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Journal of Intercultural Studies

ISSN: 0725-6868 (Print) 1469-9540 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjis20

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To cite this article: Dr Salim Lakha (2005) Negotiating the Transnational Workplace: Indian Computer Professionals in Australia, Journal of Intercultural Studies, 26:4, 337-359, DOI: 10.1080/07256860500270205

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860500270205

Journal of Intercultural Studies
Vol. 26, No. 4, November 2005, pp. 337–359

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Taylor & Francis Group

Negotiating the Transnational Workplace: Indian Computer Professionals in Australia

Salim Lakha

Academics and journalists have responded in various ways to the recent influx of Indian computer professionals into Australia. Though references to their inflow on temporary visas are frequent, there is as yet no attempt to examine in detail their experiences in the workplace. This paper considers the workplace experiences of Indian computer professionals in Melbourne in the context of the discussion on transnational social spaces. It deals with a specific case study involving employees from an Indian subsidiary of an Australian financial institution who work here on temporary visas. The paper looks at three areas of their professional lives: communication, relations with co-workers and satisfaction in the workplace. It reveals that their presence in the transnational workplace is marked by contested identity, concerns about security of employment and different understandings of what constitutes effective communication. The paper demonstrates that the emergence of transnational social spaces has complex and contradictory outcomes.

Keywords: Transnational Workplace; Transnational Social Spaces; Temporary Work Visas; Indian Computer Professionals; Migration

Introduction

The ubiquitous presence of Indian computer professionals in the information technology (IT) sector of economically advanced nations has invited varying

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ISSN 0725-6868 print/ISSN 1469-9540 online/05/040337-23

DOI: 10.1080/07256860500270205

responses from international development agencies, media commentators and scholars from different disciplines (UNDP; Wynhausen and O'Brien 9; Saxenian). Much of the literature on their migration focuses on either India or the USA. Their movement to Australia has received less attention except in journalistic reports. Academic studies in Australia refer to Indian computer professionals largely in the context of immigration policy, the skills component of migration and the implications for employment (Khoo et al.; Voigt-Graf; Kinnaird). Their experiences in the workplace have eluded researchers. Xiang, for example, studied in detail the pattern of their recruitment into Australia but did not deal with their workplace experiences. Although a previous study based on a pilot survey in Melbourne addressed workplace issues, it provided only brief evidence (Lakha 1993: 151–54).

Collins argues that 'in the popular imagination, the effects of globalization on workers in the developed countries' are frequently assessed in terms of the outcome for employment (2005: 252). In the process the consequences of 'an increasingly global labor market' for 'institutions', 'practices of the workplace' and 'neighborhoods' are accorded less significance (Collins 2005: 252). Similarly, in Australia the influx of computer professionals has often been debated and discussed with reference to the effect on employment prospects for Australian IT professionals (Kinnaird; ACS 3 and 10). Whilst not underrating the question of employment, other significant considerations connected with the emergence of transnational workplaces are overlooked. For example, differences in modes of communication and workplace practices and culture (Collins 2005: 252) remain largely unexplored.

The increasing significance of cross-border movements of workers and transnational activities of global corporations have led Pries to argue that 'international labour migration and international business units ... should be at the core of anthropological and sociological studies of transnational social spaces' (24). Though international companies and workplace issues have been addressed in studies within disciplinary areas such as industrial and economic sociology, organization studies and management, their focus is confined to the national context (Pries 26). In contrast to the nation-centred approach of such research, the study of transnational social spaces has 'a multipolar geographic orientation' that transcends national boundaries (Pries 6). Other writers have also emphasized the importance of understanding transnational social spaces with reference to kinship networks, ethnic connections and diasporic communities (Willis, Yeoh and Fakhri 2–3).

The focus upon transnational social spaces questions the view that national and social boundaries correspond to each other (Flecker and Simsa 164). For Pries transnational social spaces represent:

> pluri-local frames of reference which structure everyday practices, social positions, biographical employment projects, and human identities, and simultaneously exist above and beyond the social contexts of national societies. (23)

There is increasing recognition that contemporary globalization has intensified transnational links through the revolution in communications and transport which

has accelerated the movement of people, goods and information creating networks and opportunities that are transnational and global in scope. Thus, the employment trajectories of Indian computer professionals reveal that international migration can be a strategy for enhancing economic opportunities by moving to multiple locations, rather than settling in one country (Biao 164–65; Voigt-Graf and Khoo 146–47). Similarly O'Riain observes that computer professionals employed in an American subsidiary in Ireland, and the software industry more generally, are prone to frequent changes of employment in order to ameliorate their economic status (20–22). This study confirms the above-mentioned observations by demonstrating that computer professionals visiting Australia on temporary visas evaluate their work experience here with reference to their longer-term career objectives in India.

According to some, the focus upon transnationalism or transnational connections is the result of two main processes: international migration and the geographical reorganization of production brought about by the investment decisions of transnational corporations which in turn has promoted the migration of 'highly-skilled' workers (Willis, Yeoh and Fakhri 2). From the perspective of this study, it is the reorganization of software development on an international scale which is particularly significant (see Lakha 1994). The transnational workplace examined in this paper is not a discrete entity but connected to a capitalistic international division of labour as explained below in section one.

However, production processes and the division of labour provide only a partial account of workplace experiences because they do not account for cultural processes which have considerable influence on workplace relations in transnational social spaces such as international business enterprises. For example, O'Riain's work on an American software subsidiary in Ireland is instructive but it does not particularly address cultural differences in the workplace. The study foregrounds work practices in a globalized work setting that is characterized by the 'process' of 'time-space intensification' giving rise to a team culture, workplace relations and forms of control specific to that particular sector (O'Riain 18–19). Although it raises certain issues relevant to this discussion, its main focus is not on how ethnicity and cultural differences are negotiated in the workplace.

The negotiation of cultural differences in transnational social spaces such as the globalized workplace presents an important 'challenge' for organizations confronted with cultural differences and variations in work practices between units located in different parts of the world (Flecker and Simsa 177–80). One of the cultural factors that compounds difficulties in 'transnational co-ordination' is differences in 'communication strategies and styles' (Flecker and Simsa 178–79). This study demonstrates that differences in modes of communication between Indian computer professionals and their supervisors are of major concern within the organization and significantly influence the interactions between them.

As economic globalization intensifies and transnational links between workplaces multiply through technological changes and accelerated geographical mobility of workers, differences in workplace culture and communication assume greater

importance. It is now widely recognized that 'cultural contacts' and 'an increase in intercultural communication does not necessarily' result in a uniform world culture (Lie 77). Thus the negotiation of difference within workplaces and other social spaces is marked by complexities that were previously less pronounced. Consequently, both within the corporate sector and the broader societal level the assimilation approach to dealing with cultural diversity has proven inadequate, and sometimes has given rise to serious misunderstandings and tensions.

This paper considers the experiences of Indian computer professionals in Australia on temporary visas[1] and how they negotiate the workplace by looking at communication, relations with co-workers and the level of satisfaction in the workplace. Whilst references to the influx of Indian computer professionals into Australia on temporary visas are frequent, especially in the national media, there is as yet no attempt by academics to examine in detail the implications of this inflow for the workplace. This is despite the fact that many large Australian corporations regularly utilize the services of these professionals.

The paper identifies the key factors which influence the interactions of these professionals in the workplace, and thus provides an appreciation of the major issues they confront in negotiating the work environment in Australia. The experience of Indian professionals also brings into sharp relief the challenges faced by supervisors and managers within transnational workplaces that are culturally diverse.

The study examines the experiences of a specific group of transient computer professionals from India. They come to work on assignments in Melbourne with a major financial institution which has a software development subsidiary in India. The financial institution is referred to by a pseudonym, Global Credit, and its fully owned subsidiary in India is similarly referred to as Global Credit Software. The subsidiary in India employs over 500 people who are IT specialists and who work on projects connected with the activities of Global Credit in Melbourne. The number of IT professionals employed by Global Credit in Australia is over 1400 which considerably exceeds that at its subsidiary in India.

Though there were Indian permanent residents working with Global Credit in Melbourne they were not included in this study for several reasons. First, the concerns that management raised were not related to permanent resident Indians but those from their subsidiary in India. Second, permanent residents are not transient employees and therefore they are more familiar with the work practices and the organizational culture at Global Credit. Finally, the permanent residents are not a homogenous social category since some have been brought up in Australia or obtained tertiary qualifications here; they are not necessarily all recent migrants.

The choice of this case study was influenced by the fact that the relationship between Global Credit and Global Credit Software has extended over a relatively long timeframe of over 16 years and, therefore, the management at Global Credit has accumulated considerable experience and insights into the operations of a transnational workplace. The continuing nature of this experience and the relationship

between the two entities lends more credence to the information gathered for this study.

The employees of Global Credit Software are usually brought to Melbourne to work on projects extending from a period of anywhere between a few months to over two years. For employees of Global Credit Software the experience of working with Global Credit is vital because they get to understand the business side of the operations of Global Credit through client contact in Australia. Close contact with the staff at Global Credit through work experience in Melbourne also fosters teamwork and team culture which is necessary to ensure high quality in the development of software. For employees of Global Credit Software the potential for enhancing their professional experience is a major incentive for volunteering to come on assignments to Melbourne. In addition, many are attracted by the opportunity to experience life overseas, especially in a country with Western living standards. On completion of their assignments they return to India since Global Credit does not encourage permanent settlement in Australia.

This research has adopted an ethnographic approach to understanding the experiences of Indian computer professionals working at Global Credit in Melbourne. In the first place, the study is informed by the author's many years of research on the Indian computer software industry and computer professionals which involved fieldwork in India, Melbourne and Silicon Valley in the USA. Second, a large part of the material presented in this paper is drawn from discussions with four senior managers of Global Credit, and focus group meetings and semi-structured interviews in Melbourne with the employees of Global Credit Software and their supervisors.

A major consideration involved in conducting ethnographic research on organizations is access (Chapman 31). Whereas other sites of ethnographic research can be accessed through different gatekeepers, access to organizations is considerably restricted. Participant observation within organizations is not always acceptable to managers as was the case with this study. This underlines the difficulties of conducting traditional ethnographic work in large-scale, complex organizations such as transnational corporations where issues of power, control and confidentiality are paramount. Consequently other methods were relied upon such as focus group meetings and in-depth interviews which in recent times have gained more currency within the discipline of anthropology (Hirsch and Gellner 6–7). A 'key' factor defining ethnographic research is empathy (Hirsch and Gellner 7) with the subjects, which in this study was achieved through the above-mentioned research methods and repeated discussions with senior managers who were all males.

The main benefit of focus group sessions was the lively discussion and a cross section of views that were expressed which brought to the fore the key issues that confronted the Indian professionals in the workplace in Melbourne. The individual interviews provided an opportunity to explore in more detail the concerns that arose in focus groups. These included communication in the workplace, relations with co-workers at Global Credit, relations with supervisors and satisfaction with work.

The focus group meetings and individual interviews were conducted from around the middle of 2003 till the beginning of 2004. When these interviews began there were just over 50 Indian Global Credit Software employees based in Melbourne. The six focus group sessions covered a total of 24 people from Global Credit Software of whom four were females. The 15 individual interviews that were conducted some weeks later included three females and many of the individuals who were interviewed had also participated in the focus group meetings. Most of the employees who participated in focus group sessions and interviews were relatively young people in their 20s and early to mid-30s. They had degrees in engineering, computer science or other science-based disciplines, and there were a few with degrees in business administration. In terms of marital status, the interviews included unmarried people as well as those who were married and came with their families if they were here for a period longer than a few months.

In addition to Global Credit Software employees, six team supervisors (four females and two males) from the Melbourne office of Global Credit were interviewed individually in order to obtain the views of those who are directly involved in the daily management of the employees from India. An interview was also held with a male liaison officer from Global Credit Software who represents the Indian subsidiary and its staff in Melbourne.

The paper is divided into five sections and begins with a discussion of the different approaches to the migration of Indian computer professionals. The next section provides an overview of the migration of skilled workers to Australia since 1945. Section three considers the different understandings of communication on the part of the employees of Global Credit Software and their supervisors at Global Credit in Melbourne. Section four deals with the relations between Global Credit Software employees and their colleagues at Global Credit. The final section examines the factors that influence Global Credit Software employees' satisfaction in the workplace.

Migration of Indian Computer Professionals

India is now a major supplier of professionals in the world economy. Indian colleges produce about two million graduates each year with 80% possessing some proficiency in the English language (*The Economist* 68). Since not all the graduates in India can be absorbed locally, many find migration to the affluent Western countries an attractive proposition since it offers an opportunity to earn higher incomes and enjoy a better standard of living (Ghosh 281–87; Minocha cited in Hugo 97–98). In more recent years large numbers of professionals have been contracted out by either recruitment agencies or many Indian IT companies to work on temporary visas around the globe, but more particularly in the USA, Canada, Western Europe and Australia. For example, in 2003 the USA issued over 40,000 H-1B visas or temporary work permits to skilled Indians (Schoenberger 5A). Additionally, almost one-third of a total of 57,245 L-1 visas, which are normally reserved for foreign companies to relocate their employees to US offices, were granted to Indians (Schoenberger 1A). In

the case of computer professionals, increasing ties between the Indian computer software industry and global corporations experiencing a shortage of IT skills have played an important role in facilitating their movement.

The migration of Indian computer professionals has been considered from at least three different perspectives. First, some view this flow of knowledge workers as an important contributor of skills and entrepreneurship in the recipient countries. For example in Silicon Valley, which is the spearhead of the IT industry in the USA, Indian professionals have successfully established high-technology enterprises and many occupy positions in the upper echelons of the corporate sector (Saxenian; Singhal and Rogers 153–59).

Secondly, within the literature on the migration of Indian professionals there is also debate over whether this flow of skilled people represents a brain drain from India (Lakha 1993: 148–50; Khadria). Though some writers question the notion of the brain drain, the United Nations Development Programme in its annual report highlighted the substantial cost of training a technology graduate from the leading technology institutes in India and calculated the annual 'resource loss' through their migration at $2 billion (UNDP 92). Nevertheless there are certain gains derived from emigration of professionals overseas, especially through remittances, subsequent investments of capital and technology in India, and the management experience and leadership qualities they transfer to India on their return (Biers and Dhume 38–40; Lok 2).

However, those writers who focus on the structural context of this migration argue that the flow of Indian computer professionals is part of a hierarchically ordered international division of labour. Within this hierarchy the Indian software companies are viewed as developers of low value-added software and exporters of computer professionals especially to the USA as well as other Western countries. This perspective focuses on the predicament of many programmers who provide low cost, less skilled services in India and at numerous locations overseas with leading American and other international corporations (Lakha 1992: 105–109; Mir, Mathew and Mir). It is argued that the employment and visa status of some of these programmers is fraught with uncertainty in the American and Australian IT sectors (Mir, Mathew and Mir 24; Wynhausen and O'Brien 9). For example, following the dot.com crash in 2000 many Indian professionals on temporary work visas in the USA had to hastily depart because they could no longer legally remain in the country without a job. According to one informant residing in Silicon Valley, many Indian programmers left at such short notice that they had no time to dispose of their cars and instead abandoned them at the airport!

The low cost Indian (and non-Indian) professionals are also regarded as competitors for jobs of IT professionals in the advanced countries, particularly during periods of business contraction in the IT industry (Yourdon; Martin and Schumann 99–101). The *Policy Statement on Migration* released by the Australian Computer Society stated that many overseas IT workers on the temporary 457 visa are paid salaries that are lower than those received by their Australian counterparts

(7–8). This is partly because Australian companies are not under obligation to offer 'market rates' to those employed on 457 visas (ACS 7). Thus, the recent decline in jobs in the Australian IT sector has once again attracted criticisms from some within Australia who question a liberal approach towards the recruitment of lower-paid skilled workers such as computer professionals (Kinnaird; ACS 10).

The structural context of migration is crucial in understanding some of the processes operating within transnational workplaces as this study reveals. For example, the relationship between Global Credit and Global Credit Software is reflected by the division of labour whereby labour intensive, low value-added tasks like coding (writing of software) are located in India where labour costs are lower. As one interviewee from Global Credit Software explained, employees in India undertake more routine work, that is, they receive the specifications from Global Credit and produce the code. Coding and testing constitute half of the total activities undertaken at Global Credit Software, though the proportion was high as 90% when the informant first joined the subsidiary five years prior to the interview. The rest of the work is more skilled and includes some design activity. However, more advanced software development and most design work are based at Global Credit in Australia because of the advantage of proximity to clients and the higher skills base here among other factors. A major rationale for initially setting up the subsidiary in India, according to Global Credit's senior managers, was the cost savings involved in coding in India. The experiences of Indian computer professionals in the workplace here are shaped, to some extent, by this division of labour between the two entities.

The relationship between Global Credit and Global Credit Software does not represent a typical model of outsourcing of software by Australian companies because many companies in Australia and overseas outsource software development and services to Indian-owned companies rather than operating their own subsidiary (see, for example, Connors 1 and 30; Crowe and Connors). Nevertheless there are certain commonalities between the two models, especially in terms of the division of labour. To begin with, work that is outsourced by Australian companies is generally lower value-added, labour intensive and incurs lower costs through cheaper wage rates in India. Also, in some cases work that is outsourced to Indian companies requires bringing in Indian computer professionals to work on-site at clients' premises in Australia for varying lengths of time for the purposes of meeting clients, providing various services and training. For example, an Australian computer professional whose job was outsourced to India was required to train professionals from India in order to familiarize them with the processes that were being transferred there.[2] The case study examined in this paper has broader relevance because the issues connected with communication, cultural differences and variations in organizational culture arise under both models of outsourcing albeit to varying degrees of importance.

Migration of Skilled Workers to Australia

Despite recent criticisms of Australia's immigration policy of granting visas to overseas computer professionals when there is a decline in employment, the policy has continued to facilitate the influx of Indian computer professionals. Although traditionally many Indian professionals have been attracted by employment opportunities in the USA, at least since the 1980s Australia has emerged as quite an important destination for Indians, especially those possessing IT skills. This inflow is mainly connected with an increasing demand for professional skills within Australia and hence, a less restrictive immigration policy towards immigrants from Asia. As the discussion below reveals, with the shifting emphasis of skill requirements in the Australian immigration program, Indian computer professionals have been one of the major beneficiaries.

Between 1948 and 1968, the influx of immigrants into Australia was comprised largely of unskilled workers, but from 1969 onwards an insufficient supply of professionals led to increased recruitment of skilled people from overseas (Iredale 1997: 118). By 1991 overseas-born Australians accounted for 31.5% of the total population who had degree qualifications, and in the computing profession, Australia relied substantially on those born overseas since they represented 43% of all Australians with computing degrees (Birrell and Hawthorne 3 and 55). Towards the end of the 1980s there was also a shift in the cultural background of professional migrants who were increasingly from the so-called Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB), while previously the majority were from an English-Speaking Background (ESB) (Birrell and Hawthorne 4; Collins 2000: 20).

Within the skilled category, computer professionals were the second most important occupational group of new migrants in 1999–2000, representing a total of 1778 persons (DIMA 2002: 62). In the computing and IT sector, the presence of Indian professionals is significant since many have received permanent residence visas for Australia. For example, numerically their representation in 1996 was comparable to those of computer professionals from some of the other Asian countries such as China and Hong Kong who were granted visas to Australia (Birrell 82). As a national group Indians were the fourth largest recipients of permanent residence visas in 1999–2000 (DIMA 2000: 28).

Substantial numbers of Indian computer professionals are also granted working visas that permit them to stay in Australia on a non-permanent basis (Xiang 74). In 2000–2001 India was the second most important source of arrivals of primary applicants under the 457 temporary visa category which allows the visa holders to work in Australia for up to four years (Khoo et al. 31). Thus both in terms of their presence in the computing profession and their rising profile in the immigration flow, Indians represent an increasingly important group.

In Australia, the government has encouraged the influx of computer professionals from India and other parts of the world through both permanent settlement and the issue of temporary visas in order to compensate for the shortfall in local supply of

skills (Birrell 80–82). Though the claim that there is a shortfall in computing skills is now under dispute, the influx of overseas computer professionals on temporary visas still continues. The migration of these professionals from India is also facilitated by the close integration of the Indian computer software industry into the worldwide IT sector (Iredale 2001: 3; Lakha 1994: 394–406).

Importantly, this migration is part of the broader process of the international movement of professionals that is gaining greater prominence in the cross-border flows of workers around the world (Castles and Miller 161–63; Iredale 2001: 3). Those who move through shorter-term intra-corporate and inter-organizational transfers are referred to in the literature as transilient or transient workers (Jupp 10; Peixoto; Stalker 107 and 109–13). This category includes a wide range of occupational groups such as those represented by academics, administrators and managers, doctors, engineers and computer experts amongst others. In the case of intra-corporate transfers, the globalization of business is a major influence, and many corporations require the transfer of staff on a short-term basis for purposes of training and to ensure 'corporate consistency' (Beaton and Esposto 112).

The presence of skilled overseas-born professionals in the workplace in Australia presents many challenges as demonstrated by this study and various other reports (Lakha 1993: 152–53; Hawthorne). However, the experiences of temporary visa holders in the labour market and the workplace have received insufficient attention in academic research compared to those who are in the country on a permanent basis (see Hawthorne).

Whilst differences of class, gender and ethnicity have been widely publicized with reference to manufacturing workers in Australia, similar differences in the advanced sectors like IT have attracted relatively less academic interest. This is surprising considering the growing significance and increasing cultural diversity of the IT workforce in the USA, Australia and other Western countries. Judging from various reports, it is evident that in recent years migration from overseas has figured prominently in the debate on the impact of foreign professionals on employment in the IT sectors of the USA, Germany and Australia. Indian computer professionals are a major focus of this debate since they represent a large segment of the recruits to different parts of the world, including Australia (Khoo et al. 32–33).

In this paper the experiences of Indian computer professionals working on temporary visas with Global Credit in Melbourne are discussed below with reference to communication, relations with co-workers and satisfaction in the workplace. Their experiences reveal that the transnational workplace is a site of negotiation and contestation over different understandings of communication, the assertion of identity and pursuit of professional aspirations.

Communication

The question of communication revealed a major division between the Indian employees of Global Credit Software and their supervisors at Global Credit in

Melbourne. The source of this division is the different understandings of what constitutes effective communication. Most Global Credit Software employees claimed that they experienced difficulties in communication because of differences in accents between themselves and their colleagues in Australia. For their supervisors, however, communication represented broader concerns than just accents or differences in the manner of speech. For the supervisors and senior managers who were predominantly of Anglo-Celtic or European origins, transparency and the flow of information were of much greater concern in communication.

Most employees of Global Credit Software claimed that the problem of communication was temporary because it only arose during their initial period of adjustment to the workplace in Melbourne. Within a month or two they became familiar with the 'Aussie' accent and overcame difficulties in understanding their Australian counterparts here. A few also remarked that they were fairly familiar with the 'Aussie' accent even before they arrived in Melbourne through listening to cricket commentators from Australia. Moreover, they observed that communication difficulty related to differences in accents was not confined to Indians but was even encountered with other overseas-born people who worked within the organization and were permanent residents of Australia.

Difficulties with communication were not viewed as insurmountable. An employee of Global Credit Software explained: 'when one meets people from different cultural backgrounds one learns to communicate'. Such adaptation was explained with reference to the immense cultural diversity of India where workplaces are not homogenous since they include individuals from many different states of India which are culturally and linguistically diverse. The regional profile of Global Credit Software staff in India is quite varied because IT specialists from different corners of the country are employed there. They are all proficient in English and many also in Hindi which is the official language of India. Those who are from states where Hindi is not the mother tongue may be less proficient in it, but they are fluent in their particular state language such as Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu and others. Thus, some employees from Global Credit Software believed they were adept at communication through their encounters with diversity in India.

By contrast, the primary consideration in communication for some supervisors and managers was not the issue of accents, but the mode of communication adopted by the employees of Global Credit Software. They claimed that the employees from India were not direct in their communication which impeded the flow of information on the progress of projects within different sections of the organization. In the IT sector where the project deadline is a vital instrument of control over globally dispersed work teams (O'Riain 18–19), any barriers to the flow of information that undermine deadlines are regarded with utmost concern by management.

According to one supervisor, the employees of Global Credit Software did not express their views openly because they felt diffident towards their supervisors. They were inclined to express their opinions in an equivocal manner for fear of offending

their superiors, especially where they disagreed with them. They were therefore regarded as being not sufficiently direct and transparent in their communication.

Significantly, this assessment was confirmed by a supervisor at Global Credit who was knowledgeable about Indian workplaces. This supervisor stated that Global Credit Software employees did not generally challenge their managers but instead preferred to agree with their managers' views. Their behaviour was rationalized by the supervisor in cultural terms, and it was argued that the supervisors and managers at Global Credit failed to appreciate the culture of the workplace in India. They were, therefore, unable to understand the behaviour of the employees of Global Credit Software. The supervisor claimed that in India one had to 'coax' the employees to provide the feedback. They considered giving positive feedback was acceptable whereas offering negative feedback was dangerous because it may not be welcome by managers. This attitude was attributed by the supervisor to Indian culture and the workplace in India, both of which were described as hierarchical. For example, it was asserted that in India managers are status conscious and maintain a certain distance from their employees in the workplace. Consequently, they do not interact socially with their employees in the workplace.

Some employees of Global Credit Software concurred with this viewpoint since they also characterized their workplace in India as hierarchical. An informant in one of the focus groups stated that in Melbourne relations between co-workers are casual and there is no rigidity in the interaction between the supervisors, on the one hand, and their subordinates on the other. Similarly, another informant observed that there was 'free movement in and out of the manager's [supervisor's] cabin' in Melbourne in contrast to India where relations are more 'hierarchical'. As one of the discussants in the focus group explained, there is a chain of command in India which one cannot 'skip' unless one's manager does not respond, in which case one can 'approach the next layer of management'.

This rigid structure of authority is also replicated outside the workplace according to one respondent who explained that in India one is not used to asking questions because the education system from the beginning inculcates acceptance of the authority of teachers and parents. Thus respect for authority acts as a barrier to direct and open communication.

It was claimed that respect for authority also promotes a greater sense of deference as observed in the different approaches to communication between the employees of Global Credit Software and their Australian colleagues. An informant from Global Credit Software claimed that when Australians in the workplace could not understand Indians they would request clarification, but Indians out of deference found it difficult to seek clarification if they did not understand something. As another informant explained, for some of his Indian colleagues requesting clarification was regarded negatively. They felt that it made them appear 'foolish' because it implied they did not have the capacity to comprehend.

However, generalizations about Global Credit Software employees are fraught since culturalist explanations of behaviour are not accepted by everyone. For example, one

female employee of Global Credit Software strongly challenged what she regarded were stereotypes of Indians within Global Credit. She stated:

> People at Global Credit in Melbourne have stereotypes about Indians—they think of Indians having arranged marriages; that Indians are docile; they are surprised when you wear Western clothes. Their perspective is very limited.

Another female respondent disputed the view that Indians were reluctant to ask questions or challenge managers. She explained:

> When I joined Global Credit Software, we had a manager as a mentor and she was an Indian-Australian. She told us to question. I had eight months with her training. We interacted with the top management, so we don't have problems asking questions.

Moreover, the supervisors were not unanimous in their ratings of the communication skills of the employees from Global Credit Software. When they were asked to rate the communication skills of Global Credit Software employees on a scale, their ratings varied widely from 'very low' to 'very good'. Other considerations that detracted from the effectiveness of communication were also raised by the employees of Global Credit Software. These included the multiple channels through which information was sometimes relayed at Global Credit and the varying levels of verbal proficiency of Indian employees. Such secondary considerations notwithstanding, it is evident from the response of the informants that major differences do exist between the organizational culture at Global Credit in Melbourne and that at Global Credit Software in India. These differences in the organizational culture between the two places have a significant bearing upon modes of communication.

Relations with Co-workers

The relationship of the employees from Global Credit Software with the staff at Global Credit in Melbourne involved frequent socializing between them as well as important tensions connected with employment and identity. Though relations with co-workers who were from multicultural backgrounds were generally described in favourable terms, there were still significant issues of concern. These arose from anxiety about security of employment on the part of some Global Credit employees. Such concerns did not necessarily detract from socializing with co-workers in the workplace, but they were nevertheless disconcerting for the employees of Global Credit Software because it questioned their organizational identity.

All the respondents who were interviewed individually and asked to rate their relations with co-workers in their sections in Melbourne, rated their relations as either 'good' or 'very good'. It was not unusual for Global Credit Software's staff to state that their co-workers were friendly and helpful. One individual from India claimed that the work team here was close-knit involving close cooperation between team members. An employee who worked in a small multicultural team found

relations with others in the team were very good because there were no arguments or friction between team members. One respondent felt relations were good with co-workers because they made the respondent feel comfortable. For example, in this case the co-workers were sociable and invited the person for coffee whenever they had a break.

Social interaction in the workplace between staff members from Melbourne and India was fairly common. In some teams socializing took place around personal occasions like birthdays and farewells for departing staff members or other similar celebratory occasions. In other cases, team lunches and drinks after work were also occasions for social interaction. Several people claimed that in their teams a 'release' (of software application) normally called for a celebration. A respondent who had made good friends here was even invited for weekend excursions. Socializing also occurred during sporting events such as cricket matches. In one instance an Indian enthusiast of karaoke organized a karaoke function which was attended by both Australian and Indian colleagues.

In some cases, however, personal predilections and cultural differences limited socializing. A few individuals who did not consume alcohol because of personal or religious inhibitions felt their social interactions with Australian colleagues were restricted as a consequence. One person claimed that alcohol was integral to socializing in the workplace which made this particular individual feel uncomfortable. A supervisor who refrained from consuming alcohol confirmed the social limitations it imposed. However, individual responses vary and one person claimed non-consumption of alcohol did not necessarily affect social life. On the contrary, this individual was in considerable demand amongst friends here because they required someone sober to chauffer them around when they went out socializing at venues where alcohol was consumed. Such instrumentalist considerations aside, informants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in Melbourne who do not consume alcohol generally express surprise and unease at the considerable symbolic significance of alcohol in social interaction in Australia (Lakha and Stevenson 256–57).

Most of the employees from India felt that culture was more a source of curiosity here rather than a barrier. This was especially so where issues such as arranged marriages, food, history and architecture were concerned since they were of considerable interest to Australians of Anglo-Celtic and European backgrounds.

Despite the generally amicable relations and social interaction between the employees of Global Credit and Global Credit Software, the latter expressed some unease over the attitude of their counterparts in Melbourne. It was widely felt by the Indians that their presence was a cause of concern for some of the employees of Global Credit. For example, the responses of Global Credit Software employees who were interviewed individually were quite varied when questioned about the attitude of their colleagues in Melbourne. A minority rated the attitude as positive whereas a majority had mixed feelings, and one thought the attitude was definitely negative. Importantly, during the focus group discussions there was considerable concern

about the fact that the presence of Global Credit Software employees in Melbourne was viewed as a threat to jobs by some of the staff at Global Credit. Though it appears such fear was confined amongst a minority, it was nevertheless a significant issue as suggested by the responses of both Global Credit Software employees and their supervisors in Melbourne.

One Indian respondent who was interviewed explained that initially the threat was not perceived as serious, but as the IT sector in India has expanded the threat to employment here is viewed more gravely. This concern is amplified by reports in the Australian media of the outsourcing of IT work to India. The news about Telstra's decision to outsource its IT work to India received major publicity in the Australian media (see, for example, Connors 1 and 30) and reinforced the fear of some IT professionals within both Global Credit and the IT sector in Australia.

Most Global Credit Software employees here believed that the insecurity of employment was an issue for only a small segment of Global Credit's employees in Melbourne, particularly amongst some of the contract workers. It was also an issue that they came across here on an occasional basis rather than regularly, partly because it was not discussed openly by some who felt insecure. As one supervisor stated, the perceived threat was not of 'epidemic' proportion but significant enough to generate unease and tension. According to an employee of Global Credit Software, the fear among Global Credit's staff members was not so much an issue of cultural difference but an economic one, a viewpoint that was elaborated at length by one of the supervisors.

Even though the concern about employment was limited to a minority of Global Credit employees, its impact upon staff from Global Credit Software cannot be underestimated. Some of the people from India believed that they were not fully accepted within the organization in Melbourne which made them feel that they were not 'part of the family'. One respondent was sufficiently aggrieved to claim that 'we are always separate and treated separately to be frank'. Another remarked it made them feel like contractors. The feelings about acceptance varied amongst Global Credit Software's employees. Whilst some felt they are accepted others expressed strongly the opposite view. In part this variation may be related to the fact that they are dispersed across different work sites and sections of the organization within Melbourne and, therefore, their experiences of the workplace are not uniform.

It is evident that at least some employees of Global Credit Software felt that their identity as members of the 'family' of Global Credit was being questioned. They resented being treated as the 'Other' within this 'family' and were asserting what they regarded as their rightful membership of Global Credit.

The impact of this tension on work performance is difficult to ascertain since it is beyond the scope of this study. However, it did appear to affect the morale of Global Credit Software employees who felt they did not receive sufficient cooperation from those individuals in Melbourne who felt threatened. One respondent claimed it restricted access to information to complete the job. This person claimed some people deliberately withheld information on certain occasions to hamper

work. A supervisor confirmed that those Global Credit employees who feel threatened were less cooperative with their counterparts from Global Credit Software.

In the interviews and discussions cultural barriers were not as prominent a concern as the issue of threat to employment. However, in the case of one individual cultural attitude was a matter of significant concern. For example, when asked to describe the attitude of employees at Global Credit towards their counterparts from Global Credit Software, the person responded by stating:

> Some workers at Global Credit don't appreciate and respect cultural differences. People make jokes about Indians that relate to religion or other cultural aspects.

This person felt that some individuals in Melbourne made careless remarks about reverence for cows amongst Hindus which demonstrated cultural insensitivity on their part. He also complained that some of his colleagues looked down upon India because they viewed it as a technologically backward country.

Satisfaction with Work

Even though many of the employees from Global Credit Software regard coming to Melbourne as professionally beneficial and rate their relations with colleagues here favourably, those who were interviewed individually provided somewhat mixed responses to the level of satisfaction in their current job. It appears that individual professional considerations have a significant bearing where job satisfaction is concerned. These considerations are related mainly to career objectives and the acquisition of skills.

Though a majority of the respondents rated their level of satisfaction with their work at Global Credit as 'good' or 'very good', a significant minority[3] (6 of the 15 interviewed) were only fairly satisfied in their jobs. Those who expressed high satisfaction in their jobs were individuals who found they were learning a lot from their work in Melbourne. For example, one respondent claimed that the work here was very challenging with much to learn about programming for an application that was both complex and vast in scope. The project that the respondent was involved in was only undertaken here whereas in India the respondent would have been confined to routine coding. In this person's opinion, all the experts related to the project were located in Melbourne. Similarly, another respondent who expressed very high satisfaction stated that there was opportunity here to learn new applications.

One person who was pleased with the work here felt that being in Melbourne provided a very good overview of Global Credit's financial activities. This respondent believed that in order to understand how a solution can be obtained it was necessary to be here. The benefits offered by the job here would not have been available in India because it was claimed that Global Credit Software 'is a technical shop and not a business shop'.

Those who felt that their satisfaction with work was 'fair' or 'average' stated different reasons, mainly revolving around the nature of work they were involved in

and the limited opportunities available to them here. Thus one individual claimed that there was no growth opportunity here whereas in India one's efforts were recognized with awards and promotions.

In the case of another individual whose satisfaction was only average, it was because there was no opportunity here for challenging assignments. The work here involved routine activity whereas this person was seeking tasks that required more analysis. This respondent's expectations are well summed up below:

> *When I'm here my expectation is that . . . I would be having enough workload to keep me busy and above that I will have challenging work requests where you know I will have enough opportunities to interact with people . . . go to different teams and get to know and understand things. But unfortunately they have not been able to give the opportunity to take up . . . real challenging assignments. I've done the normal routine kind of work I would have done in India.*[4] *Now what would be a challenge for me would be something that requires more analysis . . . a complex piece of work.*

A few of the respondents were also seeking more managerial roles in order to progress in their careers in India but these roles were not available to them here. For example, one person was not entirely happy because the position did not involve managing people, whereas this individual's ambition was to obtain a managerial position eventually in India. In order to fulfil this aspiration, the individual felt it was necessary to acquire such experience now since managerial skills could not be learnt in 'one day' but only gradually.

Another respondent, who also aspired to a managerial role, felt that work satisfaction would improve if it was possible to manage the project that the person was involved in here. In this case it was felt that the individual did not 'own . . . any of the present work'.

During focus group discussions and individual interviews a few informants expressed concern about the process connected with their performance appraisal. These complaints may have impinged upon Global Credit Software employees' level of satisfaction. It was claimed by some that their performance appraisal was conducted at two levels, that is, by their supervisor in Melbourne and the manager in India. However, the feedback from the supervisor in Melbourne seemed to carry less influence compared to the assessment of the manager in India.

One respondent complained: 'there is the "one team concept" but it is not followed by everyone'. This individual claimed that people referred to 'team building between Melbourne and India' but it did not happen because the Indians reported to their Indian 'managers' as well as the 'managers' in Australia who did not assume direct responsibility for them. This system was described as one where Global Credit Software employees 'have two masters' but the 'managers in Melbourne don't take ownership'.

A supervisor in Melbourne confirmed that the performance appraisal of the staff from Global Credit Software was not conducted in the same manner as that for the employees of Global Credit in Melbourne. In this supervisor's opinion the employees

in India were subjected to a greater level of scrutiny in their evaluation compared to the staff of Global Credit in Melbourne.

The process of appraisal also reveals the ambiguous identity of Global Credit Software employees. From their perspective the 'one team' principle espoused by Global Credit was not realized in practice which left them feeling both excluded and subjected to greater pressure where their professional work performance was involved.

However, from discussions with the employees of Global Credit Software it appears that there is not a consensus about the manner or the procedures through which the performance appraisals are conducted. Whilst some employees were satisfied with both the evaluations of their supervisors and the opportunity offered to them to provide input into their appraisals, a few were also critical of the process.

Conclusion

The experiences of Indian computer professionals in this study reveal that the emergence of transnational social spaces has complex and contradictory outcomes. The transnationalization of economic processes is not necessarily accompanied by corresponding cultural and social shifts. Cultural and social practices express both national and transnational tendencies. It appears that where identity is concerned, the correspondence between national and social boundaries has not been transcended contrary to the claims of the proponents of transnational social spaces (see Flecker and Simsa 164). Though production processes through the international division of labour are transnational, the expression of identities in some cases is still anchored within nationally bounded spaces. It could be argued that economic globalization through the geographical dispersal of production processes, and the resulting insecurity of employment, has valorized national identities.

The transnational workplace is marked by a contest of identities. Professional interactions and work practices within Global Credit in Melbourne demonstrate that the identity of Global Credit Software employees remains unclear. They are not fully accepted as part of Global Credit, and are even viewed as a threat to employment by some within the organization in Melbourne. Although employees of a subsidiary they feel they have a right to be recognized and accepted as part of Global Credit. They regard themselves as members of the same 'family' as Global Credit employees. The 'family' metaphor is powerful because in the Indian context the family represents a key (if not primary) source of social identity. In India, exclusion from the family constitutes denial of one's social being. Needless to say, the employees of Global Credit Software resist their exclusion with determination. In this case the movement of professionals from India to Australia affirms Appadurai's claim that transnational flows are 'disjunctive' rather than 'isomorphic' (Appadurai 5–6). These flows do not result in the erasure of difference. For instance, as workers on temporary visas, the entitlements and the status of Indian computer professionals within Global Credit

(and in Australia) are not commensurate with those who are permanent residents and citizens of this country.

Communication also represents an important area of difference. There is a significant division of opinion over expectations in communication and what constitutes effective communication. It is clear that for the supervisors and managers at Global Credit transparency and the flow of information are paramount. For them it is vital that project deadlines are met and this is only possible if the feedback from their project team members is explicit and comprehensive. Their priorities are related to corporate imperatives such as fulfilling deadlines to satisfy client needs and keeping costs under control. Therefore, their approach to communication is influenced by corporate discourse systems which are 'utilitarian' and 'goal-oriented' (Scollon and Scollon 173 and 176).

According to the supervisors and managers at Global Credit, the approach to communication adopted by Global Credit Software employees is not compatible with management's expectations. This approach is rationalized in cultural terms by the managerial staff at Global Credit and some Indian informants. Specialists in communication from different disciplines have also argued that culture and communication are linked, and that the understandings and approach to communication are culturally defined (Jandt 29 and 46–47). Though this argument appears to confirm the views of some informants, certain employees of Global Credit Software question what they regard are stereotypes of Indian behaviour. Considering these contesting viewpoints, other mediating factors like class and caste status, educational background and the extent of exposure to Western influences may provide a more pertinent explanation of the variations in communication between Indian employees. These considerations require further exploration before meaningful conclusions are reached.

The contested nature of the culture-centred explanation cautions against sweeping generalizations and essentializing of cultural differences. The essentialization of cultural differences arises because in some academic and popular discourses culture is viewed as a nationally and territorially bounded entity that is constant over time. For example, conventionally culture is understood as representing patterns of behaviour, attitudes and values corresponding to a particular social group with fixed territorial attachment (Keesing 68; Gupta and Ferguson 1–2). Viewing culture as a homogenous, cohesive and territorially bounded entity (Ram 134–36) detracts from a more dynamic understanding of the concept that relates to practices which are subject to change with the movement of people and the passage of time. Moreover, in socially differentiated societies the existence of cultural unity is arguable considering competing claims to cultural representation by different groups vying for power and ideological domination (Gupta and Ferguson 4–5). Whilst people belonging to a particular cultural background may share some common values and patterns of behaviour it is misleading to suggest there is 'absolute uniformity'; one needs to identify and explain both the commonalities and variations within the patterns (English-Lueck 10–11).

Another major area of contention is employment. Where employees of Global Credit in Melbourne feel insecure relations between them and their colleagues from the subsidiary in India are adversely affected. They view Indian professionals as low cost labour which threatens their livelihood, especially during periods of downturn in the IT industry. Their perceptions correspond with the arguments of writers who view the migration of Indian computer professionals within the structural context of the international division of labour. Though Collins (2005) in her study is justified in suggesting that one needs to look beyond the issue of employment in discussions about the impact of globalization, the question of employment remains crucial for many who perceive their livelihoods are at stake.

Finally, for employees of Global Credit Software the transnational workplace represents an opportunity to advance their professional goals. Satisfaction in the workplace in Melbourne is closely linked to professional considerations and career aspirations in India. Employees who feel they are gaining knowledge and experience when assigned to projects in Melbourne demonstrate a much higher level of satisfaction. For those who are able to pursue their professional goals the transnational workplace represents a social space where there is an opportunity to elevate their skills within the international division of labour. By contrast, those employees who believe they are performing low skill tasks similar to those in India feel they are locked into the same groove within the international division of labour.

Thus employee aspirations in the transnational workplace can no longer be understood within a single, national 'frame of reference' (Pries 23). Indeed employment satisfaction is, to some extent, influenced by the articulation between production processes in multiple geographical and national locations. Considering the hierarchical nature of this international division of labour, the workers' satisfaction is unlikely to be commensurate with their expectations.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the staff of Global Credit and Global Credit Software for their cooperation and participation in this study. He would also like to thank Dr Michael Stevenson (Monash University) for his incisive comments on this paper and Dr Alexandra Gartrell for her enthusiastic research assistance.

Notes

[1] Under the 'temporary business sponsored (long stay) visa (457)', Australian companies can sponsor skilled people from abroad to compensate for the shortfall in skills within Australia. This visa extends for four years (DIMIA 1). In 2003–2004, 4129 visas in the 457 category were granted; this was a substantial increase from previous years when 3612 and 3567 visas were granted in 2001–2002 and 2002–2003, respectively (Crawford and Bajkowski 1).

[2] Personal communication with an acquaintance of British origin who has settled in Australia and worked in the IT sector here for many years.

[3] Four people rated their satisfaction as 'fair' and two rated it as 'fair to good'.

[4] In this quotation the name of the place has been substituted with India in order to maintain the identity of the organization confidential.

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