

# Upward and downward mobility through migration



Documentary films reveal and conceal. They are truthful without necessarily telling the truth. A film always shows just a slice of reality, and is the product of choices made by the main characters (who reveal certain aspects of their lives on camera) and the filmmakers (who select segments of these revelations to construct a story). When the film is screened, the question is how the main characters, and other audiences, will then decode the narrative. Do they experience the result as truthful? What strikes them as significant and meaningful in the film, and how does this further our understanding of social reality?

The anthropological documentary ‘Living Like a Common Man’ (2011), which traces the lives of Indian youngsters who recently migrated to London, was shown to a varied selection of audiences in India and Europe, including the main characters. This article discusses their reactions, recorded by the filmmakers for further study.

Mario Rutten, Sanderien Verstappen and Isabelle Makay

Above:  
The filmmakers  
from left to right:  
Sanderien Verstappen,  
Mario Rutten and  
Isabelle Makay

OVER THE PAST DECADE, the total number of Indians entering the UK on a temporary work or study visa increased by more than 400 percent: from 18,578 in 2001 to 76,450 in 2008 (Entry Clearance Statistics UK 2005-2009). Most of these visas were issued to persons younger than 30 (Salt 2009). The documentary ‘Living Like a Common Man’ documents the struggles, hopes and despair of seven recently arrived young Indian migrants in London (aged 24-26), who moved to Britain for work and study less than three years ago. All of them come from relatively wealthy middle-class families in India and travelled to Britain on a student visa or a temporary work permit. Like many youngsters in developing countries, they dreamed of going to the West to earn money, to study and to get overseas experience to improve their positions at home. Once in London they ended up in low-status, semi-skilled jobs to cover their expenses, and were crammed into a small guesthouse with other newly arrived migrants.

‘Living Like a Common Man’ is a story about the contradictory faces of globalisation. Contemporary youngsters from middle-class backgrounds in India now have the resources and ability to move abroad for a few years for study or work. Their migration experiences are characterized by ambivalence and ambiguity, by both downward and upward social mobility. In Gujarat, they live in big houses with their families, but in London they face rather primitive circumstances and work in low-status jobs. Simultaneously, their stay in London has also increased their social status among family-members and friends back home. The situation creates an uncertainty about their future plans; i.e. whether to stay in Britain or return to Gujarat.

‘Living Like a Common Man’ is the visual outcome of long-term anthropological research in Gujarat and London. The film follows seven young Indian migrants in their daily lives in London, as well as their parents in the home region Gujarat, who have high expectations of their sons and daughters. The film is based on intensive interaction with the youngsters over a period of two years, between May 2008 and May 2010. During this period, we went to London ten times and stayed with the youngsters for three to five days at a time. We also visited India for three weeks to film the weddings of four of them, and to meet the parents of all seven. Initial contact with the youngsters was established through Mario Rutten, who has known the families of two of the youngsters for almost 30 years, having conducted research in their home village in Gujarat since 1983. Sanderien Verstappen and Isabelle Makay became equally close to the youngsters during our visits to London and India. As visual anthropologists, they operated the camera and edited the film.

#### Screenings and feedback

During the first six months of 2011, we had four public and six private screenings in India and Europe. The premiere of the film took place at the *Beeld voor Beeld* festival in Amsterdam, in a sold-out theatre. Other public screenings with feedback discussions took place in London, Leuven and Bangalore. Four private screenings (two in London and two in Gujarat) were specifically aimed at eliciting responses from the main characters. The first private screening took place in the same guesthouse where the film had been shot. Present were those main characters who still lived in the house, as well as newly

arrived migrants who had since moved into the house. Separate private screenings were organized for the main characters who had moved out of the house, elsewhere in London or back in Gujarat. In each case, family members or friends were present to watch the film with us.

Discussions after the screenings were revealing. It turned out that the main characters could identify with the story, and found that we had portrayed their lives realistically. Other (unrelated) viewers, with a personal migration experience, also recognized themselves in the film. In fact, a discussion with Gujarati immigrants in the Netherlands revealed that the film elicited vivid memories of the process of downward mobility in the initial phase of their migration process forty years ago.

#### Downward mobility

One of the key themes of ‘Living Like a Common Man’ is the process of downward mobility experienced by newly arrived Gujarati migrants after moving to London. Living in a smaller house than accustomed to, they are suddenly expected to perform household chores previously done by their mothers or servants at home: ‘I never made beds in India, and now you can see, I’m doing it. This is London. I have to do all the things on my own.’ At the workplace this young man had to do menial work that he would never have accepted in India: ‘At the first day of my job, my boss said, “You have to clean the garden”. I said, “what is this? I came here to clean the garden?” I went into the bathroom and I literally cried. I thought, “what am I doing here? Did I come to London to do all those things?”’ His move to London was a bad experience: ‘According to me, and from the culture I come, I think that I become smaller by doing all these things.’

The experience of downward mobility is expressed most clearly in the statement that gave the film its title: ‘Here in India I live like a prince. I don’t need to do anything, everything is ready for me. I don’t need to use public transport, because I got a car, I got a motorbike. It’s the life of a prince. But in London I live like a common man.’ The parents of the youngsters are also aware of this process of downward mobility. One father stated: ‘When he calls us, and we hear how he lives there, we feel a bit sad. Here he lived in a house with 10 to 12 rooms. We have four bathrooms. But there, they live with three in a room as big as our bathroom. So we feel a bit sad.’

#### Reflecting on downward mobility

When we showed the film to the main characters, they insisted that we should show the film to youngsters in India, ‘so that they know that life is not so easy in London and that we have to struggle’. It was also interesting to see the responses of newly arrived migrants during the first screening at the guesthouse. Although they themselves did not participate in the making of the film, having arrived only very recently, they could relate to what they saw and started to reflect on their decision to come to London. One girl who had arrived in London a few months before, told us after seeing the film that she felt a bit sad: ‘If I had seen this film in India I would have probably decided not come to London. Or, perhaps I would have come anyway, but if I had seen all of this I would not have been so disappointed.’



# Responses to an anthropological documentary on Indian youngsters in London



Above: The Indian youngsters in front of their London house, Parents back home in India.

Below: London life: doing your own washing and ironing, watching TV together in the kitchen.



The parents in India also watched the film with great interest. They already knew that the living conditions of their sons and daughters in London were not very good, but they were very curious for visual information about their children's actual housing situation. Many questions were posed about what they saw on screen. One of the fathers in India smilingly informed us, after seeing the film, that 'You made a very good film, you portrayed the life of our son well, but the only thing that you got wrong is the title of the film. It should not have been "living like a common man", but "living as a common man"! Because they really live as common people in London.'

We also showed the film to a family of Gujarati migrants who had come to the Netherlands after they had to flee Uganda in 1972. The grandfather said that the film had reminded him of the time he moved from India to Uganda in 1956. 'I also faced many difficulties in adjusting to the new environment. At that time, I asked myself many times: "what am I doing over here?" Just like that boy in the film.' The film reminded his daughter of when they had left Uganda, in 1972, and had ended up in London before moving on to the Netherlands: 'I was 12 years old and I lived with my mother, brother and sister in the living room of a relative for three months. We had a nice house in Kampala and I felt that we had gone down by moving to Europe. The film reminded me of my disappointment as a young girl in the UK: "Is this Europe, will this be our future?" At the time we of course did not know for how long that situation would last. So I could very well imagine that these youngsters felt that they had gone down by moving to another country.'

Dutch youngsters reacted very differently. They had to laugh when the Indian youngsters expressed their difficulties in the film and told us: 'What's the problem with making your own bed, doing your laundry or having to clean the garden? What's the big deal?' A girl of the same age, but belonging to the youngest generation of the Gujarati family in the Netherlands, did not laugh, but said the film made it possible for her to see the past experiences of her grandfather, how it must have been for him as a new migrant: 'My grandfather told us how he felt when he first came to Uganda from India, how difficult it was for him to adjust. We knew about it, but watching the film we could actually see for the first time that life is very tough, living in such a bad house crammed into a room with four people. I could never really see my grandfather's past but because of your film I was able to see it, how it must have been to start a new life in another country.'

Older members of this Gujarati family in the Netherlands shared this recognition. One man said: 'Migrants always have to take a step back. Your language, your diplomas, everything is devalued in the new context.' His wife, who migrated from Bombay to the Netherlands about twenty years ago, told us that we portrayed a common aspect of migration. 'Migration is always a painful process. We know that because we have gone through that. The film portrays that well, but you (as film makers) are surprised by that and don't know that, because you did not experience that. For us it is a normal thing. It is part of the life of every migrant.'



He learned how to earn money.  
In the past, we used to give him money.



## The rewards

The audience of settled migrants commented on how a period of downward mobility can in the end lead to great rewards: 'What you filmed is the primary school phase of migration. Every athlete in the Olympic Games has to go through hard times to accomplish something. He falls down while practicing, maybe he breaks his leg ten times, but in the end he wins the gold medal. Not everybody can take this. Not everybody is fit to struggle like that and not everybody has the discipline and willpower. That is why only a small number of people migrate. Migration is always accompanied by suffering and pain, but you accept it because you know that in the end you gain. You have to go through this situation before you can blossom. The youngsters in your film are dedicated to make it work. They want to achieve something. Maybe after ten years, when you visit them again, they are better off than the British youngsters of the same age who started out with much more, but always stayed in the same spot.'

From these varied responses we conclude that the process of downward mobility expressed in the film (by the main characters themselves and in the editorial choices made by the filmmakers) rings a bell for past and present migrants, who recognize themselves and the difficulties they face(d) during migration. The film does not show the whole migration process, but gives an in-depth view of the 'initial phase' of migration. It will be interesting to film the main characters ten years from now, to see how they handled the migration process over time.

## Family pressure

In addition to the conflicting situation of downward and upward mobility, the film calls attention to the social links between the youngsters in London and their family members in India. As filmmakers we attempted to portray London and Gujarat as connected and somehow even interchangeable. In London, the youngsters live in a completely Gujarati environment. The youngsters make phone calls to Gujarat on a daily basis and parents send goods to their children by mail. Family links are mainly positive, but can also be hard to deal with when there is social pressure involved. Some of the youngsters migrated to London to escape that pressure: 'No need to worry about other people, just think of yourself.' This aspect of migration as a strategy of avoidance is most clearly expressed in the film by one of the girls who states, 'If I had stayed in India, my parents would have forced me to marry someone else. So it was better to tell my family I wanted to study more and I wanted to go abroad for further study. If I'm here, my family can't force me to marry another person. So that's why I just came here.'

## Reflecting on family pressure

Both the positive and the negative aspects of family linkages are acknowledged by viewers with a migrant background. One Gujarati migrant in the Netherlands said, 'When I saw the scene about the box with food that the parents send to their son in UK every three months, I was touched because it reminded me of 1972 when my father was in Austria, after having fled Uganda, and we were in UK with my mother. At that time, he sent us a box with chocolates. That is so

Indian, to show your love through food. England is of course famous for chocolates, but still my father sent chocolates from Austria to us in UK to show how much he loved us and wanted to be with us. The scene really brought back the emotional feeling I had at that time.'

Stories about social pressure seem to reverberate most with young viewers. A young Gujarati girl in the Netherlands explained how the film reminded her of a discussion she had with her nephew in India a few months back. 'My nephew is 14 years old and he has these fantasies about the West. He told me he dreams of going abroad for further study. I asked him why, but there was not much he could say. He has no idea about life here, except: "It is better over there. It is beautiful over there." He asked me a lot of questions and was especially interested in the freedom that we have here. Over there, when you talk to a girl (as a boy), people think you are flirting or even proposing. In India, friendship between a boy and a girl is impossible. He wants to befriend girls without getting in trouble. He wants to get away from all the social pressure in the family, even if it is just for a while. That is his main drive for going away. I recognized that in the film as well.'

How do the main characters themselves reflect on this issue of social pressure? Three of them already returned to India. We were interested to see how they are adjusting, and how they look back on their moments of relative freedom in London. One couple now lives with the boy's (joint) family in the village, with their newborn baby. When we watched the film with them, the girl immediately reacted: 'I want to return to England. I can't get used to living here again, in a family, listening to others, there is always something going on here. Yes we had a small room there in London. And yes, we have a big house here. But we have to share the space with many family members. So what is the difference?'

For her husband, watching the film prompted him to consider the choices he had made. One year earlier, on camera, he had enthusiastically described his business plan for a sandwich bar in Gujarat. But now, after their return to India, he has been unable to realize his dream. His family did not support his plans and he was expected to work in the family business. 'Seeing the film, I realize that I have a lot of thinking to do. When I was in London I wanted to go back to India so badly. But it turned out to be a disappointment. We just applied for a new visa. Seeing the film I realize that it will also be hard to go back to London, especially now that we have a baby.'

Seeing the film through the eyes of various audiences, and learning what aspects of their own lives they recognize, enriched our understanding of the lives of the main characters in the film and the complexities of the migration process itself. The film elicits reactions about the construction of the film as such, but also makes people reflect and talk about their own past experiences and future options.

We are still in regular contact with the main characters and their families, both in London and in Gujarat, and we are following their life trajectories with great interest. In the coming year, the film will be shown at various ethnographic and documentary film festivals, as well as in schools and colleges in Gujarat. We are especially curious to find out how youngsters who dream of migrating (but have not migrated yet) will respond to the film. What will this film reveal to them?

**Living Like a Common Man (2011) was directed by Sanderien Verstappen, Mario Rutten and Isabelle Makay. For further details about the film and sale of the DVD and accompanying booklet, see: <http://sites.google.com/site/livinglikeacommonman>**

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## Resources

Salt, J. 2009. *International Migration and the United Kingdom: Report of the United Kingdom SOPEMI Correspondent to the OECD*. London, University College London, Migration Research Unit. *Entry Clearance Statistics UK (2005/6-2008/9)*. Performance Management, Analysis & Forecasting (PMAF), UK Border Agency – International Group.