

“The government is not reducing the gap between the communities but increasing it”

Indian students in Australia speak to WSWS about recent racist attacks

Our reporters
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The Australian political and media establishment has responded to the recent spate of racist attacks on Indian university students with a series of desperate evasions aimed at covering up the political issues while, at the same time, maintaining revenue from the lucrative international student market. It has studiously avoided making any genuine examination of the systematic and institutionalised discrimination suffered by Indian and other international students.

In Victoria, Labor Premier John Brumby called a “Walk for Harmony” in Melbourne, the state capital, on July 12 in response to the violent assaults. Promoting the event, Brumby insisted “We are all equal”. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. In a telling indication of his real attitude, the state premier refused to allow any Indian students to address the crowd. (See: “Indian students boycott Victorian Labor government’s ‘Walk for Harmony’”)

International students are subject to tuition fees many times higher than those paid by most Australian students. They are ineligible for income support, for student concession public transport fares, and are barred access to Medicare and other basic social services. Every aspect of their lives while studying in Australia is determined by the government and university authorities’ drive to extract maximum profits. Providing education to students from overseas is now Australia’s third largest export, behind coal and iron ore.

Revenues from international student tuition and other fees have increased from \$200 million in 1992, \$1.8 billion in 2000, to an extraordinary \$15 billion today. In 2007, international students comprised 26 percent of all enrolled students in Australia—a higher proportion than in any other advanced capitalist country.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with three Indian students in Melbourne.

Ganesh Sundaramurthy is a full-time Masters in Business student and also works as a liaison officer for the student union

at the Bourke Street campus of RMIT University. The campus provides mainly finance and business courses and has a large number of international students. He is currently applying for residency.

Ganesh spoke of his experiences since arriving in July 2006 from India where he completed an engineering degree. “As well as my full-time study, I work 12 hours a week here (at the university),” he said. Ganesh also works five to ten hours part-time for a company selling credit cards in shopping centres. “It’s a really hard job. It’s paid by commission.”

As a student liaison officer Ganesh experiences first hand the problems faced by many overseas students. “There are just three of us working here. Last semester we had around 500 cases, on the city campus alone, of students seeking assistance. It has been a major increase from last year... I’ve seen many students facing financial distress.”

Ganesh said one of the major issues was the availability of affordable accommodation. He said Australian universities sent representatives to India, distributing brochures that gave a false picture to prospective students of university facilities in Australia.

“They say, ‘You can live in RMIT Village, and it’s really nice. You can live in the city’ but students aren’t told that you have to pay \$1,200 a month for a one-bedroom studio apartment to live in the city.” The student union, in fact, had started a soup kitchen on campus last year, which served food to hundreds of students every week.

Ganesh pointed to other issues: “International students must pay \$300 a year for private health insurance and they don’t have access to Medicare. So when you go to the doctor, you have to pay for everything, even the consultation fees.”

The university has very few medical facilities. Services once paid for out of student union fees were cut back or outsourced after the introduction of voluntary student unionism (VSU) by the former Howard government.

Ganesh said most students worked in badly paid jobs such as in restaurants, and that he had dealt with cases of students

working for between \$5 and \$8 an hour. He said they lived in poorer suburbs and had to travel late at night on public transport after finishing work.

“Because of that, they are always soft targets on the trains at night. All the police can say is that it’s the individual’s responsibility to protect their property or move to a safer suburb, but most students can’t afford this.”

Sachin is from Bangalore, has been in Australia for 16 months and is studying for a business administration masters degree at Victoria University. He pays around \$10,000 in tuition fees each semester.

Sachin said he had experiences with racism “but not to the extent that we hear in the news”. “We have had a few abusive incidents, usually from people of low socio-economic background or on some kind of drugs or alcohol. It happens when people are not in their senses. So far I haven’t had an incident where people have attacked me.” He said he did not think attacks were racially motivated but “there is an element of racism involved”.

Sachin helped distribute an International Students for Social Equality leaflet on the issues at the Victorian government’s so-called Walk for Harmony.

“I sensed that the event was a face-saving exercise” and organised “like a carnival,” he said, with little understanding provided about the life-threatening assaults carried out on Indian students. “They [the organisers] tried to stay away from that topic.”

Sachin criticised the government’s decision to bar Indian students from speaking at the event and supported the decision of the Federation of Indian Students in Australia students to boycott it.

“If the main issue being raised was the plight of Indian students, why didn’t they allow them to speak? By not letting them talk, they sent a message that the situation will continue,” he said.

Sachin disagreed with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s claims on June 10 that the attacks on Indian students were simply “a fact of violence in cities around the world”. These comments, he said, “are encouraging what is happening.” “What he is doing is shrugging off the issue and making this look like something small, that it is blown out of all proportion. I disagree.

“This has not just happened now with people making a lot of noise—this has been going on for more than a year and a half. I have been hearing about Indians being attacked since the time I have been here and I assume it has been going on for a time before that.”

Sachin explained that the university did not help him find affordable accommodation or to access other services: “You would imagine that at a university where you are paying so much money there would be some assistance—at least regarding who to contact and what to do.”

Forced to live with friends during his first weeks in Australia,

Sachin did the “whole house hunting thing by myself.” He eventually found accommodation in Pascoe Vale and was “one of about 15 people living in a house with eight rooms.”

Sachin also remarked that overseas students had difficulty coping with the “teaching style” in Australia. “We were told at orientation that the teachers here are facilitators, not teachers, and that you will have to do all your work on your own. I imagined that they would be of some assistance.”

He also explained how he had to pay fees for classes that he never took. “When I was transferring to Victoria from RMIT there is something here they call a census date to make changes in your enrolment or status at the university. I wasn’t aware of that.” After requesting a certificate for the classes he had passed at RMIT, he was informed he had crossed the census date and needed to pay roughly \$10,000 in fees.

Maitreya is from Gujarat and a finance student at RMIT, also paying about \$10,000 tuition fees each semester. He felt that the Indian media was using the recent assaults in Australia for its own purposes. “The Indian media is known to us as...the bastard media. Because they just need a single thing to spark and they stretch it like anything.”

Maitreya, however, was concerned about what was happening and condemned police inaction. He said he knew an Indian student living in Footscray who was hospitalised after being stabbed. His friends stayed in the police station for a whole day and the police reply was, ‘Do you have a picture of the person who carried out the attack?’ “That is a ridiculous question—as if instead of calling an ambulance his friends should have chased the attacker and asked him for a photo,” he said. The police told Maitreya’s friends to “forget about this issue” and “do not make too much hype out of this—we can’t do anything”.

Asked if he had been given assistance to find accommodation and with other issues, Maitreya replied: “None from the university. I’ve been lucky, I have my brother here and I get lots of help from him. I don’t have to struggle in the same way as other Indians.”

Commenting on the high tuition fees he said: “It’s too much, it’s extraordinarily high” and placed extra pressure on students because they feared the high cost of failure. “One of my friends,” he said, “had to borrow \$50,000, at high interest rates. I was paying around \$2,800 for each unit I was taking.”

Maitreya also criticised Rudd’s response to the attacks on Indian students. “The government here is not reducing the gap between the communities but increasing it,” he said.



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