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'Why Issue Visas?' Asks Anthropologist Filippo Osella Who Was Deported from Kerala Airport

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25/Mar/2022 5 min read

The immigration officials at Thiruvananthapuram international airport did not specify any particular reason before he was sent back to the UK.



Anthropologist Filippo Osella. Photo: Facebook.



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New Delhi: Renowned anthropologist Filippo Osella, who was deported after his arrival at Thiruvananthapuram international airport on Thursday morning, questioned the rationale behind issuing visas and revoking them "at the drop of a hat".

"What would be the point of approving and issuing research visas, if the latter can be revoked at the drop of a hat, and without explanations?" he asked in a statement he issued on Friday, March 25.

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Osella was to attend a conference in Kerala on Friday. However, he was deported to his home country, the UK, with authorities specifying no particular reason for the same.

Recounting the ordeal he had to go through, Osella said immigration officials had behaved with him in an "unprofessional" and "rude manner" without telling him the reason for his deportation.

"The immigration officers behaved in a remarkably rude and unprofessional way, even when I tried to explain that I was an academic who had been doing research in India for more than 30 years," he recalled, adding that he wasn't even given access to his luggage to take his BP medications.

"When I asked to be given access to my luggage to retrieve my BP medications before being taken back to the Dubai-bound flight, the reply was that unless I shut up immediately I would be restrained by security. They wanted to get rid of me as quickly and discretely as possible. Without further ado, I was packed on a plane, and sent back home!"

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Osella also highlighted that his deportation episode did not come anywhere close to the lack of freedom experienced by Indian academics.

"My unfortunate experience does not even come close to the predicaments of many Indian colleagues whose freedom of academic expression in recent years has been severely constrained, often making them the object of censorship and

disciplinary measures. My thoughts and solidarity go to them!" he said.

Also read: Anthropologist Filippo Osella Deported After Arriving at Kerala Airport; No Reasons Cited

Osella, who has carried out extensive research on social and cultural transformations in Kerala over the last 30 years, was touted as the face of the conference to be held on Friday in Kerala on "emerging themes connected to the livelihood and lifeworld of Kerala coastal communities".

The conference, which is underway from Friday, covers various aspects pertaining to coastal communities in Kerala. It is jointly organised by Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT), Centre for Development Studies (CDS Thiruvananthapuram), Inter University Center for Alternative Economics, University of Kerala, and the University of Sussex.

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Reproduced below is Filippo Osella's full statement.

§

I am writing this statement as I finally sit on a bus that is taking me back home from London Heathrow airport, after a long 36

hours spent on various planes between UK and Kerala, and back.

Today (Thursday 24th March) at 3 am I landed at Thiruvananthapuram airport after a rather uneventful Emirates flight from London via Dubai. On arrival, I was taken out of the plane by an immigration official who asked me to follow him to the immigration desk. I thought that this had to do with covid prevention, as it happened when I went to Kerala in September 2021: all passengers whose flight had originated in the UK had to follow PCR testing procedures separately from others. So, this time I was taken to the immigration booth, my passport and visa were checked, photo and fingers print taken, all routine immigration stuff.

But once these procedures had been completed, with stern words an immigration supervisor informed me that I would not be granted entry, and will be deported back to the UK immediately. Indeed, this decision was premeditated and had been taken before my arrival, because an Emirates employee was already present to march me back to the same plane on which I arrived.

I was in complete shock because I had a valid research visa issued by the Government of India, and once I asked the immigration supervisor and officers as to why I was being deported, I was refused

any explanation. In fact, the immigration officers refused to talk to me altogether, beyond repeating a couple of times that this was a decision from the Indian government, and could not discuss it or talk about it.

They did not even allow me to get in touch with friends in Kerala or India who could have sought explanations or vouched for my academic status. The immigration officers behaved in a remarkably rude and unprofessional way, even when I tried to explain that I was an academic who had been doing research in India for more than 30 years.

In addition, when I asked to be given access to my luggage to retrieve my BP medications before being taken back to the Dubai-bound flight, the reply was that unless I shut up immediately I would be restrained by security. They wanted to get rid of me as quickly and discretely as possible. Without further ado, I was packed on a plane, and sent back home!

I don't know why I was denied entry and deported. So, I can only speculate on the possible reasons. Clearly it was not about visa irregularities because there was a one-year multiple entry research visa expiring well after my planned departure from India on 7th April stamped on my passport.

For those who are not aware of the procedures, applying for a research visa to India requires submission of substantial documentation, from a full-length project

proposal and details about the nature and practical arrangements for the research to letters of affiliation and support from Indian universities. These documents, along with the applicant's passport, are sent to the India High Commission or Consulate to be thoroughly assessed and vetted by the relevant departments of the Government of India.

In other words, research visas are released only when the applicant and the proposed research are deemed to be fully compliant with the regulations and policies of the Indian Government.

To cut it short, the research visa stamped on my passport would have assured any immigration officer that my visit to India was legitimate and approved by the Government of India. What would be the point of approving and issuing research visas, if the latter can be revoked at the drop of a hat, and without explanations?

I am also sure that the decision taken this morning by the Indian immigration authorities is not due to the possible controversial or sensitive nature of the research I am currently undertaking in south Kerala, the reason for my current visit. Not only has this research been approved by the government of India, but it involves collaborations with (natural and social) scientists from a number of different Indian universities and government agencies. It is multi-disciplinary research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) with the objective of finding effective

ways to make south Indian small-scale artisanal fishers' livelihoods more secure and sustainable by improving safety at sea.

While small-scale/artisanal fishing plays a crucial role in the economy and daily diet of Kerala, fishing is one of the most dangerous occupations in the state. Available data based on the calculation of insurance compensations given to fishing families suggest that between 2015 to 2021 one fisher died every six days as the result of an accident at sea.

To increase the safety of artisanal fishers and to make their livelihood more resilient in the face of increasingly hazardous and unpredictable weather resulting from the effects of climate change, over two years we have devised and tested new tools to produce accurate and timely localised coastal weather forecasts. The usefulness and practicality of these tools were established through regular discussions with fishers who we trained in the interpretation of weather information and graphics.

The preliminary results of the research—co-authored with Indian scientists — have already been published in international journals such as the Journal of the American Meteorological Society, and we are making available all data sets, analyses and outcome to the Government of Kerala, coastal communities and other relevant (governmental and non-governmental) stakeholders. Hardly the stuff of political controversy, then, but solid scientific research directed towards increasing the

safety and resilience of Kerala coastal communities.

Likewise, I refuse even to contemplate that my current predicaments might be the outcome of years of research on social reform movements which have contributed to the development of the Izhava and Muslim communities in Kerala. My research has also explored other aspects of Kerala life and culture, from gender and masculinity, to Malayali culinary traditions and fashion, and even film stars and their fan clubs (I must confess that I have remained a great admirer of Mammootty!).

So I guess my deportation might have to do with something else, such as a couple of old Pakistan visas which are normally treated with some surprise every time I show my passport to immigration officials, but never came in the way of being allowed to cross the Indian border. I am a South Asia specialist—indeed, I am a professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies at the University for Sussex (UK)—and as well as working in south India, over the years I have also conducted some research and attended conferences in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. These collaborative research projects on charities in urban Sri Lanka and education opportunities in rural Pakistan were funded by the Economic and Research Council (UK) and the British Council respectively. I have never tried to hide my short research trips to Pakistan from the scrutiny of the Indian authorities.

As well as upholding academic freedom, I

strongly believe in academic integrity and transparency, and so every time I applied for a research visa to India, I declared my visits to Pakistan or elsewhere in South Asia (and I have always been granted appropriate visas for India, regardless of the Pakistan visa stamped on my passport!). And to the questions of immigrations officials about my Pakistan visas, I always responded with the simple truth, “I am an academic and I went to Pakistan for research purposes”.

A truth which might ring hollow only to the most bigoted or spiteful ear. South Asianist scholars are a very expansive and yet tightly knit body of academics. We know each other well, collaborate extensively with each other, we might argue and disagree but deeply respect one another. At the same time, in academic departments the world over, and in any international academic conference, South Asian academics and students work alongside each other, regardless of their nationality. In my academic career as an anthropologist, I have supervised and examined more than 40 doctoral students from all over South Asia, and as well as doing my best to nurture their knowledge and critical skills, I hope to have fostered among them a spirit of academic rigour, mutual understanding and tolerance.

I am utterly shocked and saddened by the deportation order that was served on me today. This is not because it might come in the way of conducting future research in India, but because over the years Kerala has become a second home to me, a place

whose culture I love deeply, and where I have countless friends. I have been animated by a passion for understanding the fast-paced transformations of Kerala, one of the most dynamic and culturally rich states in India.

And I have always been mindful and respectful of the social complexities of this state, admiring the efforts of successive governments which, very often against great odds and with limited resources, have managed to improve the lives and aspirations of all Malayalis. Indeed, I was relieved to be told that my deportation was decreed by an order from the government of India, and not from the government of Kerala.

In 30 years of research in the state, I have interacted with and got to know countless politicians, bureaucrats and social activists who always treated me with great respect and generosity, appreciative of my genuine efforts to contribute to the understanding of the complexities of everyday life in the state. To my surprise, once I landed back in London I turned on my phone to see that I received hundreds of emails and texts from Malayali friends from all other the world, and from Indian and non-Indian colleagues. Their utter disbelief and sadness for my deportation, together with their loving words of support made me choke with tears. I thank them all from the bottom of my heart, and so I also thank all the Indian news media which rushed to report the incident.

I hope this is not my last (attempted) visit

to Kerala. I also hope that incidents such as those I experienced today—and which are becoming increasingly common—will not come in the way of collaborations with Indian scientists and universities at a time when the latter are trying tirelessly to internationalise their research endeavours. I'd rather be thinking that I have been the object of plain paranoid bureaucratic foolhardiness which, arrogant and offensive as it might be, should not be allowed to impinge on the pursuit of scientific knowledge.

However, my unfortunate experience does not even come close to the predicaments of many Indian colleagues whose freedom of academic expression in recent years has been severely constrained, often making them the object of censorship and disciplinary measures.

My thoughts and solidarity go to them! In the same way, my deportation cannot be compared to the experiences of countless Malayalis who are regularly deported from their country of migration on alleged, even trumped up charges of breaching immigration rules in pursuit of what should be the natural right to improving one's life chances. I salute their courage and forbearing!

This article went live on mars twenty-fifth, two

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