

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.’