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## Moving to paradise for the children's sake | Mari Korpela<sup>±</sup>

### Abstract

Increasing numbers of “Western” families spend several months a year in Goa, India, and the rest of the time in the parents’ passport countries or elsewhere. These “lifestyle migrants” are motivated by a search for “a better quality of life”, and the parents often claim that an important reason for their lifestyle choice is that it is better for the children to be in Goa, where they have enriching experiences and enjoy playing freely outdoors, in a natural environment. This article discusses parents’ and children’s views of this lifestyle. It argues that although the lifestyle sometimes causes moral panic among outsider adults who see regular transnational mobility as a sign of instability, a closer look reveals that there are various aspects of stability in the children’s lives. Paying careful attention to the parents’ and children’s own accounts, and the empirical realities of their lives, enables us to reach beyond normative judgements.

**Keywords:** Children; expatriates; family; India; lifestyle migration.

### Introduction

It’s an amazing opportunity [for children]. They know many different nationalities that they meet and they are hearing all the different languages and they are in such an amazing place learning first hand some things instead of only reading about them in a book. (Marta, three children<sup>1</sup>)

Over the past two decades, the state of Goa on the western coast of India has become increasingly popular among “Western” families with young children. Instead of being merely short-term tourists, many of them repeatedly spend periods of three to five months in Goa and the rest of the year in their passport countries.

Such people can be defined as lifestyle migrants and, in this article I discuss what this kind of lifestyle means for both families and children. First, I briefly introduce the phenomenon of lifestyle migration, and then I describe my empirical context – lifestyle migration to Goa – and introduce my research methods. The subsequent section describes the moral panic that the phenomenon sometimes causes among outsider adults. I then discuss the

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<sup>1</sup> After each interview extract, there is the pseudonym of the interviewee. For adults, there is also the number of children they have and, for children, their age.



parents' views, arguing that they justify their lifestyle choice by saying that it is the best one for their children and, subsequently, I elaborate on the views and experiences of the children themselves. Finally, I argue that although the lifestyle is characterised by change and fluidity, there are nevertheless various aspects of stability in the children's lives. Therefore, the article shows that although the lifestyle is characterised by frequent transnational mobility, focusing only on this mobility and fluidity is misleading and that paying attention to the phases of immobility and the signs of stability between mobilities is crucial too.

Following the contemporary ethos of childhood studies, the premise of this article is that children need to be studied as active agents rather than as objects of adult interventions (Hardman, 2001: 503-4) because "children are themselves the best source of information about matters that concern them" (Kellet et al., 2004: 165). Therefore, instead of merely listening to what the parents, or other adults, say, it is important to investigate how the children themselves experience being lifestyle migrants in Goa. Children are not only "luggage" (Dobson, 2009: 358; Orellana et al., 2001: 578) that their parents need to carry when going abroad; they can express their own views on the lifestyle their parents have chosen. Since lifestyle migrant children have not so far been studied, with the exception of Karen O'Reilly's (2012) study on teenagers, this article provides new information about an increasingly popular phenomenon.

### **What is lifestyle migration?**

Lifestyle migration is a phenomenon that has attracted increasing scholarly interest since the beginning of the new millennium<sup>2</sup>. Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly's working definition of lifestyle migration has become widely used:

Lifestyle migrants are relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009: 609).

Retirees form a significant group of lifestyle migrants (see King et al., 2000; Lardiés Bosque et al., 2016; Oliver, 2015), yet by no means are they the only people who migrate for lifestyle reasons. People of working age as well as families with children also move abroad in order to find a more relaxed lifestyle (Igarashi, 2015; O'Reilly, 2012).

Several reasons have been listed as contributing factors in lifestyle migration (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). These include unemployment, pressurised working environments, hectic lifestyles, rising crime rates, high living costs,

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of recent research on lifestyle migration, see <http://www.uta.fi/yky/lifestylemigration/index.html>.



consumerism and insecure living conditions in migrants' native countries. At the same time, the destinations are attractive to them because of the lower living costs, the pleasant climate and what the migrants perceive as a slow pace of life. Other contributing factors include easy online communication and faster and cheaper international travel. It has also been argued that the ethos of late modernity demands that people see their lives as self-realisation projects (e.g. Giddens, 1991), and lifestyle migration offers people a way to take control of their own lives and live in a way that is more "true" to themselves. At the same time, it is important to note that lifestyle migration is a privileged lifestyle that relies on global inequalities; not everyone has the financial resources and the social situation that enable them to move "transnationally for the purpose of pursuing 'the good life'" (Benson and Osbaldiston, 2016: 5).

### **Goa as a lifestyle migration destination: research setting and methods**

Goa has attracted "Westerners" since the 1960s<sup>3</sup>. First it was the hippies and, since the 1990s, it has been the trance music<sup>4</sup> enthusiasts who have gathered on its beaches. More recently, Goa has become popular among families with young children.

The empirical data in this article comes from an ethnographic research project among lifestyle migrant children in Goa. Typically, these children originally come from a variety of European countries and also Russia, Israel, Canada and Australia, but differences between these nationalities seem to disappear when comparison is made with the "Indian other". The lifestyle migrants tend to be of middle-class origin and those with children have usually spent long periods of time in India before having them. The popular season in Goa lasts from November to April. The lifestyle migrants keep returning to the same villages, and their lives are characterised by intense socialising with other lifestyle migrants. Most of them are involved with trance music and/or New Age countercultures. It is difficult to know how many lifestyle migrants there are, as very few register with local authorities and they enter the country through various routes; many repeatedly use tourist visas, while others are able to obtain business or student visas. Nevertheless, there are definitely hundreds of them in Goa each year. Although they spend a lot of time enjoying themselves, theirs is not only a life of pleasure; many of them make a living in Goa by working as fashion designers, massage therapists and yoga teachers, among other things. Very often, these economic activities are conducted in the informal sector, as it is very difficult for lifestyle migrants to obtain work permits in India.

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<sup>3</sup> For decades, India has been a popular destination for people searching for an alternative lifestyle. Theosophists and other spiritual searchers went there in colonial times, and during the hippie era thousands of young people travelled to India in search of an alternative lifestyle. Also today, thousands of backpackers tour the country every year (see Enoch and Grossman, 2010; Hottola, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Trance music is a genre of electronic dance music.

My research in Goa investigated how 4 to 12-year-old children of lifestyle migrants experience their lifestyle. I conducted fieldwork in Goa for a total of ten months, during the winters of 2011, 2012 and 2013. I intensively participated in the lives of the lifestyle migrant families, visiting their homes and spending time with them on the beaches, at pools and in other popular gathering places. I also conducted interviews with children and parents, and with adults who work with the lifestyle migrant children there. In addition to a detailed field diary and the interviews, my material includes photos taken by me, and pictures drawn by children during projects I ran with them<sup>5</sup>. During the fieldwork, I met about a hundred children and was closely involved with 15 to 20 of them. Few of the children I knew in Goa lived there all year round. Yet, most of them stayed for 4 to 5 months each year, and then returned to their parents' passport country, and if their parents were from two different countries, as is often the case, they also spent some time in the other parent's country. In addition, some of them travelled to other places, for example Bali or Ibiza, either because their parents were working there or to visit friends.

### **Moral panic among outsiders**

I once gave a talk about my research at a childhood studies conference in Finland. The audience consisted mainly of social workers and other child protection professionals and my presentation on the lifestyle migrant children in Goa caused a kind of a moral panic<sup>6</sup> (e.g. Cohen, 1972; Garland, 2008). They were concerned that the children were growing up in very unstable circumstances because of their transnationally mobile lifestyle and, consequently, that they would have no sense of belonging and would feel lost and miserable. The audience clearly saw the lifestyle as a problem and, in their view the children need to be rescued from it.

Such views are, in fact, common. There is a widely agreed view, at least in "Western" countries, that children have a "natural need for stability and security", which can be provided only through a sedentary life in a stable home. Consequently, a mobile life is believed to have negative consequences for children (Fass, 2005) and mobile children – for example migrant or nomadic children – become a source of considerable anxiety (Dobson, 2009: 357), even causing moral panic (Laoire et al., 2010), as described above.

The worrying statements made after my presentation reveal the views of adults who are not familiar with the phenomenon of lifestyle migration, but I argue that adults who have lived a sedentary life themselves may have trouble grasping

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<sup>5</sup> Since interviews are a limited method with children who do not necessarily have the patience and interest to sit and answer questions, it was particularly important to conduct participant observation and drawing projects, as they allowed the children to play a more active and more comfortable role.

<sup>6</sup> Moral panic refers to the widespread fear that emerges where something is perceived as a threat to the norms of society at large (Cohen, 1972).



the experiences of transnationally mobile families. My conference audience had never met lifestyle migrant children and had therefore not asked them for their own views, yet they were quick to make moral judgements about their lives and, in particular, to blame the parents, because of what they saw as their irresponsibility towards their children. Such a view, however, is in contrast with the views of the lifestyle migrant parents and children in Goa themselves.

### **Parents' views on the lifestyle**

It's a paradise on earth, still! (Ines, two children)

When I asked the lifestyle migrant parents in Goa about the reasons for their lifestyle, they mentioned, above all, the sunny weather and the more interesting life they had found. In the interview extract above, a mother goes as far as to describe Goa as a paradise. Another important factor of Goa life is the ethos of freedom that is celebrated among the lifestyle migrants there (Korpela, 2017). Many of my adult interlocutors claimed to have left behind the social shackles of their native societies in exchange for a life in Goa, where they could live as they liked and do what they wanted. Another significant contributing factor is the comparatively cheap living costs. In Goa, the lifestyle migrants can afford a higher standard of living than in the countries from which they originate. For example, most lifestyle migrants in Goa frequently eat in restaurants and hire domestic servants, something most of them could not afford in their passport countries.

The above-mentioned reasons apply to all kinds of lifestyle migrants in Goa. Those who have children, however, also emphasised that an important reason for their having chosen to live in Goa was that: it was better for the children to live in Goa than in their passport countries. Above all, the parents highlighted that in Goa their children could play freely outdoors and explore nature, a chance they would not have had in the "West". In these reflections, the "West" becomes defined as densely populated urban space, in comparison with semi-rural Goa.

There is nature, there is jungle, there is beach. [...] So for the children, it is beautiful, and it's warm. [...] My son is now ten years old and I'm sure that eight of these ten years he has been walking barefoot. I think this is an advantage. Because it's really connected to the earth. There's no cement under his feet. In Goa [...] they still have some contact with the nature. (Anita, three children)

Another significant factor that was commonly mentioned was time.

What we all have in common is that we spend quite a lot of time with the children. There's a lot more interaction between the parents and the children. (Andre, two children)

Many of the parents I knew in Goa emphasised that they spent a great deal of time with their children, whereas in their passport countries they would be working and would see them only in the evenings and at weekends. The children would, therefore, spend long days in daycare or at school. In Goa, the lifestyle migrant families do, indeed, spend a lot of time together. First of all, those parents who do work often work only part-time and, secondly, the fact that the families hire domestic help contributes to the parents having a lot of time to spend with their children.

In addition, many parents thought that living in Goa was a great opportunity for their children.

The spectrum of what they see and what they experience is so much bigger than what you see and experience when you stay only in one place. All the different languages, all the different cultures. (Andre, two children)

A similar view is conveyed by the interview extract at the beginning of this article. Living in an enriching multicultural environment was considered not only interesting for the children but also an asset for their future.

It is a good thing for those kids because they are gonna know that any context you find yourself in, if it doesn't work for you, you can move. So especially, if you speak a few languages, you are gonna know that if one situation doesn't suit you, you can leave. (Eric, two children)

The world is her oyster! An advantage to be brought up here is that it gives you a lot of options. (Helen, two children)

A striking aspect of the above extracts is the ethos of free choice; the parents view their children as free agents who are able to come and go, and choose their place of residence, as they wish. At the same time, the parents justify their own lifestyle choice via their children's wellbeing, arguing that lifestyle migration to Goa is not only what they want as individuals but something that is best for their children.

All in all, in their talk the parents were convinced that living in Goa was a good option for their children. It is important, however, to listen to what the children say themselves.

### **Children's views and their experiences of their lifestyle**

For the children, living in Goa is not a lifestyle choice, an attempt to live differently, but the only lifestyle they know. The children I knew in Goa seemed to enjoy living there.

S: I really like Goa.

M: And do you ever get bored here? Or it's always fun?



S: No it's always going really...The fun is going, circling around. (Sara, 9)

The children usually spend 4 to 6 hours a day in a nursery or at school, both of which are typically run by other lifestyle migrants. Because of a lack of permanent residence permits, the children are not allowed to attend local schools, and most lifestyle migrant parents would not want this anyway because they do not like the curriculum or agree with the teaching methods; as they put it, they prefer arts and creativity to rules and exams. In the afternoons and at weekends, the families spend time with other families, visiting each other or gathering together on the beaches and at pools. This means that the children have a lot of time to play freely outside with their friends. In fact, my fieldwork revealed that the lifestyle migrant children are given a high level of agency in Goa. For example, on the beaches they are allowed to play freely, exploring the environment on their own without adult supervision: the parents sit in a beach shack while the children wander around playing with seashells, plants and sand. As the extracts below indicate, for the children, being on the beach involves a variety of activities.

E: I want to draw someone lying on a sunbed.

M: Do you like to lie on a sunbed?

E: Just boring, I wouldn't go to the beach just to sit on a sunbed. (Elsa, 8)

M: Which beach you like the best?

T: The Sun beach. There's the trampoline and rocks and clay...you find much clay there and I can make clay balls. (Victor, 7)

O: Yesterday I went to the beach and my friend [...] got snapped by a crab [...] It was like this, hiding [...] it bite like this... ouch. (Oscar, 6)

The interview extract below shows that friends are important for the children in Goa and children are involved in their own social schemes at events that are targeted at adults.

M: What do you do in your free time?

H: I usually go to the beach or we go to trance parties. I like parties.

M: Which kind of parties?

H: The Club mostly...Lots of my friends go there. Usually we're all the time with my friends there. (Harry, 10)

Harry's statement above illustrates how important it is to listen to children's own voices. At first sight, trance parties might not seem appropriate places for children but Harry's comment reveals that the children are involved in their own social circles there. Indeed, on a number of occasions during my fieldwork I witnessed how adults were on the dance floor and children were playing together further away, on the fringes of the party venue.

At the same time, for most of the lifestyle migrant children, the fun life in Goa is fixed-term; they know that after a certain period they will leave. In addition, many of the other children and adults they know in Goa will leave too. This means that the lifestyle is characterised by a high level of fluidity and temporariness. Friends and acquaintances leave (and others come back) and hobbies change as the adults organising them leave. In fact, almost every week someone the children know leaves, and someone else arrives.

Since almost everyone they know in Goa leads the same lifestyle, the children seem to be very conscious of the fact that clinging to permanence and sedentariness and being upset about regular departures would be useless.

M: When you are in Europe, do you miss something from here?

T: I miss all my friends. But they are not here, they are in France, Israel, Germany... so it would make no difference. (Tina, 8)

Interestingly, the children told me that when they are away from Goa, they do not keep in touch with each other much (via e-mail, Facebook, postcards, letters and so on). Instead of longing for the life they have in India, the children seem to enjoy themselves wherever they are, occupying themselves with the social circles in their current location. In addition, the ethos seems to be that they know they will meet again during the following Goa season, and therefore there is no particular need to keep the relationships alive in the meantime. It seems that, for the children, being transnationally mobile and belonging to two or more social scenes in different countries is a state of normality; change and fluidity are part of their everyday experience.

Interestingly, although their lifestyle may seem very mobile from an outsider's point of view, the lifestyle migrant children in Goa do not necessarily consider themselves well-travelled. In their social circles, spending time in a few different countries every year is the norm.

M: Where would you like to live when you are an adult?

T: I don't know, 'cause I haven't travelled around the world a lot, so I don't know really that many places. (Tina, 8)

Before I build big buildings and stuff, I'm gonna travel the world. [...] because [so far] I only travelled half of the world. (Ron, 6)





The lifestyle migrant children in Goa do not compare themselves to sedentary people – to those who have lived in the same village or country all their lives – but to the neo-nomadic adults (D’Andrea, 2007) they know in Goa. Again, mobility is a state of normality for these children. Their expressed plans to travel around the world also resonate with the aforementioned parents’ views, that the lifestyle means that their children have a range of options. These views also reveal a privileged position. First, the lifestyle migrant children in Goa have passports that allow them to cross international borders relatively easily (Korpela, 2016) and, secondly, although the families are not rich, they are nevertheless relatively well-off, having enough money for international flight tickets for example.

### **Structures of stability in the midst of change and fluidity**

[We live] like this: France, Goa, France, Israel, France, Goa. (Victor, 8)

In the extract above, Victor describes the yearly routine of his family, in which the father is French and the mother Israeli. Although the lifestyle of such children is certainly characterised by change and fluidity, a closer look reveals that there are various aspects of it that create stability. First of all, the life of the lifestyle migrant families in Goa is very much centred on the nuclear family. As I mentioned earlier, the parents spend a lot of time with their children, and the families almost always move between countries together, thus sharing the same, changing, spaces. The strong presence of the nuclear family is an important factor in bringing stability to the children’s lives. Secondly, pets are very important for many of the children and a large number of them have pets both in Goa and in the other locations where they reside.

T: This is in Bali.

M: Have you been to Bali?

T: Yeah [...]. I have one dog in Bali. I left it in my friend’s house. (Troy, 4)

Moreover, although the children frequently physically move between countries, this does not mean that they constantly get involved with new locations and social circles. When they return to their parents’ passport countries, they return to the same locations and meet the same people, including relatives, year after year. In Goa, they also keep returning to the same villages and the same activities in the same locations. Most of the children attend a school or a daycare centre in Goa, and although the groups of children in these vary constantly, the teachers, routines and locations remain the same. Furthermore, some children have known each other all their lives and, sometimes, there are surprising historical connections.

T: I was born in Bali.

A: Lisa was born in Bali also.

T: With the same midwife. (Tina, 8 and Alice, 9)

Therefore, what may seem to outsiders like constant change and instability also contains various aspects of stability and continuity. The conference audience that was terrified by the lifestyle and saw it as a state of insecurity and instability, failed to see the various structures of stability that are also part of it.

## Conclusion

When people migrate in order to find a more relaxed lifestyle rather than for financial or career reasons, the accompanying children play an important role in the parents' justifications for their lifestyle. This article has considered such children as active agents with their own views, rather than as luggage following the parents' routes. I have argued that although the lifestyle certainly involves change and fluidity, it also has aspects of stability and continuity, and that before making moral judgements, it is worth listening to what the parents and children involved have to say. A careful look at the empirical realities shows that what seems, at first sight, to be a highly unstable situation, in fact contains many aspects of continuity and stability. The moral panic among my conference audience emerged from the expectation that sedentariness is the norm that is necessary for children, but if we abandon this normative judgement, we are able to view the phenomenon from an angle that corresponds better with the views of the lifestyle migrant children and parents themselves. Such an approach might also be useful when investigating other transnationally mobile children; in fact, it is always important to listen to the children themselves. Moreover, it is vital to pay attention to temporal aspects; the lifestyle is a question not of constant but of frequent mobility and, consequently, the phases of immobility between the mobilities are crucial too.

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