

MARGINALLY MOBILE? THE VULNERABLE LIFESTYLE OF WESTERNERS IN GOA

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ABSTRACT

Marginally Mobile? The Vulnerable Lifestyle of Westerners in Goa

An increasing number of Westerners are leading lifestyles where they repeatedly spend long periods of time in Goa, India. This article discusses the phenomenon in terms of marginal mobility. The main focus is on the problems that the transnationally mobile lifestyle can cause for individuals. The article shows that the mobile lifestyle of the Westerners in Goa involves various vulnerabilities, for example in terms of personal crises, official residence status, visas and children's education. The article is based on extensive ethnographic research.

KEYWORDS: marginal mobility, sedentary norms, India

IZVLEČEK

Marginalno mobilni? Ranljivi življenjski stili med zahodnjaki v Goi

Naraščajoče število zahodnjakov oblikuje življenjski stil periodičnega preživljanja daljših obdobj v indijski Goi. Pričujoči članek tovrstni pojav obravnava skozi očišče marginalne mobilnosti. Pri tem se osredotoča na težave, ki jih od prevladujočih sedentarnih norm odstopajoči življenjski stil prinaša posameznikom. Članek pokaže, da transnacionalni mobilni življenjski stil zahodnjakov v Goi vključuje različne ranljivosti, na primer osebne težave, status uradnega bivališča, pridobivanje vize, izobrazba otrok. Prispevek temelji na obsežni etnografski raziskavi.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: marginalna mobilnost, sedentarne norme, Indija

The state of Goa on the western coast of India is a popular travel destination. Hippies arrived there in the late sixties, and since then Westerners in search of an alternative lifestyle have been gathering on the beaches of Goa every winter. Goa attracts Westerners because of its beaches and the trance music scene. Many of them are not just visiting tourists but spend several months there every year. For them, living in Goa is a lifestyle, not merely a temporary break from everyday routines in their countries of origin. Some of them spend winters in Goa and summers in their native countries, others spend winters in Goa and summers working at festivals around Europe, and still others are involved in irregular movement between Goa, Bali, Thailand, Ibiza, etc. Most of these people need to work in order to support their lifestyle. They work, for example, as fashion or jewellery designers (who sell their products in tourist

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markets), artists, yoga teachers, massage therapists or spiritual healers, or run restaurants, guesthouses or nurseries in Goa.

The Westerners in Goa come from various European countries, Israel, Australia, the USA and Canada, and they represent all age groups, from people in their 20s to people in their 70s. Most of them are from middle-class backgrounds. There are a rapidly increasing number of Western families with children leading the lifestyle as well. Very often, the parents are of different national origins and consequently their children spend time in three countries every year, sometimes also visiting other countries. Many of the children have lived for no more than a few months in the country which issued their passport, having spent most of their lives in Goa.

In this article, I will focus on the Westerners in Goa in terms of marginal mobility. I reflect on this empirical case in terms of the basic characteristics of marginal mobility outlined by Juntunen, Kalčić and Rogelja (forthcoming) and in particular, I focus on the problems that the mobile lifestyle can cause for individuals. I argue that because of their mobility, Westerners in Goa can gain much individual freedom and agency, but at the same time the lifestyle involves various vulnerabilities when anything unexpected and/or troublesome happens.

WHERE, WHY AND WHEN? RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIAL

This article is based on my ethnographic research on Western children and families in Goa. The fieldwork lasted for ten months and was conducted in three parts during the winters of 2011, 2012 and 2013. While in Goa, I participated intensively in the lives of Western families with children aged 2–12 years. I spent time with them on the beaches, at pools, and in cafes and restaurants. I visited their homes, attended numerous children's birthday parties and observed various hobby groups. I also spent time in expatriate schools and nurseries.

My research material consists of detailed field diaries on my participant observation and of interviews with children, parents, and people who work with the children as well as young adults who have grown up in Goa. In the interviews, I focused on the interviewees' experiences and views on transnational mobility, home and belonging. In addition, I conducted drawing projects with children (on this method see e.g. Coates 2002). The children drew pictures in groups of two to five on various themes related to my research (home, Goa, India, and the other countries where they spend time, etc.). While the children were drawing, I chatted with them and recorded the discussions.

In this article, I use the somewhat problematic terms "West" and "Westerners". I use them as *emic* terms, that is, my research subjects and local Indians commonly use them. According to the Westerners themselves, being a Westerner means, above all, having a certain shared knowledge of popular culture, shared values (especially individualism), and similar educational background. The crucial issue in being a Westerner is being non-Indian, being a citizen of an affluent industrialised country. In similar terms, Juntunen, Kalčić and Rogelja (forthcoming), use the term "Westerner" as a loosely defined category that refers to people from the affluent countries of Western Europe, and from the countries with firm historical, cultural and ethnic ties to Western Europe such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia".

A MOBILE LIFESTYLE

A nomadic lifestyle is by definition a mobile lifestyle. Traditional nomads moved with their cattle (see e.g. Barfield 1993). Nomads use natural resources on the route (especially water and pastures) and/or sell

their goods and services to sedentary populations whom they encounter on the way. The latter group can be termed “peripatetic nomads” (Reynier 1995), and the Westerners in Goa can be seen as belonging to this category. However, they are peculiar in the sense that they do not earn their living from sedentary populations but from another mobile group, that is, from tourists. Instead of moving constantly, my research subjects spend long periods of time in Goa and often also in some other destination(s), either in their native countries or in Thailand, Ibiza, Bali, etc. Their routes and timetables are not necessarily fixed, but typically they return to the same places frequently. In fact, most of my research subjects have established permanent homes in Goa, with fancy furniture, fully equipped kitchens, etc. Yet they do not permanently live there, but regularly leave and stay away for several months. They are thus regularly – although not constantly – mobile. The Westerners do not live in Goa permanently for various reasons. Firstly, they need to leave India regularly in order to renew their visas. Secondly, many want to escape the heavy monsoon rains. Thirdly, those who are dependent on tourists for their income do not have customers in Goa during the monsoon months.

Although the Westerners are somewhat settled in Goa, they are very aware of the fact that they may move to another country in the future. A recent Facebook post illustrates this well:

Some cannot afford Goa prices for housing, food, etc. [anymore]... Cambodia seems to be easy on visas and spendings.

The quotation above presents the ethos among the Westerners in Goa very well: their lifestyle is about maximising one’s benefits. The Westerners want to live in a place where the cost of living is low, the climate warm and life relaxed. They also need to be able to earn money there. Their lifestyle is thus an attempt to utilize various circumstances to their own benefit. For many, mobility is a crucial strategy of their economic survival. At the same time, they also move because the destinations represent for them a relaxed way of life and they are understood to be countercultural centres of like-minded people (D’Andrea 2006: 105). Mobility is thus not an end but a means to attain the kind of life that they want. Yet, in spite of their long sojourns in specific locations, they are definitely not leading a sedentary lifestyle but are clearly transnationally mobile.

VOLUNTARY OR FORCED MOBILITY?

The Westerners in Goa present themselves in very individualistic terms (see Korpela forthcoming). They claim to be independent actors who have voluntarily chosen to improve their lives by leaving their sedentary lives in their countries of origin behind. They claim that the lifestyle between Goa and some other destinations has made them happier and they also are much better off financially.

One can, however, question how voluntary the choice has really been. As Nigel Fountain puts it: “in the 1960s the young dropped out, in the 1980s they are dropped out” (Fountain, cited in McKay 1996: 52), and this also seems to apply in the new millennium, and not only to youth but to people of all ages. Vered Amit, who has written extensively on expatriates, argues that the same situation of transnational mobility can be interpreted and experienced either as a structural imposition or as a personal choice (Amit 2006: 109). Westerners in Goa often say that they wanted to escape a lifestyle that in their view is dull, meaningless and suppressive to their individual needs. However, one can also argue that their options in their countries of origin may have been rather limited and moving abroad has thus been a rational choice which has clearly improved their income levels and quality of life. The lifestyle is, however, very vulnerable as I will discuss below.

UPROOTED, LIMINAL AND UN-POLITICAL?

In many respects, the Westerners in Goa can be characterized by uprootedness and liminality, like many other marginally mobile groups. Within the national order of things (Malkki 1995: 4–6), my research subjects are anomalies because they do not want to live in their countries of citizenship. By leaving their native countries, these Westerners have become outsiders there, but they are also not integrated (or not willing to become integrated) into Indian society, and are outsiders there as well.

At the same time, however, the Westerners create their own community in Goa. It is based on face-to-face interactions, and the members share certain values and practices in addition to sharing the same lifestyle. The feelings of belonging to this community can be very significant for the members, although at the same time the relationships are dispensable, as individuals may move away from Goa and often maintain very few, if any, relationships with the Goa community while away. Nevertheless, although dispensable, the relationships can be highly significant at a certain time (on a similar community in Varanasi, see Korpela 2009). I argue that creating the community of Westerners in Goa means creating a certain rootedness there.

I thus want to emphasise that although officially, from the point of view of the Indian state and the states of their native countries, these Westerners are outsiders occupying a liminal space, they are not necessarily uprooted but create their own roots and belonging in Goa or elsewhere where they reside among like-minded people. These roots may remain invisible to the sedentary populations but they may nevertheless be highly significant for the mobile individuals themselves. It is, however, not a politicised community, which contributes to it being invisible to many outsiders.

AGAINST THE SEDENTARY NORM

The Westerners in Goa do not live permanently in one country but regularly move between two or more countries. Consequently, their residence status is problematic from the point of view of states. The world is still very much organized according to the principle of sedentary lifestyle: one is supposed to be registered as an inhabitant in a certain location and then one is granted certain rights (and duties) in that place. In particular, this refers to rights in terms of property ownership or employment as well as political and legal rights, and in many countries (although not everywhere) rights regarding health care and social security. Not living a sedentary life may cause people to lose many of these rights in their native countries, and owing to their mobility they are not able to gain such rights elsewhere either. The mobile subjects are then left on their own – without state support – on many fronts. The Westerners in Goa themselves often emphasise that they are independent actors who do not need official structures and statuses. Circumstances may change, however, and being a non-recognised outsider may eventually cause problems. Being an independent actor and an outsider is a vulnerable position. Vered Amit has argued that a transnationally mobile lifestyle can lead to consequences that the individual did not anticipate when making the decision to abandon sedentary life; a transnationally mobile life has its contradictions and costs (see Amit 2002: 37; 2006). Below, I discuss some of the vulnerabilities that my research subjects face. I do not intend to claim that sedentary people do not face similar problems, but I argue that a mobile lifestyle makes one particularly vulnerable.

LIVING ON THE EDGE: THE TROUBLESOME CONSEQUENCES OF MOBILE LIVES

Families on their own

Adam and Sophie have two children and Sophie is pregnant with the third. They earn their living by selling leather clothes in the Goan tourist markets. Two weeks before Sophie's due date, Adam falls ill with pneumonia and cannot work for a while. When Sophie gives birth, Adam misses a few more markets as he takes care of the family when his wife recovers from the delivery. Two days after the baby is born, the oldest child gets chickenpox. Three weeks later, the middle child gets chickenpox and once she has recovered, Adam gets it and falls very ill. During these difficult weeks, the family's cleaning lady gets married and consequently resigns from her job. Adam and Sophie are struggling to run their everyday lives with three children. The situation is particularly stressful because the family is not getting any income: Sophie cannot work because she is taking care of the baby and Adam cannot work because he is ill (Field diary February–March 2012).

The story above illustrates well some of the vulnerabilities of the lifestyle of the Westerners in Goa. The lifestyle is very much built on the assumption that everything goes as planned; people stay healthy and continue working and travelling. Among the Westerners in Goa, people function either as individuals or as family units but larger support mechanisms are predominantly missing. The Westerners provide support to each other and there are specific Facebook groups where one can ask for advice from other expatriates in Goa. However, the fact that most Westerners do not live in Goa permanently sets clear limits to such support. Most (if not all) people with whom the Westerners socialise in Goa are frequently away from there for long periods, as a consequence of which whatever help and support is available at one point may not be there at another time. Moreover, some people are socially more connected than others, and the help given by friends is not necessarily very long-lasting. Adam and Sophie's friends helped them considerably during the difficult period described above, but helping with everyday tasks, although important, does not help with the financial situation, and if someone in the family had fallen seriously ill for a long time, the situation would quickly have become extremely difficult. Living in Goa without income or a decent savings is not possible, especially if one has children: one needs hundreds of euros every month for house rent and school fees alone. Moreover, regular flights abroad are costly (but necessary because of visa regulations).

The Western families living in Goa have limited support from relatives because they live so far away from them. Sometimes relatives do visit them and provide help with childcare and other tasks. Such support is, however, always only temporary since the relatives leave India sooner or later, usually within a few weeks. The lifestyle is thus very much based on a nuclear family. One mother whom I interviewed specifically pointed out that she is alone with her spouse and their children; they do not have support from relatives because they do not live in the same country as them but only visit there occasionally.

It's us alone with the kids. No family support (Ines, 45, two children).¹

Obviously, many sedentary families are lacking support from relatives in the West nowadays, too. However, I argue that there is a qualitative difference, since in the West one's life is usually more settled, or at least one has an image of stability, whereas in Goa, the Westerners' lives are from the very beginning built on the assumption of an insecure future and transnational mobility. Support from relatives is

¹ The interviewees' names used in this article are pseudonyms. The ages refer to their actual ages at the time of the interview.

explicitly not an option when living abroad. Domestic servants are much appreciated and they ease the life of the Westerners considerably in Goa. Such paid help is, however, problematic if one runs into financial trouble, and servants may also suddenly resign.

There are several single mothers among the Westerners in Goa and they seem to be very able to live between Goa and one or more other countries. Many even stated that it is in fact easier to be a single mother in Goa than it would be in their countries of origin because they can afford domestic help and babysitters in Goa. However, if a family with two parents ends up in a divorce, the crisis is particularly severe because their mobile lifestyle was built on the assumption of a functioning nuclear family. When a divorce occurs, the foundations of the lifestyle collapse, which often leads to the end of the mobile lifestyle. Very often the mother stays in her country of origin with the children while the father continues spending winters in Goa. Divorce is obviously an end to a certain lifestyle even for sedentary families, but the fact that the Westerners who divorce in Goa often end up moving to a different country after the divorce makes their situation more drastic; they need to start from scratch more concretely than those who have lived a sedentary life in their native countries prior to the divorce. Thus a transnationally mobile life can lead to a highly vulnerable situation if one faces personal crises such as illness or divorce. Such events are obviously also troublesome for sedentary people, but mobility adds another twist to the situation.

Outside official structures

If support from relatives is limited, support from the state is often non-existent. Since the Westerners do not live in their countries of origin, many of them have fallen out of the social security and health care systems that may exist in those countries. Even those who regularly return there have usually become ineligible for benefits, as their sojourns back "home" are not long enough and their contributions to the system are minimal or non-existent. The existence and scope of social security and public health care obviously varies greatly from country to country. Nevertheless, in most Western societies such systems exist at least to some extent, especially for members of the middle class (which includes most Westerners in Goa). None of my interviewees, however, considered dropping out of such systems a problem but viewed it as a preferred situation.

India is a very corrupt country. If you want something, you have to pay. In the north – in Sweden, Finland and Norway – everything is well organized and you do not need to pay. But there you are not free, they chain you (Lino, 48, three children).

Most Westerners in Goa prefer to be outside public welfare systems because they feel such systems control and restrict individuals too much, whereas they prefer to be "free". At the same time, they are not part of the Indian system either. They do not need or want Indian social security benefits (which are very limited or non-existent even for Indian citizens) but simply existing within the system would be useful sometimes: the lack of official registration can lead to various everyday problems (on the problems of registration of lifestyle migrants, see O'Reilly 2000: 142). They are in an ambiguous limbo state, which can be very problematic if things do not go as planned and they encounter difficulties (i.e. traffic accidents, robberies, arguments with landlords or business partners, etc.). As Lino's comment above indicates, Westerners often engage in bribing in India, that is, they try to solve things the unofficial way when the official one is not available (and sometimes also when it is available). Sometimes this strategy works, at other times it does not and they are in a very vulnerable position because the outcomes of such unofficial processes are uncertain. Moreover, they have to deal with the situations on their own and it is not necessarily a fair game. Similar problems (except for maybe bribing) obviously also exist in many Western countries, but being a non-registered foreigner makes the Westerners in Goa

feel particularly vulnerable. In addition, most of them are very aware of the rights they would have in many Western countries.

Not being registered in India can also lead to other problems. In addition to the administrative bases, the economic bases of the Westerners' lifestyle are insecure. The Westerners who earn their living in Goa often work in the informal sector, which seems to provide good profits but is without official recognition and legal protection; it is therefore a very vulnerable position. In fact, even if one works formally in Goa, one is very vulnerable as one is prone to changing local policies (without the right to affect them) and to the (sometimes surprising and sudden) actions of local administrators and politicians. Again, one may also face similar problems in one's native country, but non-registered foreigners are particularly powerless.

The Indian state seems not to want to recognise small businesses run by foreigners: the requirements for business visas are such that visas are granted only to people who invest and earn considerable sums of money.² However, although the small businesses are not officially recognised, they are extremely significant for many individuals whose income may come solely from these ventures. The ultimate risk of such small businesses is that if caught, one will not be able to obtain a new visa to India, which obviously means an end to the lifestyle.

The transnationally mobile lifestyle is thus problematic from the point of view of many official structures. In some respects, it is beneficial for individuals to stay outside societal structures – they are free to do what they want – but in certain situations, individuals may need such structures, and being unrecognised outsiders is tricky.

The eternal struggle with visas

One very significant vulnerability in this lifestyle is the Westerners' dependence on Indian visas. Most Westerners are in Goa on temporary visas – most on tourist visas, some on temporary business visas – and thus need to leave the country regularly in order to renew their visas.³

We still rely on the Indian authorities, so they will decide when the visa is given and when it is not given (Ines, 45, two children).

The structural bases for the lifestyle are thus very insecure: Westerners living in Goa can never know for sure whether their visas will be renewed or not.

In recent years, India has clearly tightened its policies regarding foreigners and has started to control their movements to a greater extent than in years past. India is a peculiar country because one can obtain tourist visas which are good for from six months to as much as ten years. Earlier, many Western long-term sojourners visited India's neighbouring countries (Nepal, Sri Lanka or Thailand) for short periods in order to renew their Indian visas. A few years ago, this practice was put to an end: one can now obtain a long-stay tourist visa to India only in one's country of origin, and once one has departed India when one's visa expires, one can re-enter only after staying outside of the country for at least two months. Even most people who have obtained business visas are required to leave India regularly. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, business visas are not attainable for many Westerners in Goa because their income and business structure do not meet the requirements of such visas. India thus clearly

² In order to obtain a business visa, the gross sales from the business activities must be at least 135,000 euros a year, and a person holding a work visa must earn at least 20,000 euros per year (http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/work_visa_faq.pdf, accessed 4 June 2013).

³ Those who have permanent visas are married to Indian citizens, were born to an Indian parent or born in India before the early 1980s when one could get a permanent visa to India if one was born there.

wants to prevent foreigners from staying there permanently, although at the same time, long tourist stays are allowed.

The visa regulations are a constant topic of discussion among the Westerners in Goa, and people are trying to find ways to circumvent the increasingly strict and sometimes arbitrary rules. Even children are very aware of the visa issues. For example, 5-year-old Fred once told me that “sometimes people need to leave Goa because they have a visa problem”. In other words, visa issues are everyday reality for Western children and adults in Goa, and the adults often identify visa issues as the main obstacle to their lifestyle. Some Westerners have even stopped coming to Goa because they have not been able to obtain suitable visas and they have grown tired of the constant struggle to obtain visas. Even if they are determined to continue coming to Goa, they undergo continual stress and insecurity because they can never be sure which kind of visa is granted – if at all – and what new rules will be put into practice with the visa regulations.

Even in those families that have managed to obtain long-term (business) visas, the issue of visas can lead to a tricky situation when children become legal adults. As minors, they are accompanying their parent(s) in India, but once they reach the age of 18 they can no longer obtain visas as dependents of their parents. Consequently, some young Westerners end up being able to come to Goa only on six-month tourist visas although they have grown up there and consider the place their home.

According to the Indian state, most of my research subjects are either visiting tourists or conducting temporary business in Goa, although they consider themselves to be permanent residents of Goa, that is, they have no intention of leaving for good. One could in fact argue that many Westerners in Goa would like to be considered migrants in India, but the visa regulations force them to be officially tourists. The rules also force them into mobility. Although most Westerners in Goa enjoy their transnationally mobile lifestyle – and would not want to abandon it – the visa regulations force them into regular mobility even when they may not desire to move at particular times. Many of the Westerners in Goa say that they would like to stay there for much longer periods than the visas allow. During the monsoon rains, they might want to leave Goa but not necessarily India – decamping to the mountains in Northern India is popular during the monsoon months. Therefore, although some need to leave India in order to earn money elsewhere during the off-tourist season, others do not need to, or they could earn money from tourists in North India during the monsoon months as the peak tourist season in the north occurs at that time. All my research subjects consider mobility an important part of their lifestyle, but they would like to choose the timing and frequency of that mobility themselves, which is currently not always possible because of the visa regulations. Visas are thus a structural issue that sets limits (and frameworks) to their transnationally mobile life.

“We don’t need no education”: Mobile lives and children’s schooling

The mobile lifestyle also includes a potential vulnerability with regard to children, i.e. education. Combining a transnationally mobile life and children’s schooling is not an easy equation, especially when the visa regulations force families to leave India regularly. The Western families in Goa have various strategies regarding how to manage this, and the theme is widely discussed among the families.

According to the spirit of individualised freedom, some families have opted for home schooling (or as many prefer to call it, un-schooling). Most enrol their children in schools run by Westerners, and some children attend local Indian schools. Local schools are, however, not attainable for most families because they require attendance for the entire school year, which is impossible with short-term visas. In addition, most of the Western parents are strongly opposed to local schools, viewing them as too strict and uncreative in their approach.

The transnationally mobile lifestyle (which is partly a personal choice, partly a necessity dictated by visa policies and business ventures) prevents children from attending an entire school year in one

school. Some of the Western children in Goa attend schools in (one of) the parents' country of origin when they are there, while others do not. Countries also have different approaches to what is and what is not acceptable in terms of children's education. Some countries (e.g. the UK, Italy, Norway) allow home schooling, whereas others (e.g. Germany, Greece, Sweden) do not, and some countries follow the child's progress more carefully (with regular examinations) than others. Thus, problems with arranging children's education are another example of how being transnationally mobile leads to various kinds of negotiations with the rules and structures that are designed from the sedentary point of view.

However, in spite of various potential problems, many people manage to lead mobile lifestyles between Goa and other countries for decades. Those who succeed have found secure sources of income, for example a continuous market for the services or products that they sell. They have also stayed healthy and thus able to work. Many of them have managed to obtain long-term visas to India or they have organised their lives in such a way that the six-month-long tourist visas are enough.

CONCLUSION

The Westerners in Goa are an example of marginally mobile people. They keep returning to specific locations but do not (and cannot) stay there permanently. Being marginally mobile may be economically beneficial to individuals and it may offer them the individual freedom that they appreciate, as well as a personally meaningful lifestyle, but it is a highly vulnerable position. In this article, I have presented various practical issues where the mobile lifestyle between Goa and some other countries is vulnerable and may cause individuals to run into trouble. Crises in one's personal life, issues with health care, un-registered businesses, un-registered residency, visa regulations and children's schooling are issues that highlight some of the vulnerabilities of the transnationally mobile lives of Westerners in Goa. The article has shown that although individuals may opt out from the sedentary norm, they seem to bump into rules and structures targeted for sedentary populations again and again. The individuals try to navigate the various rules and structures of the sedentary norm the best they can. Challenging the sedentary norm quickly leads to a marginal position which in turn means a vulnerable lifestyle. Yet, many people are able to tackle the various vulnerabilities so that they manage to lead the mobile lifestyle for years or even decades.

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