

**Engineering the Global Indian:
Skills, Cosmopolitanism, and Families in Circuits of High-Tech
Migrations between India and the United States**

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on Indian *technomigration* – the transnational movements of Indian engineers between India and the United States. It documents and analyzes the experiences and perceptions of Indian technomigrants and the structural conditions that shape their mobility. The research was oriented by two main questions:

1. How do Indian technomigrants understand their own mobility? What shapes these understandings?
2. What historical, cultural, and political-economic conditions shape Indian technomigration? What are the cultural and structural (trans)formations that it engenders?

The research was designed as a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995): ethnographic interviews with Indian technomigrants, participant-observation, and internet and non-internet based primary and secondary research constitute the main methods of data-collection. 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with Indian engineering students in Mumbai, India, Indian graduate engineering students at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY, and Indian early-career professionals based in various parts of the United States as part of this research. Technomigrant writings, in the form of application essays to graduate school, and as essays reflecting on the practice of transnational mobility are also important data sources. Data from participant-observation at the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* 2009 at Chennai, India - an annual diaspora conference organized by the Government of India – constitutes a third data-set.

The dissertation argues that Indian technomigration is shaped by multiple factors at different scales - a historic overproduction of engineers by the Indian educational

system, middle class imaginations of successful careers and lifestyles, logics of kinship, a perceived shortage of skilled labor in the United States and the global economy, and discourses of cosmopolitanism, being some of the most salient ones. These drivers of Indian technomigration articulate in complex ways. A key argument is that frustrations with the Indian state writ large have meant that Indian technomigrants have become carriers of economic liberalization, even while they are legacy beneficiaries of state socialism through systems such as subsidized higher education. U.S. immigration law, through its emphasis on attracting highly skilled labor, also draws and regulates the flow of Indian technomigrants into the United States. In doing so, it interpolates them into an intermediate position of a “model minority” within the preexisting racial hierarchy. Together, these conditions render Indian technomigrants particularly dependent on a moralizing discourse of “Global Indian” cosmopolitanism – a discourse that allows Indian technomigrants to simultaneously maintain a strong cultural-national Indian identity while also distancing themselves from the Indian state machinery, as well as carving a distinct, culturally isolated social space for themselves in the United States . In the process, the family, both as an ideological and a practical construct, becomes a strong locus of individualized investment, supporting a range of “privatized strategies” (Fernandes 2005) for success and security. Empirically and theoretically, the dissertation contributes to an understanding of how people move and invest in contexts characterized by economic liberalization. In Indian technomigrants, the dissertation thus describes an emergent community of practice that is articulating new ways of being and belonging in the emerging world order – a *differential cosmopolitanism* that is based in notions of *difference* of Indian culture from dominant Western culture.

Methodologically, this dissertation furthers understanding of how (global) systems (Marcus & Fischer 1986/1999) can be understood and portrayed through ethnographic research and writing. One methodological argument is that moral discourses (here that of cosmopolitanism and Global Indianness) are usefully conceived as *infrastructural* in nature, providing support not unlike the kind of support that law and technology provide. A second methodological argument is that many systems of concern to ethnographers are *reflexive*, morphing as players within the systems interpret and evaluate their context(s). Collier & Ong's (2005) conception of "global assemblages" is thus particularly useful because it highlights ways the reflectiveness of actors within a system animates the very system they reflect on. The notion of "global assemblages" thus usefully extends established ways of thinking about systems in Science and Technology Studies, which has been characterized by a limited emphasis on how acts of interpretation, especially in domains of relative privilege, alter the very systems in which they take place.

Results of this dissertation will contribute to streams of scholarly research on transnationalism and global order, on the role of family and skill in economic liberalization, and on the subject constitution of technologically skilled emerging middle classes. Results can also advance insight on how race, privilege and bias continue to operate in the contemporary global system, informing practical efforts to build just and effective structures to support global circulations of people and expertise.