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School of Development Studies
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi



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Insights from a Vlog Analysis

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Abstract

The number of students migrating to urban spaces to access higher education has been increasing over the years in India. Despite the growing phenomenon of intra-state migration for education, the lived experiences of student migrants remain underexplored in academic literature. The everyday lives of migrant students in urban India offer a unique lens to examine the intersections of migration, education, and urban transformation. The study analyzes video logs (vlogs) shared by migrant students on social media to understand how students interact and negotiate with the urban realities. The study highlights the reciprocal dynamics between migrant students and urban environments, revealing how these students not only redefine their identities but also reshape their surroundings in significant ways that its role becomes a key one in shaping the urban landscapes.

1. Introduction

Migration for acquiring education has been increasing over the years in India. The latest report by the National Institute Ranking Framework (NIRF) highlights the rising trend of migration among students pursuing higher education. Student enrollment in higher education stood at 43.3 million as of the academic year 2021-22. Out of this, 75% of the students reside away from their hometowns (Ibaf, 2025). Another report by UN-Habitat shows that about 37 lakh (3.7 million) young people aged 15-32 moved within India for educational purposes. Of these, 26 lakh were men and 11 lakh were women (Chhapia, 2014). Like other forms of migration, educational migration also requires close observation and study, as it plays a vital role in shaping the spaces around us and the lives of people within these spaces.

In India, metropolitan centres are also hubs of higher education. Major cities in the country attract a high number of students because they offer the kind of education and lifestyle they aspire to achieve. With time, this migration of students leads to shifts in the demographic compositions of such cities. The concept of studentification is closely associated with this shift. The term refers to the process by which the density of students in a specific area increases,

leading to various kinds of transformations (Nakazawa, 2017). This includes economic changes due to increasing rents, social transformations such as the displacement of residents, cultural changes introduced by the rise of the student lifestyle, and physical/spatial transformations in urban spaces (Smith, 2005). Scholars have often linked this process with gentrification and have argued that students in such spaces act as "apprentice gentrifiers" (Smith & Holt, 2007). According to Chatterton (1999), student spaces and student life are settings and times in which middle-class habits are formed. However, according to Nakazawa, the cause of studentification is beyond production-consumption, and the broad higher education policy is what institutionally causes the unavoidable overflow of student populations. Studies show that urban spaces around the world and people in them respond differently to the growing influx of students.

Studentification in the Anglo-American context is linked to several problems, including misbehaviour on the part of students (Revington, 2022). Evidence also shows that for attracting potential students and faculty, urban universities often try to gentrify their surrounding areas (Ehlenz, 2019; Etienne, 2012). All of this suggests that students, as a demographic group, have the potential to influence the space to which they migrate. However, there has been relatively little study on this phenomenon in the context of Indian cities.

India, as mentioned earlier, has been experiencing a surge in internal migration for the purpose of acquiring higher education, and cities are major destinations for this kind of migration. Most public universities in India are unable to provide hostel facilities to their students, resulting in an increasing demand for housing in the local areas surrounding educational institutions. Hostel capacity covers only 20% of demand, which leads to a reliance on private rentals, such as privately run hostels, Paying Guest (PG) facilities, and shared flats/apartments (TNN, 2019). A study conducted by Eduvisors revealed that only 1.6 million beds are available in the country for the approximately forty million students (Eduvisors, 2024). More recently, companies such as Stanza Living, Housr, and Olive Living have also entered the student housing market, realising its growing potential in India. Student housing is also viewed as a real estate investment asset class. This paper attempts to examine the day-to-day lives of students in India's urban centres and analyse how they, as a group, contribute to the process of urban transformation.

2. Methodology

There are several ways one can adopt to study the lives of student migrants in an urban space.

One can resort to traditional research tools, such as surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions, or integrate qualitative and quantitative tools to acquire a more comprehensive picture of the realities surrounding this phenomenon. This paper employs a qualitative methodological framework centred on video logs (Vlogs) created by student migrants, documenting their lives and experiences in urban spaces where they reside. Vlogs are a multimedia format blog through which individuals express their ideas and often showcase the mundane aspects of their lives, providing intimate insights.

In the context of this study, vlogs provide self-documented and intimate insights into student life. It also reveals mundane practices around food, housing, travel, and expenses, which are aspects often overlooked in academic research. Vlogs are treated here as cultural materials, reflecting both personal expression and broader urban transformation.

The vlogs created by students residing in the Delhi NCR region were selected through purposive sampling and analysed using various theoretical frameworks. Bourdieu's theory of habitus is one among them. Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1990), is an internalised disposition shaped by past experiences and social background. He has argued that students bring habits, values, and worldviews from their socio-cultural and economic backgrounds to the spaces where they live. Students live in a space separate from family control and professional rigidity, and this freedom, with time, creates a distinct social and temporal context (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). After migration, they are often forced to adapt to new norms in educational and urban spaces, often unconsciously. Yet another framework utilised here in this analysis is the production of space by Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre (1991) points out that space is not merely a physical entity, but rather a socially constructed phenomenon through practices, relations, and everyday life. In the context of students and their relationship with urban spaces, as a large mobile group, they actively shape and transform urban neighbourhoods. When we examine such spaces through the lens of the concept of perceived space, as proposed by Lefebvre, it becomes apparent that students' daily routines contribute to the creation of specific student geographies within cities. On the other hand, students also bring their cultural practices with them into the city, leading to the reshaping of urban foodscapes, rental markets, and cultural landscapes. Various aspects have been focused on here from the vlogs, such as food practices, travelling and mobility, housing, infrastructure and modes of adaptation, among others.

3. Takeaways from the Vlogs

A vlog created by a student of a private university in Delhi NCR shows the preparation of a traditional dish from his hometown, Nagaland. The vlog highlights the complexities of cooking such dishes in a hostel setting which is far from home. Through this process, students attempt to protect and recreate their culture in a new environment. This act of culinary continuity serves as a means of emotional and cultural connection to their homeland. The same student, in several of his vlogs, has documented his experience of travelling around Delhi and exploring restaurants serving North-Eastern cuisine. This is also due to the unavailability of such food joints in the area where his university is located. The student mentions in one of the vlogs how the weekly practice of travelling to Humayunpur for eating North-East food has become a part of his student life. Similarly, a student from the University of Delhi, from Kerala, talks about her journey with friends to Kerala House for eating South Indian cuisine. The demand for local cuisines in urban spaces where students reside leads to the establishment of such restaurants and allied facilities. These spaces often act as more than just a space which offers food, but as places of socialisation and network-formation. The presence of such shops and facilities also influences the decision of potential students when they choose an institution to enrol in. Thus, one can observe that a dyadic relationship exists between these spaces and student migration.

Cooking is another important element which can be found in several vlogs. Cooking, the vlogs suggest, is often a community-based activity. In one vlog, titled 'Chicken Curry Vlog', a student of Jamia Millia Islamia is seen cooking chicken curry along with his roommates and friends. The preparations for the same and the responses of each person present have been documented in detail in the vlog, which is rich with references to their lives and food from Kerala. Such seemingly simple acts, such as cooking, serve as significant ways of adapting to a new life and the urban space to which students are introduced.

Travelling is another recurring theme in the vlogs made by students. This includes them narrating their routine, day-to-day travel to the institutions where they study, as well as the train journeys to their home states. One vlog by yet another Delhi University student covers her experience of travelling to Majnu Ka Tila, a space where students go for recreation near Delhi University's North Campus. This journey, she says, is a part of her weekly schedule. She explains in her vlog what a student should ideally purchase from this place and suggests areas for eating. Such explanations often indicate the financial decisions students make, and this also reflects the social and economic position each of them belongs to. Vlogs, which talk about

expeditions to weekly markets in various localities such as Kabutar Market and Sarojini Market, can be seen as reflections of the adaptation strategies students adopt. The pursuit of finding affordable commodities becomes an essential aspect of their everyday urban experience. In almost all the areas in Delhi where students reside in large numbers, one can observe the presence of such markets. The presence and continued expansion of such markets exemplify how students, through their demand for affordability, are reshaping the urban landscape. In other words, these markets are spatial manifestations of the everyday economic negotiations that students engage in, as well as of their search for sustainable and low-cost living arrangements.

Some vlogs also capture the journeys of students between Delhi and their hometowns, offering insights into the rhythms of mobility that shape the lives of migrant students. These trips, which are often undertaken in the second-class compartments of trains, reveal the material and emotional hardships that accompany such journeys. In one vlog, for instance, a female student documents the preparations she makes before travelling alone by train to her hometown. Her narration presents the journey as an adventure, framing it in terms of excitement and independence, while the underlying struggles of navigating public spaces alone remain largely unspoken. Similarly, many vlogs discuss students using public modes of transportation within the city, such as the metro or buses. They can be seen frequently comparing these experiences with transportation systems in their home states. These comparisons illustrate how students engage with and interpret unfamiliar urban infrastructures. Such moments of reflection can be seen as early encounters with the "alien" urban environment, through which students begin to situate themselves within the city's systems.

Students document the housing conditions and allied infrastructures in their vlogs as well. There are numerous vlogs where students offer various suggestions to those who aspire to study in the city. These suggestions primarily concern the type of housing one should choose and the rationale behind it. One can see multiple vlogs where students suggest finding a room with the help of a broker, since it will be challenging to find a 'good' room by oneself. In one of these vlogs, it is also noticeable that senior students act as brokers between new students and room owners. Hence, students contribute to the economic cycle around the rental market in such urban areas in more than one way. Vlogs also reflect the precarious nature of the rental housing market for students. In one of the vlogs made by a student of Jamia Millia Islamia, he shares his experience of struggling to find a place to stay after reaching Delhi for the first time. After hours of desperate searching, he finds himself at the house of a stranger who offered him a

place to sleep for the night. Such is the condition of those students who reach the city without much prior knowledge of the urban space or social networks. The presence of social networks thus plays a vital role in the urban life of student migrants. Numerous vlogs depict students mentioning their relatives, friends, or former schoolmates who help them navigate the initial days of settling in the city, sometimes even hosting them until they find a place of their own. Some of the vlogs also reflect the deteriorating conditions of the flats in such localities where students densely reside. Students often complain through their vlogs that they are having to pay high amounts of money without receiving basic amenities. We can also see that issues such as rising rents, exploitation, gender-based and caste-based vulnerabilities, and health challenges are also mentioned in some vlogs.

Students also narrate episodes of hardship through some of their vlogs. For instance, a student in one of his vlogs talks about the experience of visiting a clinic in Delhi after contracting typhoid. He contrasts the healthcare system in Delhi with that available back in his home state. In the vlog, he also mentions that every other patient in the hospital had a person to assist them whereas he was alone, reflecting the vulnerable conditions students experience. Vlogs also help us track the transformations that students undergo in relation to urban surroundings. While the initial vlogs made by students after reaching the city reflect language barriers, cultural shock, and the loneliness they face, the vlogs made in the later years show how they have developed strategies and adapted to life in the urban landscape. This includes developing social networks that assist them in navigating urban life, discovering spaces where they can find food of their choice, or adjusting their lifestyles and interests according to the financial and cultural realities of their surroundings. Hence, these narratives portray how students move from a position of vulnerability to one of negotiation and adaptation.

4. Limitations of the study

This study has multiple limitations. Selective self-representation is evident in the vlogs, where students curate what they choose to show and may therefore omit sensitive or negative experiences. The information collected through this method cannot be claimed as representative of all sections. Not all groups of migrant students vlog, and hence the voices of certain groups, such as those from lower-income, rural, and marginalised backgrounds, may be absent from such accounts. Due to the performative nature of vlogs, the content may be influenced by the desire for more audience and engagement, leading to exaggerated or staged experiences. We should also note that these are fragmentary insights, as evident in the vlogs,

which capture moments rather than full life stories; hence, it might be harder to track long-term experiences systematically.

However, alongside its limitations, this method also presents several possibilities for social scientists. Combining the observations from the analysis of vlogs with information gathered from other sources may contribute to the creation of a more comprehensive analysis of social realities. The future research can further explore the methodological implications of using digital content as primary data, considering ethical concerns, audience reception, and the intersection of online and offline identities.

5. Conclusion

The study has attempted to explore the everyday experiences of migrant students in urban spaces through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, along with the broader framework of studentification. The analysis of vlogs shows how students navigate new urban environments, adapt to unfamiliar social and cultural landscapes, and, in turn, contribute to the transformation of city spaces. Various themes emerging from these vlogs, such as food, travel, housing, and infrastructure, reveal how migrant students both shape and are shaped by their surroundings as they negotiate identities, relationships, and economic constraints.

It also shows that migration for education is not merely a movement from one place to another but a complex process of adaptation which contributes to the identity formation of students. The transition to urban life introduces students to numerous challenges such as alienation, financial precarity, and cultural dissonance, but also opportunities for self-reinvention, community building, and the creation of alternative spaces of belonging. Alongside, for the cities, students serve as agents of transformation. As the internal migration of students in search of education is expected to increase in the coming years due to rapidly transforming educational policies and students' growing aspirations, academic inquiry into the possibilities and challenges created by this migration should be intensified.

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