

Borderscapes and Student-Mobility in Continental Europe : An Academic Journey from History to Contemporaneity

I

“No man is an island”, said English poet John Donne. This is how I wrote the first sentence of the acknowledgement section of my master thesis. My task, as an MA student was to bind the thread and to bridge the gap between many such single islands. Otherwise, I am humbled to say that my thesis, which eventually received the best possible grade in the German academic system, is a direct culmination of the various academic encounters I came across during the years of my MA programme, Erasmus Mundus MA in Euroculture. To me, academic exchange means, at its very core, an experience to overcome borders – the borders between the known and the unknown, the home and the world, and the self and the other, to name a few. Beyond the well-known and rather clichéd definitions of ‘studying abroad’, what interests me more regarding an Erasmus exchange is the immense possibilities it unleashes in one’s capacity of knowing and understanding someone from the ‘other’ side of the border.

Our ‘dwelling’ in time and space (to use a common philosophical trope elucidated by Martin Heidegger) has often in it the existence of borders and boundaries. In our common parlance, national boundaries are thought to be the well-defined fault-lines that separate our existence into well-demarcated categories. What academic exchanges usually aspire to do is to transgress these ‘obvious’ and ‘taken-for-granted’ boundaries. My two years during the MA programme taught me to critically reflect on some of these crucial tenets around the idea of borderscapes. These apparent markers of division still tend to regulate our movement and the subsequent epistemological understanding of those patterns of mobility. The continued research that I have been carrying out over the duration of my MA studies and the final outcome of that research, my MA thesis, bear testimony to these processes of student mobility across these geographical, political, social and cultural boundaries in Europe. I have written my master thesis primarily on the notional understanding of borders in interwar Europe, and how it actually regulated the mobility-patterns of a group of non-European students studying in Europe in the 1930s-40s. In this thesis, titled as “The Borders and the Boundaries in the Land of the Quasi-Masters: Continental Europe as seen through Bangla Travel Narratives, 1919-50,” I have tried to show the experiences of the young travellers-cum-students from British Colonial India. In the course of writing this thesis I analysed how they made ‘meaning’ of the spatial concept of the continent called Europe while travelling across its vast territories, and how they engaged themselves with the internal boundaries of Europe – not only the geographical or political boundaries, but also the borderlines between different versions of *Kultur* and *Civilisation* et cetera (à la Norbert Elias).

Due to my keen interest in this topic, in 2015 I started studying the Erasmus Mundus Master of Arts in Euroculture at Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Germany. This interdisciplinary MA programme throws light on the political, legal and cultural foundations of the European continent, and its ‘image’ in the wider world. In order to accomplish the ‘European nature’ of the degree, this involves a compulsory Erasmus exchange at a second European university. Due to many a reason that I am going to explain in the next sections I chose Rijksuniversiteit Groningen in The Netherlands as my second semester host university. One of the key reasons behind choosing Groningen was a research seminar called ‘Representing Europe’ – a dedicated course to explore Europe’s self-image as a continent, and how ‘the non-European others’ make meaning out of it. After completing my Erasmus exchange semester in Groningen (February – June, 2016) I went to another Coimbra Group university (Uppsala, Sweden) for another semester to complete a research-assistantship. After spending one semester each in Groningen and Uppsala, I came back to my home university, Göttingen to finish writing my thesis.

II

Although I wrote my thesis primarily in Göttingen during the final semester of my MA programme, I have been greatly benefitted from the contacts I already established during my exchange semester in The Netherlands. First, on a formal level, for a MA programme like Euroculture, the idea of an exchange semester does not simply end after a few months spent at another university. My dialogue and academic exchange with my Erasmus exchange university endured through the entire duration of the MA. That is why I have been fortunate enough to have not merely a single thesis supervisor from my German university, Göttingen, but simultaneously two joint-supervisors from two universities – the home one and the host one. With equal importance and equal responsibility, my two supervisors continuously interacted among each

other in the matters related to the intricacies of my thesis; and as a result my MA thesis did indeed continue to get benefitted from the extremely sound academic structures of these universities.

Secondly, contrary to most Erasmus experiences whose contact with these academic amenities from the host university is limited once the duration of the exchange is completed, as a Euroculture student I was able to be formally enrolled at Rijksuniversiteit Groningen until the very last day of my MA, and thereby get access to numerous resources, both online and offline, from RUG's library service. This has been simply the reason why I have been very happy to frequently commute between Göttingen and Groningen, at least once or twice every month during my final semester, in order to be in touch with both my supervisors and access the library systems from my home and host universities. It is therefore absolutely important to admit how significant it has been for me to be in touch with my host university all along my trajectory as a non-European MA student looking for the exploration of academic possibilities in Europe.

Thirdly, the final outcome of my thesis, as mentioned earlier, followed a logical consequence of the knowledge and competence I gathered during my exchange semester in Groningen. I would particularly mention two courses that were essential behind the initial conceptualisation of my MA thesis. 'Representing Europe', a research seminar worth 10 ECTS credits, taught by Prof. Dr. Margriet van der Waal, was the primary inspiration as to why I chose to explore various 'literary representations' on Europe (but written in a non-European language such as Bangla from the eastern part of British India) to understand what could indeed be the face of European cultural history of the early twentieth century, if one were to take cognisance of a huge gamut of non-European archival sources to better understand the self-image of Europe? The fact that I could later on be supervised by Prof. van der Waal for the actual process of thesis-writing, had greatly facilitated the continuity of the academic exchange we started during the exchange semester and carried on even after the completion of my thesis. Another course, 'Theory and Methodology' of doing social sciences in Europe introduced me to a great many pathways of modern European thinking so that I could properly explore those ideas and theoretical frameworks. This course came useful not only for my MA thesis, but for all of the research papers I wrote since then and even now when I am embarking on the journey of my doctoral dissertation.

Fourthly, my academic mobility from Göttingen to Groningen had since then led me to recognise the hitherto unforeseen terrains of understanding European cultural history. My association with the course 'Representing Europe', offered in Groningen, could later on grant me have access to a number of research networks devised on a pan-European level. Since Prof. van der Waal, who offered the aforementioned research seminar, also manages a research network of U4 universities (involving three of the Coimbra Group universities, Göttingen, Groningen and Uppsala; along with Ghent), I received enormous theoretical and methodological support for my MA thesis from the research network on 'Cultural Mechanisms of Inclusion and Exclusion in Contemporary Europe (CMIECE), cluster of Social Sciences, Economics and Law (<http://www.u4network.eu/index.php/network/projects/812-research-network-cmi-ece>). Although my MA thesis explored these key terms, such as 'inclusion', 'exclusion' and 'boundaries' from a historical point of view, the insight I gathered from this research network helped me justify the necessity of doing such a *longue durée* research in order to understand the contemporaneity of these terms against the backdrop of the tightening of intra-European political and social boundaries in the era of 'Refugee Crisis'.

As a viable point of departure, the access to this network from Groningen's side opened up a fresh new academic trajectory that has gradually laid the foundation for not only the core theoretical tenets of my MA thesis, but the fundamental basis of my current PhD project. After finishing my exchange semester in Groningen, I was chosen by both Göttingen and Groningen to pursue my third semester in another Coimbra Group university – Uppsala in Sweden. In Uppsala, I was serving as the research assistant of Dr. Benjamin Martin, the then Director of the Euroculture programme in Uppsala and an acclaimed historian of Ideas. As Dr. Martin serves as the U4 representative from Uppsala for CMIECE project, I could easily connect my academic training from Groningen with the professional responsibilities I encountered in Uppsala. Dr. Martin's critically acclaimed project on the Nazi-Fascist visions of 'European Integration' (*The Nazi-Fascist New Order for European Culture*, Harvard University Press, 2016), which has opened up a new vista of understanding the interwar European history in an altogether different light, has also created the need and space for me to place my MA thesis in a broader context.

My research experiences under his guidance in Uppsala instigated me to devote a substantial section of my thesis to the mobility-patterns of non-European students in continental Europe in the 1930s-40s. As the German Reich and the Italian Fascist Regime were very keen on setting up fresh new academic relations outside Europe, Deutsche Akademie's New Delhi office and a preliminary set-up for the German Academic Exchange Service were for the first time established to attract more and more British Indian youths to continental Europe and divert them from the traditional British universities to the newer patterns of academic

mobility across Nazi-Fascist occupied Europe (See for details in Kris Manjapra's book, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2014). Driven by this stimulating yet unexplored area of European history, I have used to a whole new range of archival and literary sources from late colonial British India to map the experiences of those young students who came to Europe, moved across the continent and engaged with various passport and visa regulations while negotiating with the ever-changing national boundaries within Europe during the expansionist days of the Third Reich. While doing so, as their experiences reveal, they offered us a plethora of tools and methods to unravel the processes of signification of the term 'Europe' – to put it in a simple way, how did the concept of whole Europe make 'meaning' to these non-European students beyond the mere immediacy of the ever-changing national boundaries? This is, in essence, the pith of my MA thesis.

Moreover, building upon the results from my MA thesis I applied for a PhD position in the Graduate School for the Humanities, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Having gone through the selection procedure and the final interview, I am happy to say that I have been selected by RUG as a doctoral student, working on a project about the possibility and plausibility of writing Modern European History from a fresh new set of non-European language sources. It makes me immensely happy that my Erasmus exchange in Groningen did not simply remain as a mere exchange semester; but it took me to such a specialised and nurturing academic journey that I am able to call Rijksuniversiteit Groningen my home university for the most significant duration of my academic upbringing – my doctoral studies years. I believe, it is also important to mention at this point that this very trajectory of working under the guidance of three Coimbra Group Universities gradually initiated me to a state of confidence in my own research that towards the end of my MA programme I myself became an integral part of another research network called 'The Axis Alliance in the Global Perspective', run under the auspices of Universität Konstanz in Germany and Columbia University in New York. I am indeed honoured to mention here that only a week after submitting my MA thesis simultaneously in Göttingen and Groningen, I have been invited by this research network to present its findings on theme of the British Indian student mobility patterns in interwar continental Europe. This workshop was jointly organised by Exzellenzcluster Kulturelle Grundlagen von Integration (a DFG funded project) of Universität Konstanz and Columbia University's European Institute (<https://www.exzellenzcluster.uni-konstanz.de/uploads/media/Programm-Axis-Alliance.pdf>).

Furthermore, coming back to the actual experiences of my exchange semester in Groningen, I can fondly recall another crucial aspect of Dutch academic culture. In Groningen, one of the most rewarding experiences so far has been the openness of the Dutch academic life. It is in general a norm that academic exchange exposes us to a certain kind of openness where one learns to positively appreciate another culture and belief-system. However, the openness I am trying to explain is of a different nature. It is pleasing to note that as an elected member of the Programme Committee of Erasmus Mundus MA in Euroculture in Groningen I was particularly responsible to represent my MA programme in an open platform called Network of Arts (NoA) and attend several meetings organised by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts. I could learn a lot by regularly interacting with other students from other departments of RUG. My experience as a non-European student to be active in these administrative set-ups of mostly Dutch officials did not only increase my awareness of the Dutch university system in general, and its keen drive towards the internationalisation of the university curricula, but also allowed me to improve my Dutch language skills beyond the scope of the official language courses offered by the university.

Apart from these experiences, I shall unreservedly commend what is commonly known as the 'Open Door Policy' of the Dutch universities. Even without having been enrolled in other study programmes offered by the university, I was always allowed to approach many professors from other departments of the university at any point in time. This renowned openness and cordiality had indeed granted me the access to some of the unexpected academic encounters which, in turn, enriched my MA thesis in an immeasurably positive manner. Since I had to involve many an ego-document for the purpose of my MA thesis research, I could easily approach the Biography Institute in Groningen, one of the most famous ones of its kind in the whole world (<https://www.rug.nl/research/biografie-instituut/?lang=en>). The independence and openness of allowing even the Erasmus exchange students to engage with every possible academic nook and corner of the university is indeed what I consider one of most important features of RUG.

III

Apart from the academic track that was particularly significant for gaining international and intercultural experience as well as for developing research interests including a theoretical framework and the specification of the topic of my thesis, my exchange semester was also vital to identify the professional skills required to work in a European institutional context. The course titled as 'Eurocompetence II' provided us with practical hard-skills and soft-skills needed to work in a transcultural and multi-sectoral situation. The

aim of this project management course was to equip the MA students to enhance intercultural competencies while working in diverse groups. In order to successfully complete this course, a group of us (six exchange students at Groningen from six different national backgrounds) chose to make a film on certain aspects of the nature of interaction between the international students of the university and the local Dutch citizens. Our film *When in Groningen* was in itself a documentary proof of what Erasmus exchange means to the local community of European university-towns, and how these two divergent groups – the international students and the local community – learn from each other on various themes, such as cultural boundaries and intercultural communication. In order to grasp a nuanced view on this topic, our project chose to show four different points of convergence where the international students meet the locals in Groningen: a Dutch language classroom; a café; a sports club; and a refugee rehabilitation centre where some international students volunteer in order to understand the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the Dutch society and comprehend in a better way their own social position in The Netherlands. Drawing on its extremely positive reaction received in Groningen after we arranged a public screening of this film at the ‘University Museum of Groningen’, we had also been invited to arrange a screening of this movie at a summer school at Palacky University, Olomouc, Czech Republic in June 2016.

I must say, I did not only receive a lot from Groningen, but also tried to make whatever little contribution I could through these small gestures. By involving the local community and a number of other stakeholders who generally stay aloof from the so called ‘Erasmus crowd’, my time in Groningen was also spent to lessen the gap and overcome the boundaries between a stable population who feel ‘at home’ in a university-town and a mobile group of students who are often destined to feel ‘out of place’ wherever they go to. My academic perception of borders and student-mobility in a historical context was thus complemented by my practical skills and communicative strategies gained while executing this Eurocompetence II project in Groningen.

IV

In conclusion, my Erasmus Exchange not only encouraged me to have ‘greater and more widespread knowledge of the history and culture of the European continent’ through my active participation in the courses like ‘Representing Europe’ and ‘Theory and Methodology’ but also immensely helped me in appreciating the Dutch academic culture to such an extent that I have finally become an integral part of it as a PhD student in Groningen for the duration of the next four years. Moreover, the Eurocompetence II course from Groningen imparted in me the professional experience I needed to incorporate my theoretical and methodological academic training with the film we made on Groningen’s exchange students and the professional responsibilities I had to carry out during my work in Uppsala.

My exchange semester was not a mere optional choice; it was an essential and inevitable component of the Euroculture MA curriculum. Cutting across three Coimbra Group universities, Gottingen, Groningen and Uppsala, my research and training have provided me with the trajectory I required to navigate along the idea of student exchange in Europe – both in its historical dimension (in the course of my MA thesis which also led me to my current doctoral dissertation project) and in its contemporary public perception on the thirtieth anniversary of Erasmus programme’s inception (that I wanted to explore through the film we made about Groningen). Overall, the best opportunities and experiences gathered during my stay in Groningen best demonstrated the added value of the true essence of an academic exchange for a South-Asian student in Europe. In this regard, an Indian national currently pursuing his doctoral studies in a Dutch university on the theme of German and Indian cultural liaisons in the early twentieth century can indeed be characterised as the true exemplar of what an exchange programme justifiably means and what an exchange semester can lead to. My MA thesis would not have looked so coherent without my coming to Groningen and choosing the research seminar ‘Representing Europe’, It was also impossible without the open door policies of RUG in general to have a sustained dialogue with the scholars and professors affiliated to not only my own department but also a number of other departments of the university, which in turn resulted in me getting accepted for a PhD position in the Graduate School for the Humanities at Rijksuniversiteit. These are the reasons why I sincerely consider my Erasmus exchange as the most effective and fruitful component of my MA programme. Therefore, I humbly submit my candidature for the Arenberg Coimbra Group Prize for Erasmus Students 2018.