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Global/Indian
Cultural Politics in the IT Workplace

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I really stress the word global. And not American. Because even if their coworkers are predominantly American … that's changing. So they may work with someone from Poland or China. So the skills that we talk about are going to be useful globally. And that's about being transparent and clear. Because you need that. In virtual teams, you need this kind of communication … And it's a very appealing term. I mean, who doesn't want to work globally? And they [the Indian engineers] love it!

– Luellen Schafer, the founder and director of Global Savvy, a cross-cultural training firm in Silicon Valley

Because I'm global, I tend to be more interested in reading something about the US or whatever. I think a lot of that has got to do with globalization. And even with my television, my news, my movies. My restaurants. When I go out, I eat Italian food, and that makes me curious. So, in that way, I think globalization has really helped me. And, you know, when I was growing up, all this was just "modern" or "Western." I think a lot of that is really going away. I think it's getting to be a part of Indian life … So everything is not just Western and modern, and hence, not so good. Things are changing. Because we have always been aware of the global world, but we have always shut it out. Now, we're letting it in. Always, there's a challenge, right? You have your own way of life and there's another way of life coming in. While it's coming in, while you're creating a new identity for itself, there will be casualties, a bit of confusion. It's okay.

– Malini, a thirty-year-old project leader in Bangalore

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Malini, a longtime employee at a major Indian multinational in Bangalore, has traveled the world and has very specific ideas about what it means to be global. She defends globalization, praises its virtues in India, and does not mind it if the more parochial features of India's society and culture fade away. A few casualties and some confusion, inevitable in the cultural shakeup, are fine with her. For LuEllen Schafer, in contrast, "global" is a keyword meant to describe a particular set of skills that she helps to foster in the IT workplace – an appealing, pragmatic set of skills that is transferable and applicable anywhere. It is Schafer's job to transmit these skills to Indian engineers in a way that does not threaten their sense of Indianness, but rather allows them to maintain what she understands to be their culture. When does the acquired skill of effective global communication become something that defines a person more fundamentally? What are the mechanisms through which this happens? How might Indians working in the IT industry acquire not just the skills to "work globally," but also the personality traits and attitudes that make them feel "global" on a much deeper and more personal level? [...]

Navigating Cultural Terrain at Work: Corporate Perspectives

Indian IT companies do not just produce software products or sell their technical skills to clients abroad; they also produce a new breed of workers. The culture of the IT workplace, and, consequently, the transnational class of Indian IT professionals, is importantly derived from what informants repeatedly called a "global work culture." This culture is defined in myriad ways, the most prominent of which I describe and analyze here. "The global" can indicate a kind of new corporate culture that is separate from either Indian culture or Western culture, although this culture can be very thinly defined, leaving it open to interpretation. A cultivated sense of placelessness and insulation in office interiors, paired with a new awareness of corporate branding, offers little that is distinctive from which to build a new corporate culture. "The global" also refers to certain types of processes, communication styles, and skills, all of which are low context (in that they rely more on words and language than situational or relational cues), standardized, and transferable anywhere in the world. Finally, "the global" refers to a particular kind of organizational and managerial style, indicating flat hierarchies and innovative, empowered employees that emerge from new-age management and globalization discourses. Discourses of personal empowerment have particular resonance for professional women, although in their navigations, the gaps and shortcomings of corporate discourses of empowerment become apparent.

All of these competing meanings of "the global" set the stage for cultural streamlining. In corporate hallways and cross-cultural training sessions, culture becomes something that can be apprehended and absorbed, something transferable and strategically deployable. Corporations are invested in fostering a "global work culture" because it offers the promise of better efficiency and productivity, which improves their bottom line. Individuals, in contrast, are invested in being "global" because it promises a cosmopolitan sensibility that connotes status and refinement outside the

workplace, as well as added bonuses within it. Such a strategic approach to culture that begins in the IT workplace, stemming from the capitalist imperative to streamline differences for the sake of efficiency, becomes a way of understanding culture more generally, as corresponding notions of "Indian" take shape alongside competing notions of the "global."

Sometimes, notions of what is "Indian" stand in contradiction to the global, while at other times, they are in concert. The dominant relativist rhetoric of "the global" encourages Indian technologists to maintain an "Indian" core and to adopt a global professional persona purely for the purposes of their own productivity and advancement. In this setting, India is ostensibly being preserved, but it is also being redefined as definitions of "the global" proliferate. This sense of India – at once new and abiding, both informed by discourses transmitted to technologists in the workplace and created by the engineers themselves – reveals itself most clearly in the narratives of professional IT women, whose behaviors within the workplace reflect their commitment to being simultaneously "Indian" and "global," a reconciliation that forms the basis for the cultural navigations that streamline Indian culture into mobile, globalization-friendly appropriate difference.

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In a cozy flat in Bandra, a posh suburb of Mumbai, I am stretched out on a comfortable divan opposite Bharathi, a thoughtful technical writer in her mid-twenties. She sits cross-legged on the floor across from me, her eyebrows knitted together in deep thought as I ask questions. The tiny recorder between us bears witness. To me, Bharathi seems different from the colleagues of hers I have interviewed so far. She is in the IT industry, she is remarkably critical of the culture of IT. It is not completely surprising. A sociology graduate who studied law before realizing that her love for writing would be more lucratively channeled in IT, she has a more formidable set of tools for critical analysis of her social world than do her colleagues who have studied engineering exclusively. Now that I am interviewing her, asking her opinions and thoughts about working in IT, she is even more pensive than usual. In reflecting upon the colleagues she encounters in her field, Bharathi explains,

> And IT, well, I don't know. I think that environment just makes everyone a clone. You start thinking the same way. There's just that much range of a background you will encounter … It's not like a doctor, when you have patients from all different backgrounds. I will interact with an integrator, a software person, a graphics person. How different would that be? They still speak English, which means they have at least had a certain kind of education. You see them wearing the same jeans and t-shirt … Had I been a lawyer that would have been different. That empathy [for others unlike me] would have been much more. Now, from an IT field, my interaction with people is very limited.

Despite the popular perception that the experience of IT makes its employees more open-minded, Bharathi argues that the viewpoint of IT professionals is only becoming increasingly narrow. The popular perception of the industry as characterized by openness, communication, and dialogue seems dangerous to her: "IT was supposed to stand for communication – being able to speak another's language. But you are not. You speak the same language. And I mean language in the broadest sense, not just

English … It's a class vocabulary. Even if they come from different places, it's the same class … You can almost rattle off someone's opinion without having to know them." Bharathi observes a uniform class culture surrounding her at work. She feels that this culture has narrowed her outlook on the world. She is frustrated by the complacency of a culture that presumes and produces individuals with similar interests, tastes, aspirations, and even interpretations. This similarity, according to her, trumps class or regional origins because, as she says, "it's the *same* class." Only a very few of my interviewees agreed with Bharathi's sentiments; most argued instead that IT offered them unprecedented "exposure," a term to be explored in the next chapter. Bharathi's claims offer a notion of IT workers as sharing a common culture that few recognize.

Yet, Bharathi's opinions about the culture of the industry are more than keen, albeit unpopular, observations. Her opinions are the basis of a deep-seated fear for herself. She is afraid of how an environment she considers to be suffocating might be affecting her own individual growth and development: "I can interact better with my client in America than I can with the peon who cleans my toilet. Why is that? And I feel that, at some level, is quite debilitating for my personal growth. When I can't carry on a dialogue with another human being, however different that person might be, that's really sad. While this person in Ireland who has something to say about my content, I can talk to him for hours! Which is probably bringing the world closer, but it's still estranging me from my own people." The lifestyle and status that IT offers her fails to fulfill her personal goals, and her criticism hints at far more subtle desires: an individuality she believes she possesses and wishes to develop. For Bharathi, this individuality is made real through independent thought and through the capacity to connect and relate to those outside her own social, economic, and political milieu. This kind of individuality, it seemed to Bharathi, was not encouraged or even recognized as valuable in her industry.

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Shubha, a software engineer I interviewed in Mumbai who first introduced me to the importance of the word "background," comes from a Marwari business family in Mumbai's suburbs. Her parents run a lucrative pharmaceutical business and were dismayed by Shubha's decision to work in IT. A daughter working in this industry was a step down for them, not a step up. After avoiding discussion of her parents for much of the interview, Shubha finally explained, "I do come from a very different family background than most of the people who would work in my company … like, many of them *have* to work … I really didn't have to work for money, I really didn't. My parents could afford to give me anything I wanted … and the amount of money I make [in IT] is nothing compared to the amount I would make if I put the same amount of effort into our business. There's just no comparison … So, it was just crazy for my father. He was like, 'Why are you doing this? You don't have to!'" Shubha was hesitant to explain to me this aspect of her background. She knows that it sets her apart from her peers, and she indicated that she purposely tries not to bring it up around her colleagues. For her, the decision to go into IT stemmed partly from her personal drive and partly from her desire to distance herself from her family:

> For me, the major reason was independence, wanting to work on my own. I've been a fairly ambitious person throughout … I was academically very good in school. I was a

> board rank and my name was in the top ten in the city in my tenth standard. So I've been a very brilliant student. I don't think I'm intelligent; I just work very hard. I am by nature a slogger. So, that sort of fuels you into thinking that you should get ahead …
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> You see, my mom and my dad and my brother go to the same office. Family business. It was something I never wanted. My father has never been able to understand that … He always takes it that I don't want to be with them, but it's not that. I want to be with people, and at [my] work[place], you're always meeting people your age, and at work there's that fun associated with that. In business, I only meet people my dad's age and you are – well – it's different. I didn't want that and I don't miss that.

In contrast to Bharathi's account of the IT workplace being a place of mind-numbing uniformity and complacence that inhibits individuality, Shubha's narrative describes the IT workplace as a space that can fulfill her individual desires, remove her from the restrictions of her family, and allow her to craft a new independent sense of self, even though it means choosing a less lucrative path than she might have.

Shubha's decision to work in IT opened up opportunities that went far beyond the experience of working in a high-tech Mumbai workplace. When the opportunity to live in the United States temporarily for work arose, Shubha was determined to grab it, despite the very vocal objections of her conservative family. While most of my respondents, even those from otherwise protective and strict families, enjoyed encouragement from their families when the opportunity to go abroad came up, Shubha's parents strongly discouraged her from going to the United States. She fought them and eventually prevailed. Her stay abroad was exuberant for her. "I loved my seven months over there [in Minnesota]," she explained. "For me, it was just amazing. I've been pretty protected with my parents. *Very* protected, actually. So, it was like me spreading my wings and I just had a blast." While in the United States, Shubha lived on her own like most other IT workers, taking care of her own apartment without domestic help, and this distanced her even further from the everyday experience of her class position in India. Shubha explained, "I used to live in my apartment alone for a lot of the time and I had roommates coming and going, which was a big pain, but I used to do everything … My mom would be like, 'Oh, how are you doing this and that, cleaning the toilet?' But you just did it. You don't think, 'Oh my god, I'm cleaning my toilet.' You didn't think of it as a moral issue." Even in the short space of seven months, Shubha assimilated to the norms of suburban life in the United States, an experience that put a hard-won distance between her own sense of what was normal and her family's. When her triumphal stint in Minnesota was over and she returned to India, she agreed to marry, but her reference points for a good mate had changed. After screening and rejecting several potential grooms from business families, who would have expected her to quit her job and join the family business, she reconnected with a man from Mumbai with whom she had worked while living in Minnesota. Also an IT professional, he did not come from the same caste community, nor did he come from a business family, and for Shubha, choosing him also meant opting out of the expectations of business families altogether. Although her parents were initially resistant, they eventually approved of the match.

Once Shubha had married, her parents gave the couple a flat in an expensive part of the city, something they could not have afforded at such a young age from their IT

salaries alone. Still, Shubha's everyday professional life has changed the group of people she interacts with, and made her less allied to her family's particular community. Although Shubha's father wanted for her the lifestyle typical of wealthy urban women from business families, who spend their days shopping or at parties, Shubha spends long hours at work in IT. For her, the relative hardships of the industry, and the relatively low compensation she receives, have nonetheless won her independence from her family and the lifestyle that would come along with being part of the family business. Now, most of Shubha's friends work in the IT world, and these social and professional connections help to make Shubha even more closely identified with ideas and pastimes common to other IT workers. Through her interactions with an IT workplace, then, both at home and abroad, Shubha fashions a story of herself that is rooted in striving and individuality, but its unique character is made possible by her preexisting class privilege, which came with both opportunities and obstacles.

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While a drive for individual independence in itself provides a virtuous justification for disavowing economic gain among some informants, another type of narrative coming from those who grew up in wealthy business families underscores the virtue of IT as an industry with the potential to serve the world. Personal development and individualism are important here but are in service of a larger good. Here too, economic motivations are secondary. Rani, a twenty-eight-year-old Silicon Valley engineer moving into product development, works at a powerful company I will call Surge. While Rani's life trajectory took her away from India for the long term, her narrative bears important parallels to Shubha's. Like Shubha, Rani explained her career in IT as one that she pursued for the sake of her own self-actualization. More importantly, Rani explained that she expected to have a major impact on the world through the field of technology. Raised in a wealthy business family, Rani never had the drive to forge a career for herself, or indeed to work at all while growing up. While in college, however, a major Indian multinational identified her as someone with aptitude in the field, and after that she became more and more committed to the notion of a career. Through work, she met and later married her husband and moved to the United States with him in 2000. Since she has been in the United States, her vision for herself and her career has expanded and matured, as she has pursued her career more and more seriously. Rani feels that her work will someday have a major impact on the world, even as it actualizes and transforms her as an individual. "What do you think of cell phones?" she asked me early in our interview. I said I thought they were useful. "No, I mean, do you think it's a great thing? How has it changed your life?" I told her that it had certainly made life more convenient, but that it had downsides too. In response, she explained the scope of her vision and ambition for herself: "I have a different perspective. I feel it is a great technology. The thought of being able to talk to anybody, all my dear ones, even someone who is so far anytime, even if you are hiking or on the road. When I want to make an impact on the society, it is to create an invention, a technology like this, something that would eventually make a difference to all the people in the world." […]

Like Shubha, Rani outlines a path of self-discovery and actualization through her work, but, importantly, her individuality is deeply tied to her relationship with her family. Her family background did not pose the kinds of obstacles it did for Shubha;

rather, her family supported Rani's decision to pursue a career in IT because it was a respectable career, even if members of her family did not prompt Rani to pursue IT themselves. Indeed, her closeness with her family is quite central to Rani's account of her own drive and success. Her mother's motivation played an especially prominent role in Rani's narrative:

> [When I entered IT] I was not really motivated by technology or any of the latest advancements happening in this field. It was more of my mother's passion to see me leading in whatever I am doing that made me achieve what I have done today. She wanted me to lead everywhere; even if I ever stood second in class she used to be sad. At that time when I had to opt for a career, this was the number one career that I could have gone to, and I felt it was ideal … I never neglected my family. Were it so that I had to make anybody in the family unhappy [in my career pursuits] I would not have stirred out [of the home in the first place]. That is the kind of value I would like to carry on.

Rani asserts her individual development and ambition through a particular discourse of virtue – she aims to contribute to society even as she makes her family proud. Her constant invocation of the family echoes the "family comes first" narratives of most IT women I interviewed, and hints at the ways in which Rani's particular background – her class background, as well as the expectations of her mother – shapes her particular articulation of individuality. In saying that she is not in IT for the money, she relies upon her preexisting class privilege, the moral-support of her family, and her vision to help society through technology in a modified version of knowledge for development discourses.

Although they live in Mumbai and Silicon Valley, respectively, Shubha and Rani invoke notions of individuality that are similarly embedded in the class privilege they were born into, such that the position and feelings of their families profoundly affect the ways in which they imagine and actualize their life trajectories. Although both clearly articulate individualized desires and choices, most obviously in their choices of careers and partners, they also enhance their own symbolic position by disavowing the financial incentives that the IT industry provides because these incentives are actually a step down from lifestyles they were born into. In the way they met their spouses – at work rather than through an arranged process initiated by their families – the examples of Shubha and Rani also hint at the important ways in which their navigations of individuality might be producing new gendered norms, even as these navigations are embedded in the context of class and family dynamics. […]