

# Indian students in Australia: victims of crime, racism or the media?

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## Abstract

*A series of attacks on Indian students in 2009 in Australia led to an international media frenzy about the safety of International students in Australia and Australia's apparently racist culture. While on face value this was a story about crimes against Indian students, the media's reaction to those events (particularly in India), the reactions of student interest groups, and the reactions of education providers and government, made this story of International importance and resulted in significant civil unrest in many Australian cities and suburbs. This paper examines the available facts of these events, and follows a range of (often competing) discourses circulating amongst a range of participant groups. From a criminological perspective we analyse the data on crime patters central to these events and this is discussed with reference to the media responses and student, education provider and government responses. The paper concludes with recommendations about how the welfare of students might best be maximised in the context of victims of crime and the reporting of these incidents.*

**Keywords: international students, Indian students, crime, racism, media**

## Introduction

Ever since the formal establishment of a commercial international education industry in Australia in the 1980's, individuals from many countries have sought an education - and particularly a post-secondary education - in Australia. Indian students have counted among those students from the beginning.

Indian students have become one of the most significant cohorts of students:

- In 1994, Indian students represented just 1.5% of the 102,000 onshore international students.
- By 1998, the year most affected by the Asian currency crisis, Indian students represented just over 5% of the roughly 150,000 international students studying in Australia.
- By 2004, the Indian student population had grown to nearly 6.5% of onshore international students. This number seems relatively small and only a marginal growth since 1998, but this number; 20,749 students represented the fourth largest national cohort.
- In the five years since 2004, the number of Indian students has risen to the number two position of 109,356 - just over 19% of a total of over half a million international students coming from 200 different countries. China remains the number one source country for international students.
- Today, over 43% of all onshore international students come from either India or China. International students as a whole constitute around 2.64% of the Australian population, more than the estimated number of Aboriginal Australians for 2009 of 2.57%.  
(AEI, 2009a)

Until 2009, the media paid only occasional attention to these significant statistics with typical references to international students as "cash cows" who compromise Australian educational standards. Common themes of media coverage on international students included victims of mercenary education providers and agents, collaborators with unscrupulous employers, and perpetrators of migration rorts. In this light, medial

constructions of international students ranged from innocent victims to scheming exploiters of innocent Australian law.

But in May and June 2009, there was an explosion of media interest in Indian students specifically, and as a consequence, international students in general. Attacks on Indian students in Melbourne and to a lesser degree, Sydney, were at the core of this explosion which also led to an independent expose of international students at many levels. The experiences of Indian students in Australia became a hot media topic across the world, and the State and Federal governments panicked at the prospect that this negative coverage might send the international student demand plunging. The oft-quoted statistics of international education being the third highest Australian export earner (AEI, 2009b) meant that this panic had a strong economic basis, and no-one knew how serious the ensuing economic damage would be. This media coverage generated a paradoxical response from government: we (the government) will show you (the international student) just how much we care about you (so that you, your friends and your family won't stop buying from us). Clearly, good care of students is primarily an imperative for the students themselves, but also has benefits for Australia's international relations reputation and the Australian economy.

In order to make sense of this unprecedented cluster of events, this paper looks at Indian students as the victims of violent crimes and undertakes three specific tests:

1. Were Indian students victims of crime in 2009?
2. Were Indian students victims of racism in 2009?
3. Were Indian students victims of the media in 2009?

Anecdotally, Indian students have been noted as ardent seekers of permanent residence, especially since the closer links between Australia's education and migration programs were established in 2001. As a result, Indian students have been seen as single-minded seekers of courses with optimistic PR (permanent residence) prospects, at times above any concerns of educational merit or vocational appropriateness. Also, Indian students have been seen as highly motivated by, if not dependent upon, employment to be able to survive in Australia during their studies.

This paper will show that these two anecdotal perspectives of Indian students:

- i) PR interests above educational interests, and
  - ii) the need to secure an immediate onshore income stream above educational interests,
- are intimately connected to the results of the three tests above.

## **Test No. 1: Were Indian students victims of crime in 2009?**

Before examining this first test question, it would be well worth looking at what being a victim - of any sort - means. Merriam Webster defines it as "one that is acted on and usually adversely affected by a force or agent" ... "one that is subjected to oppression, hardship, or mistreatment". It is most curious that this definition specifies "usually adversely affected" because this holds back from the common definition of victimhood as undoubtedly adverse.

To dig a little deeper, we turn to victimology, a narrow sub-discipline of criminology for a definition. And there we find victimhood is anything but simple notion. Concepts such as "true victim", "ideal victim" and "undeserving" and "deserving victims" add complex layers to this core definition. Perhaps of most use for this paper is the idea that victims cannot be separated from "the process whereby an individual comes to be identified as a victim" (Davies, Francis and Greer, 2007, p.144), and the media has an enormous role in establishing that process. Now that we can say that being victim is a multifarious thing, we can look at the case in hand with some trepidation.

There is no doubt that a number of Indian students were victims of assaults and other crimes in Australia in 2009. A convenient summary of reports published in Australia on some of those crimes is given at the Wikipedia page, '2009 attacks on Indian students in Australia'. A concise summary of the crimes identified there is given in Table 1 below.

*Table 1 details of some of the crimes against Indian students published in Australian media in May/June 2009.*

<b>No.</b>	<b>date</b>	<b>location</b>	<b>gender</b>	<b>age</b>	<b>Crime</b>
1	04-May-09	MEL	male	21	assault, "beaten unconscious"
2	01-May-09	MEL	male	unstated	assault, "assaulted, robbed, [verbally abused]"
3	01-May-09	MEL	male	25	assault, "stabbed in the head"
4	24-May-09	SYD	male	unstated	assault, "house petrol bombed, suffered burns"
5	25-May-09	SYD	male	25	assault, "stabbed in abdomen"
6	30-May-09	MEL	male	unstated	assault, "beaten by group of fifteen"
7	02-Jun-09	MEL	male	21	assault, "slashed across chest"
8	08-Jun-09	SYD	unstated	unstated	assault, "attacked by Lebanese men"
9	08-Jun-09	MEL	male	23	assault, "beaten unconscious"
10	08-Jun-09	MEL	unstated	unstated	car burnt
11	11-Jun-09	ADL	male	22	assault, turban struck, fight ensued
12	13-Jun-09	MEL	male	24	assault, "attacked by three people"
13	15-Jun-09	MEL	male	20	assault, assaulted, verbally abused
14	29-Jun-09	MEL	male	22	assault, attempt to forcibly remove turban

It is interesting to note that all known ages of the victims were between 20 and 25 and all known genders were male. This is broadly consistent with the typical demography of this student cohort, except that the population ratio of male to female of Indian students is three to one (AEI, 2009c).

No female Indian students were reported in this summary, and that absence is worthy of note. The first possibility is that there were female victims but they chose not to report their assaults. Victims choosing not to report is a well documented phenomena in the literature on victims of crime. This would not be unusual, particularly if the physical assaults also extended to sexual assaults as these offences are still notoriously under-reported. Moreover, if the assaults were clearly racially motivated one might also expect to at least hear an increase of reports of assaults against women – sexual assault is, after all commonly conceptualised as a crime of power. Of course “the police in all States and Territories are a major source of crime statistics, but these statistics refer only to crimes reported to and/or detected by police. The Crime and Safety Surveys in Australia and Crime Victimization Surveys conducted overseas consistently show that a majority of victims do not report incidents of victimisation to the police or other government agencies. Estimates from these surveys indicate that less than 40 per cent of crimes are reported to the police.” (Mukherjee, 1999, p. 2) The claims about reported crimes can only remain speculative precisely because of the absence of data.

The second possibility is that women were not victimised because they were not in high risk locations at high risk times. This is consistent with notion that many women avoid being out alone after dark for fear they increase their likelihood of being victimised. There is no clear data on the time and/or location of these crimes, so this second possibility cannot be easily tested.

With reference to these possibilities, Adam West of the Victorian Police Media Unit indicated that these crimes were usually late at night in public places such as near rail lines and stations and typical of assault locations and times (personal communication, 14 October 2009). In this respect, they may not have been significantly different to other victims of similar crimes; other international students, and other Australian residents. But there is no firm data to test this claim.

The possibility that female Indian students avoided those locations at those times remains viable, and indeed sensible. The converse question may also be asked; why were male Indian students in those locations at those times? We might speculate that male Indian students were more likely to be expected to earn an income to immediately begin servicing debt associated with their studies. This imperative takes them away from their residential areas and often into shift work with odd starting and finishing times. In short, their financial circumstances forces them into risky employment conditions with an increased associated risk of being assaulted. Criminologically, this is consistent with a routine activities thesis. This theory holds that crime occurs when motivated offenders and potential victims come together in a space lacking capable guardians a violation can occur (Cohen and Felson, 1979). This explains well why the offences occurred in the locations they did; that is lone Indian students commuting late at night between their places of employment or study and their residences

pass through places lacking capable guardians. However, it tells us little about the motivations of offenders (see Bottoms and Wiles (2002).

Here there are three possibilities;

1. That the attacks were racially motivated and that race was the primary factor in the selection of a victim; that is that there were essentially 'hate crimes'.
2. That motivated offenders used race as part of the 'selection criteria' or 'profile' of their victims. That is that Indian students were seen as 'soft' targets who might carry on them considerable rewards (in the shape of cash). This does not make the offence a 'hate' or race crime (Mason 2008), yet race may still be a motivating factor.
3. The Indian students were victimised at much the same rate as other potential victims but a confluence of media reportage and other problems and uncertainties associated with education and living away from home played a part in 'problematising' the assault as a race issue.

If the test question were modified to ask: "was the number of Indian students represented as victims of crime more or less than the general population?", A more illuminating perspective on this issue might arise. But since no 'race of victim' data was recorded in either of the states featuring media reports, this question cannot (yet) be answered.

### **Statistics on Assault in NSW and Victoria**

The racial identity of the victims of crime is not routinely recorded in either of the two states of interest, NSW and Victoria. And secondly, the general statistics on assaults for these two show contradictory trends over the last 12 to 24 months, with NSW falling by 8.1% and Victoria rising by 5.4% (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2009; and Victoria Police, 2009).

And the anomalies don't stop there. In the period July 2007 to June 2009, NSW recorded an overall net drop in non-domestic assaults, ranging from 'no significant change' in nine statistical regions; to a drop of -8.1% in Sydney; and a maximum drop of -11.7% in the north western statistical division (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2009).

In Victoria, the pattern is much more uniform: Adult victims aged between 18 and 59 have increased by 5.9%, which is typical of all Victorian assault statistics across this period. The five regions of the state experienced increases of between 2.8% and 8.8% for assault, while the most common location of Indian student attacks, 'street/lane/footpath', the second most common location for all assaults after residences, increased by only 4.5% (Victoria Police, 2009).

### **Test No. 2: Were Indian students victims of racism in 2009?**

Racism is a broad term that can refer to a wide range of beliefs and behaviours and is certainly not a simple phenomenon. Indeed, definitions of racism vary significantly. Take the Macquarie Dictionary definition for example, "the belief that human races have distinctive characteristics which determine their respective cultures, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to rule or dominate others." (Macquarie Dictionary, 2009).

An important feature of this and many definitions is the notion of racial superiority, but Sowell (1994) argues that "many assume that racism is a prerequisite for discrimination, or is virtually synonymous with it. However, a generalized hostility or specific discrimination may be directed to a particular racial or ethnic group without any belief that they are innately inferior" (p. 154). His conclusion means that the recognition of racial difference alone can be the basis of racist behaviour.

Some commentators view the boundary between the categories of racism and non-racism is significantly blurred and prefer to work with a continuum instead, with 'less racist' at one end and 'more racist' at the other. This would admit forms of racism that are more subtle or covert, as well as major acts of racial violence (Trepagnier, 2006)

Blending these two ideas, we can ask: how does recognising racial difference transform into racist acts that register positively on a racist continuum, such as the attacks that form the basis of this paper? This requires both evidence that this occurs, and some understanding of the racist motivation of the attackers.

The evidence of racist behaviour was sufficient for the Race Discrimination Commissioner, Mr Tom Calma, to comment that: “we need to recognise that racism does exist in Australia. It doesn't mean the whole society is racist but it does exist with individual's actions and small group actions,” and “it's important that we all accept that, understand and start to develop the frameworks to address it into the future and not be reactive but be proactive.” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 14 June 2009) These statements reflect a view that is most likely held by many citizens about the diversity of racism in Australia.

However, the evidence that racism per se was the driving force of the attackers is not so easily found. Let's begin examining this test question by considering both reported and unreported crimes. We will first consider reported crimes and assaults in particular.

Any claim that these crimes are inherently racist must first address the strongest evidence available. Crime statistics in NSW and Victoria do not routinely record the race or ethnicity of victims of crime (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2009, and Victoria Police, 2009). And those crimes that do record the race/ethnicity of the victim are very few, and noted because they feature explicitly racist actions as the core of the crime. Therefore, it is impossible to make any compelling claim about increased attacks in Indian students since there is no comprehensive evidence to support these claims, and no official baseline data with which to measure any change. At this point we can now consider speculations beyond the official records.

Unreported assaults can by definition, only be estimated. Estimates vary as might be expected. Ten years ago, the Australian Institute of Criminology published an article on ethnicity and crime which suggested that only 40% of crimes are reported, of which only 25% have known perpetrators (Mukherjee, 1999). This means that the majority of crimes allegedly go unreported and only 10% of all crimes have a known perpetrator. Francis (2007) identifies seven reasons why crimes may be under reported, ranging from fear of communication due to language difficulties to a belief that police and other statutory agencies are unresponsive to their needs.

Arguably, the mostly directly relevant group commenting on Indian student victims would be the Federation of Indian Students of Australia (FISA). FISA is somewhat ambiguous in its determination on the presence of racist crimes against Indian students. The central question of whether Indian student victims were the victims of racism was answered by the President of FISA, Mr Gautam Gupta ('Are we racist or are we just violent?', ABC radio interview, 12 June 09) who stated, “I do have doubts [that these are racially motivated attacks]. So some of the attacks where the people or the thugs were abusing people and they were asking them to go back home, or telling them this is 'curry bashing', or ... they're thrill seekers and they find thrill in targeting a particular section of the community which I think is becoming like a pattern. And that's what's disturbing for us and that's where we think there are racist elements in some of these attacks.” Only 'racist elements' were asserted.

A much more reactionary statement from FISA is contained in an article titled *FISA calls Australian Government to stop student killings* (4 September 09). FISA looked at international student deaths, an issue that came to the attention of the media following the coverage of Indian student attacks. Student and FISA representative, Hardeep Kaur said that, “any student death will be the direct responsibility of the negligence of the Deputy PM and her ineffective structures such as DEEWR and ACPET. All deaths that are avoidable must be avoided or they should be treated as killings.”

Both of these statements make important assertions. The first is that racism cannot be regarded as the only basis of the attacks, while the second makes the astonishing assertion that all student deaths are the responsibility of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Given Gupta's claim that these assaults contained “racist elements”, we need to look further into that possibility, but this is where the lack of evidence forces us to accept an 'inadequate evidence' verdict. No evidence has been published that conclusively shows that the perpetrators were driven by a primarily racist motivation.

### **Test No. 3: Were Indian students victims of the media in 2009?**

The notion of a 'victim of the media' is categorically different to the victims of crime or racism in that the relationship between the would-be perpetrator and victim is impersonal and detached in time and space. So for this test question, we have to broaden the idea of victimhood to include consequences that negatively impacted on the victim, and perhaps in less immediate or traceable ways.

A very useful key to the 'victims of the media' question is this description of the media's power in relation to matters of race is provided by van Dijk (p. 37 2000): "when power over the most influential form of public discourse, that is, media discourse, is combined with a lack of alternative sources, when there is a near consensus, and opponents and dissident groups are weak, then the media are able to abuse such power and establish the discursive and cognitive hegemony that is necessary for the reproduction of the new racism."

The media's role began in earnest in May 2009. On 27 May, and for several days after, Indian and then Australian media carried stories of Indian students being attacked, mostly in Melbourne but also in Sydney. Many of them carried claims that these attacks had been going on for some time, or more extensive than the specific cases reported.

eg.

"The Federation of Indian Students in Australia says there have been more than 500 recorded attacks on Indian students, most of them in Melbourne." (*The World Today: 'International image hit by attacks on Indians'*, 29 May 2009)

"Trade Minister Simon Crean says Indian authorities raised concerns about students being targeted more than a year ago." (*Australia in damage control over Indian attacks*, 1 June 2009)

"Violent attacks on Indians have been growing over the last few years and has raised serious concern (sic) for aspiring students who wish to study in Australia." *Australia: Teenagers attack Indian student, critical*, 27 May 2009

Overall, these statements suggest racist attacks against Indian students emerged and proliferated before any police actions took place. But the evidence for these claims is not borne out in the few statistics we have, as we have seen. Some of the world's media formed a loose consensus that Indian students were victims of violent Australian racists, with the Indian media indicative of a hardline racist Australia depiction, and the Australian media perhaps the most uncommitted.

It was not until these crimes had largely faded from the pages of the world's media that a more critical position was expounded. Perhaps the most succinct summary of the themes of the reporting was reported by John Ross in his August 2009 article, 'Just another week in international education' (Campus Review, 3 August 2009). He said, "any incident of thuggery was headline news so long as there was an Indian connection", but his concluding remarks capped it all off, "International education lobbyists say the industry will survive all this. Hopefully it will emerge stronger. More attention paid to the students, the security, the inclusion, the curriculum, the language skills, the policy settings, the compliance measures, the regulation. And regulation of the media? Well, nobody's really talking about that."

This is a case of the media critiquing itself. The numbers of attacks were not shown to be significantly greater than before, but the cause for alarm was nevertheless raised. As Prof. Stephen Connolly, the president of the International Education Association of Australia responded "We have slipped in our duty of care to some of our international students. We have had a wake up call (courtesy of the crisis over the security of Indian students)," (Lane, 2009). The crisis was not about victims of crime or racism, but a crisis in international relations and its accompanying economic risk.

In the simplest terms, the scoop on Indian students as victims of racist crime became international news because the global media market is perpetually hungry for racist sensationalism, and once that media cat was out of the bag, no amount of rational examination of the matter could put it back in. As Indo-Australian journalist, Janaki Bhahadur astutely observed, "At first glance, the crisis seemed to trash Australia's reputation as a safe place where aspirational and middleclass Asian parents could send their children to pursue their studies. In the process it imperilled a multibillion dollar Australian industry in the midst of an economic downturn when every export dollar was needed." (p.1, 2009)

The actions taken by very senior Australian political and government representatives at the time of the crisis and the months that followed were an attempt to assure Indian authorities that India's sons and daughters were safe in Australia. The principal demonstration of this commitment to safety was a number of reforms being undertaken in response to this crisis, at both state and federal levels. To a significant degree, the media representation of a crisis of Indian student safety was treated as real in order to highlight the benefits of the actions being taken by the Australian government and its political leaders. And both the Indian and Australian governments participated in this political device. As Bahadur succinctly put it: "The Indian government, no less

than the Australian one, cannot afford to ignore – or be seen to ignore – the plight of its citizens when they face violence abroad. The media will not let them.”

A very important and unexpected result of media coverage of these attacks was that sharply focused attention was directed at international students in general, and a number of quite real problems in international education came to light, most notably through the ABC television program, ‘Four Corners’, (*Holy Cash Cows*, 27 July 2009). This program revealed that “foreign students in this country have been targeted by unscrupulous businessmen, who have set up training schools that supply qualifications that sometimes aren't worth the paper they are written on” and other scams involving migration agents and fraudulent documents. Most critically, Four Corners “discovered evidence that students have made serious allegations to the relevant government authorities and been ignored or worse found themselves subsequently under investigation by government.”

These revelations were consistent with a much more rational response from the government. The broad consequence of these revelations was that Indian students now have a better prospect than ever of gaining a genuine and useful education from Australia and a more attentive ear from ombudsmen and corruption monitoring bodies. Moreover, discussion of many aspects on international studentship has been elevated and serious critiques of matters as significant as Australia's decision to align its education and migration programs have emerged.

The Deputy Prime Minister's Australian/Indian Community dinner speech in New Delhi on 31 August (Gillard, 2009) captured the transition from the media sensationalism of Indian student attacks to the appropriate review of government strategy very well. First, it recognised the media coverage of Indian student attacks and second, the much more significant problem of reform against rogue education and migration operators. It is no surprise that the attacks on Indian students have disappeared from the world's headlines in late 2009, while the hard work that is being done on regulatory reform goes on with hardly a front page story.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined three questions about Indian students in Australia in 2009 as victims of crime, racism and the media. Indian student as victims of crime has not been significantly demonstrated in the recorded statistics, and evidence of significant unreported crimes is weak. Indian students as victims of racism has not been shown to be justified, though racism and links to violent crimes cannot be regarded as beyond possibility, we are not suggesting that each attack shares identical motivations.

In the light of poor criminological evidence and a plethora of evocative images, the global media has propagated and fostered claims about crimes and racism related to that are well outside the evidence. However, the claim that Indian students have become victims of the media cannot be demonstrated. While responsible agencies have acknowledged the media claims as, at least in part true, the interests of education providers and their associated economy have been shown to be the most vulnerable participants in these media events.

The media coverage of Indian student attacks in 2009 has in part led to recognition of problems unrelated to physical safety involving government departments, individuals, education providers and migration agents. These problems are real, though their impact will most likely be limited to a minority of international students.

The challenge for Australia now is to establish much more penetrating monitoring of international student affairs so that problems are not revealed by the media for its own purposes, and seemingly under the nose of government. Channels for effectively recording student concerns and rigorously implementing the tough sanctions already available to international education through the ESOS Act must be stepped up, and both federal and state governments have made some progress on that charter. And finally, it is also up to the industry itself to increase its integrity, commitment and accountability in this process in concert with the regulatory framework.

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