theoretical conceptions as well. Michel Maffesoli's (1996) theorising on post-modern communities, neo-tribes, is well known. However, although I find Maffesoli's conceptualisation a useful way to think about contemporary communities, I do not fully agree with his statements: many contemporary empirical examples, including that of my own research, show that even contemporary communities are often more 'solid' than he suggests.

*Westerners in Varanasi*

In many Western countries—by which I mean Europe, Israel, Australia and North America—a backpacking trip to an exotic destination has become an initiation rite into adulthood for white middle class youth (see Hutnyk 1996: ix–x; see also Munt 1994: 119). Such a trip is usually undertaken after secondary education, before graduating from a higher education institution, before committing to a career or setting up a family. India is one popular backpacking destination (see e.g., Hutnyk 1996; Wilson 1997; Hottola 1999; Maoz 2005). After their trip, most backpackers return to their home countries to continue their lives there. Some, however, enjoy India so much that they go back to their countries of origin—or other Western countries—only in order to earn money, and they end up returning to India again and again. Instead of continuing backpacking, they often settle down in certain locations in India. They claim to have found ‘more vibrations’, that is, a better life in India.

My research focuses on a group of such people in the city of Varanasi. My study is ethnographic: the data collection methods I used were participant observation and interviews.<sup>1</sup> Varanasi, one of the oldest living cities in the world, is a holy city of Hinduism with over a million inhabitants, situated on the banks of the river Ganges. Hindus believe Varanasi to be the home of the supreme god Shiva and it is an important pilgrimage centre. Diane Eck (1983: 9), an indologist, writes that “it is precisely because Banaras [Varanasi] has become a symbol of traditional Hindu India that Western visitors have often found this city the most strikingly ‘foreign’ of India’s cities”. For many Westerners, Varanasi indeed represents a sign of Eastern otherness. However, most of the Westerners repeatedly spending long periods of time in Varanasi are not there because of the attraction of Hinduism but because of their interest in classical Indian music. Varanasi is a centre of music in India and some of the most famous Indian musicians, for example Ravi Shankar and Bishmillah Khan, have lived there.

Varanasi is a very popular tourist destination but the people featuring in my research distinguish themselves from tourists and they are indeed different from tourists, above all because of their repeated long sojourns there. The long-term Westerners in Varanasi come from Europe, Israel, Canada and Australia, amounting to 200–300 during the popular season which starts in October and ends in May. I refer to these people as ‘Westerners’ due to the fact that in Varanasi differences between various Western nationalities seem to disappear when opposed with the ‘Indian other’. ‘The West’ becomes unified in their talk and everyday lives in Varanasi. They understand this ‘Westernity’ to mean above all a certain kind of education, knowledge of certain popular cultures and appreciation of certain values; especially individuality and freedom. An everyday example in which the common Western identity becomes manifested is food. When the Westerners cook together, the most popular dish is pasta, and it is understood as a common Western dish (instead of representing Italian cuisine). In fact, even *falafel* becomes ‘Western’ food in the context of Varanasi. When food and other goods or values are defined as ‘Western’, the crucial factor is classifying them as ‘non-Indian’.

The long-term Westerners live in the same houses year after year and have all the necessary household utensils in Varanasi. For many, the lifestyle has lasted for years, even for decades. Typically, they work for a few months in menial jobs or sell Indian textiles

and handicrafts in markets and festivals in their countries of origin (or in some other Western country) and then spend the rest of the year in India, living on the money they have earned in those temporary jobs. Most of them are twenty to thirty-five years old but some are forty to fifty. Men form the majority. In Varanasi, they all live in one particular area within walking distance of each other, renting apartments in local houses. Most Westerners in Varanasi play Indian instruments, some do yoga, meditation or charity work. A lot of time is spent socialising with friends. They visit each other on a daily basis and often cook and eat their meals together. At sunset, they gather to a particular tea stall by the Ganges. In the evenings, there are often parties or smaller gatherings where people eat and play music together. Attending concerts of Indian classical music is very popular and it is also common to go swimming in the Ganges.

Why do those Westerners prefer to stay in India? They view their countries of origin and Western countries in general in rather negative terms. They criticise hectic lifestyles and consumerism. The claim that people in the West are not happy; they do not have time to enjoy life because they are too busy earning more money.

These Westerners claim to have found a better and more meaningful life in Varanasi compared to life in the West. By coming to India, they have escaped the rat race. In Varanasi, they have time to do what they enjoy—for example studying music. The Westerners' pace of life in Varanasi is slow, and they live without strict daily plans. They are content with fewer material possessions, life is relaxed and they have time to socialise with friends. They often point out that instead of worrying about the future, they have learned to enjoy the present. They also emphasise that in Varanasi, they can pursue spiritual and artistic aims. The better life in Varanasi also includes living in close connection with nature and in many ways the Westerners conceptualise life in Varanasi as a return to an 'authentic' past. They appreciate the intense social life that they have with other Westerners in Varanasi, and in fact, the company of similar-minded people is a crucial factor in making Varanasi such a popular place for them.

### *Conceptualising the phenomenon: lifestyle migration*

Moving abroad in search of a better and more meaningful life has recently been conceptualised as lifestyle migration. For example, Karen O'Reilly and Michaela Benson have written about the theme (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; O'Reilly and Benson 2009). Most studies on lifestyle migration have concentrated on retired people from Britain, Scandinavia or Germany who have moved to Southern Europe (see e.g., O'Reilly 2000, 2003, 2007; Gustafson 2002; Oliver 2007). However, lifestyle migrants also travel to and from other parts of the world, and not all of them are elderly.

Benson and O'Reilly (2009) suggest that one way to analyse lifestyle migrants is by employing a typology of destinations, as those tell a lot about the way of life the migrants are seeking. Their typology includes the residential tourist, the rural idyll and bourgeois bohemianism. The residential tourists lead a life of leisure (typically at a coastal retreat), whereas those in search of a rural idyll search for a tranquil 'authentic' life in the countryside. Bourgeois bohemianism refers to lifestyle migrants who have bohemian (that is, spiritual, artistic or creative) aspirations that they realise in their lifestyle migration

destination. Following this typology, I define the Westerners in Varanasi as bohemian lifestyle migrants. They define the 'good life' in somewhat different terms from many other lifestyle migrants and they are relatively young.

I argue that bohemian lifestyle migrants lead lives of mobility, that is, instead of settling down in a particular destination, which is a more typical form of lifestyle migration, they often circulate between a few places, all of which are assigned certain bohemian meanings. Such places include, for example, Ibiza, the island of Mykonos in Greece, Bali in Indonesia, Goa in India and certain beaches in Thailand, and as my study shows Varanasi is also one important destination. In fact, the Westerners in Varanasi, and I believe also other bohemian lifestyle migrants, celebrate a discourse of movement; there is something wrong with sedentary life as it means getting stuck in boring routines. I also argue that creating an alternative—that is, countercultural or bohemian—space with similar-minded people is crucial for bohemian lifestyle migrants. A particular aspect of that space is that it is very international: bohemian lifestyle migrants in a particular location socialise with similar-minded people coming from various countries (although usually excluding the inhabitants of the host country) whereas many other lifestyle migrants tend to socialise only with their fellow nationals (see e.g., O'Reilly 2000).

#### *The community of Westerners in Varanasi*

As already mentioned, in my research I investigated what kind of community the Westerners in Varanasi create. Although it may at first seem that the Westerners in Varanasi do not share anything, a closer look discloses that something is shared which gains a lot of importance. Members of the community come from various countries and none of them are in Varanasi permanently yet they share certain values and a lifestyle, and above all they share their long sojourn in the Indian city. I thus argue that they form a community, which is fluid, based on individuals' temporary participation, yet very concrete in a particular place and at a particular time.

Common shared activities include cooking and eating together, parties, swimming trips, attending concerts of classical Indian music and just casual hanging out together. The norms, rules, expectations and common values are never stated aloud, yet they nevertheless exist. There are for example certain behavioural norms regarding one's clothing, music studies and whom to greet and whom to ignore. Moreover, there are certain ways to define 'us' and act as 'an insider'. One's actions towards other community members are very important ways of expressing and evoking belonging. The boundaries of the community are evoked in various ways, above all by separate social activities: in addition to short-term tourists, local Indians are also excluded. Sharing and reciprocity are central values among the Westerners in Varanasi, and sharing applies above all to food. The expectation of reciprocity in turn affects whom to invite to common activities and whom not to invite, that is, where to draw the boundary. Inviting tourists would be a waste of resources as they would not fulfil their reciprocal duty but instead, leave Varanasi and continue travelling. The community is very real; it is not imagined but constructed through practices by real individuals interacting face-to-face in a particular location on a daily basis. The community is also very intensive; those who are considered insiders are

expected to constantly participate in common activities and show up in central locations, and failing to do so is not appreciated.

Although the emphasis within the community is on equality, there are also clear divisions and distinctions among members. Those who have been going to Varanasi the longest are considered to have more distinctive status than those who have not *yet* been there many times. The most significant tool of status distinction is, however, musical expertise. One's knowledge and talents in Indian classical music are constantly tested, and the music students have various ways to demonstrate their defining role. Gender is also a significant tool of distinction among the Westerners and, in general, men have higher status than women. Women have an important role in the maintenance of the community but they are not accorded the same distinctive status as males.

*The fluid and temporary, yet persistent community*

The life of the Westerners in Varanasi illustrates how quickly one can adopt routines and familiar places, faces and practices even in a new environment, and the familiar routines and practices remain even when one leaves periodically to return later. Eventually, everyone leaves and disperses to the global arena but at a specific moment the close local communal relationships are extremely important. Moreover, those relationships are renewed year after year.

In fact, the practices of the community of Westerners in Varanasi are very persistent, yet individuals change and in that sense, the community is temporary. There were bohemian Westerners in Varanasi as early as the colonial era and especially in the hippie era. In fact, the everyday life and practices of those Westerners who were in Varanasi in the 1970s are strikingly similar to the practices that I found there in the new millennium, which shows that the community is very permanent in these terms. Yet those who are in Varanasi now do not have a historical memory beyond their personal experiences there. I argue that the community's strict rules and stagnant practices are necessary means of keeping the community alive since the human content of the community is fluid. Moreover, as a result of this, communal connections and feelings need to be strengthened continuously. In fact, the community culminates at the time of individuals' departures, that is, when the fluidity is visible. At those moments, relationships are made visible and the ethos is that everyone is expected to return to Varanasi: it seems to be impossible to state out loud plans of not returning.

The Westerners in Varanasi lead highly mobile lives, based on individual choices, yet my research shows that tight communal relations—although temporary—are significant for them. In other words, communality and individuality are not mutually exclusive. It is a very particular community also because although the members lead transnational lives, it is very much tied to a certain place, the city of Varanasi, and the members do not keep in touch while away from there. Their transnational lifestyle is also unique because instead of shuttling between their countries of origin and India, they also spend time and maintain networks in other countries and in various locations within a specific country.

*Western privilege*

My research also shows that the Westerners' relationships with local people are instrumental: their Indian acquaintances are landlords, shopkeepers or music teachers. In other words, there is a service connection. Most of my interviewees say that they do not have any Indian friends and they argue that friendships with Indians are impossible because of fundamental cultural differences. Therefore, the ideal life that they claim to have found in Varanasi refers above all to the life and values of their particular group of Westerners. And although the Westerners in Varanasi criticise the West a lot and can be understood to be escaping it, what they look for is not anti-Western but a different kind of (that is, bohemian or alternative) Western. The community becomes so important because it is there within Western space that the ideal life of like-minded people materialises.

I argue that the phenomenon is very much a question of Western privilege: the Westerners search for a better life in Varanasi because they can! Their Western passports allow them to easily get visas to foreign countries and the money that they earn in the West lasts a long time when spent in India. They take advantage of the fact that they have the opportunity to realise a better life abroad, where living costs are low and the place is imbued with certain spiritual and artistic meanings. Yet they are clearly financially dependent on the West as they typically return there in order to earn money. In other words, their flight from the West is only partial. They highly appreciate certain aspects of Indian cultures, above all spirituality and values and practices attached to classical Indian music, yet by no means are they aiming to 'go native', that is, to become Indian. Again, it is a question of being a different kind of Westerner instead of rejecting the West completely.

My research shows that it is important to keep in mind that even in the global postmodern era, people do not 'float in transnational spaces'. Locations still matter; even highly mobile people have certain ties to specific places with specific meanings, and research needs to examine those actual ties and processes. Although it is important to attend to departures, that is, the motivations behind various kinds of transnational and translocal movement, it is also crucial to pay attention to arrivals: the places and spaces in which mobile people come together and what happens within those spaces, such as the kinds of (temporary or permanent) communities that then form. Such knowledge can be obtained only by detailed ethnographic fieldwork, and this is where anthropology has much to offer. I also want to emphasise that even in the postmodern era, when individuality is highly appreciated, communal feelings have not lost their significance but can be very important, even for highly mobile people.

*Who cares? Or why should we care?*

The fact that Westerners choose to live in an Indian city because they claim to find 'more vibrations' there says something about the phenomenon in which an increasing number of people in contemporary affluent industrialised countries are choosing to leave the 'rat race' and search for a more relaxed life. This can mean, for example, aiming at an ecologically sustainable existence in the countryside or it can mean moving abroad to

a place where the climate is pleasant and living costs are low. Globalisation means new opportunities for many people to take advantage of the fact that they can move abroad to seek a better quality of life when their countries of origin do not provide them with the kind of life they appreciate. Such lifestyles are also a challenge for the present political world order: policies at the level of nation states do not usually cater to mobile lifestyles and individuals can end up in difficult situations when they lose benefits in their country of origin without gaining them in the destination country. Therefore, research on various kinds of mobilities is important.

A further question that needs to be addressed even here in Finland is why so many people want to escape contemporary societies and their lifestyles to easier and more meaningful ways of life abroad. Moreover, what does it mean to India and to other third world countries if Westerners move there in search of an ideal (often very romanticised) life? Finally, as demonstrated by lifestyle migration in general, and the example of the Westerners in Varanasi in particular, it is an important social fact that transnational lifestyles are available to a growing number of people who do not comprise any kind of international elite. I argue that we need to pay careful attention to the various kinds of mobile lifestyles on offer as people are increasingly affected by such movements, even if not personally involved in them. Such people could be seen as a cultural resource for the future instead of being viewed as a threat to the “national order of things” (Malkki 1995: 4–6).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I interviewed 44 Westerners who were staying in Varanasi for at least two months (most for longer) and who had also been there for long periods before. I also wrote hundreds of pages of field diaries on my participant observation. The fieldwork was conducted in two parts in 2002 and 2003, lasting for 13 months.

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