Information Technology Professionals and the New-Rich Middle Class in Chennai (Madras)

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Since 1991, when the policy of economic liberalisation began in earnest, the size and prosperity of India's middle class have grown considerably. Yet sound sociological and ethnographic information about its social structure and cultural values is still sparse, and as André Béteille (2003a: 75) comments: 'Everything or nearly everything that is written about the Indian middle class is written by middle-class Indians...[who] tend to oscillate between self-recrimination and self-congratulation' (cf. Béteille 2003b: 185). The former is exemplified by Pavan Varma's *The Great Indian Middle Class* (1998), which excoriates this class for its selfish materialism and the 'retreat from idealism' that was manifest in the smaller, 'traditional middle class' of the earlier, post-independence period (*ibid*.: 89). A good example of the opposite tendency is Gurcharan Das's *India Unbound* (2002), which celebrates 'the rise of a confident new middle class' (*ibid*.: 280). Das's diagnosis of what has changed is actually very similar to Varma's, but he insists that the new middle class is no 'greedier' than the old one, and the 'chief difference is that there is less hypocrisy and more self-confidence' (*ibid*.: 290).

Condemnation and celebration are important in the Indian middle class's discourse about itself, but neither necessarily reflects social reality with much accuracy. First, though, we must broadly define the 'middle class' under discussion. Sociologists of the west usually distinguish between the 'old' middle class—the property-owning petty bourgeoisie—and the 'new' middle class of educated and qualified, professional and technical, white-collar staff, which has grown steadily since the nineteenth century (Giddens 1973: 177–9). In India, this new middle class was a product of colonial rule and, even though very influential, it remained tiny compared with its western equivalent until recently (Béteille 2003a: 76–9; 2003b: 192–4). Varma's 'traditional' and Das's 'new' middle classes do not correspond, we should note, to the old and new middle classes of western sociology, and Das's category is virtually equivalent to the 'new rich'. In studies of this increasingly prominent stratum in various Asian countries, as well as India, 'new rich' is the deliberately loose phrase chosen to emphasise that it is indeed new and rich, as well as to evade some definitional difficulties surrounding 'middle class' (Pinches 1999; Robison and Goodman 1996).

The new entrepreneurs, managers and technocrats in contemporary China and Vietnam probably constitute the plainest examples of the Asian new rich (Robison and Goodman 1996: 3–6). In India, owing to its mixed economy, liberalisation had less radical consequences, but it has also fostered the emergence of a comparable new rich of entrepreneurs and professionals in the private sector. None of these developments means that the older middle class of bureaucrats, lawyers, bank officials, teachers and others has become unimportant. Our discussion, however, which is based on data collected in Chennai (formerly Madras), looks at one of the most high-profile sections of the new-rich middle class in urban India: the professional staff in the new information technology (IT) companies that provide 'the indispensable, material basis' for the 'informational global' economy described by Manuel Castells (1996: 66).

The Information Technology Industry in India

The two most important sectors of the Indian IT industry are software and services, and business process outsourcing (BPO). Software and services companies (hereafter software companies) supply and maintain the IT systems used by large companies and

other organisations, including the systems required to outsource work to offshore locations, where it is carried out by BPO companies. In the last few years, the Indian IT industry has been growing quickly. Thus, the value of software and services exports rose from $3.4 billion in 1999–2000 to $12 billion in 2004–5, which is equal to approximately 20 per cent of all India's exports. The number of 'knowledge professionals' in the industry, 522,000 in 2001–2, crossed one million in 2004–5, and continued rapid growth is expected; roughly one-third of this workforce is in the export-oriented software sector. Overwhelmingly, this is a young industry, in which the median age of software professionals is about 27.5.[1]

Some software companies have grown at a phenomenal rate. A now famous example is Infosys Technologies, which was started in 1981 with an investment of $1000, had annual revenues of nearly $4 million ten years later and reached $1 billion by 2004 (Heitzman 2004: 181–3).[2] The company and its founder and chairman, N. R. Narayana Murthy, have become modern legends, and Peter van der Veer (2005) rightly identifies a 'culture of magical belief' now surrounding IT as an economic success story for India. The IT industry has also 'become the new great white hope of the Indian middle class', as an editorial in *Economic and Political Weekly* put it.[3] IT entrepreneurs and professionals are among Das's new middle-class heroes (2002: 245–53), and he even proposes that India can leapfrog the industrial age, because 'in information technology we may have finally found the engine that can drive India's takeoff and transform our country' (*ibid.*: xvii). The business press is similarly enthusiastic; in 2003, the American magazine *BusinessWeek* carried a cover story claiming that India might be the first developing nation to use its 'brainpower' as the motor of growth. The magazine quoted various enthusiastic young people, including one 22-year-old student in Bangalore, the country's IT capital, who proclaimed that: 'IT is driving India's boom,

[1] Data from NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Services Companies); see www.nasscom.org: Home> Resource Centre > Facts & Figures > Indian IT Software and Services Market; Home > IT Workforce > Indian Scenario > Profile; Home > Media Room > Press Releases (2 and 16 June 2005); monthly reviews in Home > Media Room > Newsline [accessed July 2005]. For an overview of the software industry, see Kumar (2001).

[2] The 2004 figure is on the company's website, which also outlines its history: www.infy.com: Company Information> Facts & Figures.

[3] EPW Editorial, 'IT and the Economy', *Economic and Political Weekly* 36(16), 21 April 2001.

and we in the younger generation can really deliver the country from poverty'.[4]

Plainly, we must be sceptical about the opinions of business gurus, let alone youthful students in Bangalore, and Narayana Murthy himself (2000) is notably cautious about the future prospects of India's IT industry and the country's development. Nevertheless, although much optimistic talk about IT in India is exaggerated, it is not all magical fantasy. Thus, for example, the software industry is 'maturing' by moving into higher value-added markets, rather than stagnating as a low value-added industry viable only because of its cheap labour force; one sign of this is the rising proportion of offshore software exports, because more work for foreign clients by Indian software companies is now done 'offshore' in India, rather than 'on-site' at the clients' offices (Bhatnagar and Madon 1997: 279 & *passim*; Kumar 2001: 4279; cf. D'Costa 2003: 124–6 for a more sceptical view).[5] As a result, 'bodyshopping', whereby low-paid software workers are sent to foreign countries as exploited 'techno-coolies' (Mir et al. 2000: 23–5), now occurs less than it did a few years ago. Overall, if current trends continue, more high-value software engineering will be done in India, rather than overseas, and this (as we shall see later) is significant for IT professionals' migration patterns.

Although Bangalore is India's premier IT centre (Heitzman 2004: 165–217)—and Hyderabad is prominent—Chennai is rapidly developing as well and a huge array of software and BPO companies have established themselves in the city. Ranked by export revenue, India's top six software companies, all well-established in Chennai, are Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Infosys Technologies, Wipro Technologies, Satyam Computer Services, Cognizant Technology Solutions (CTS) and HCL Technologies.[6] In our research, we have

[4] Manjeet Kripalani and Pete Engardio, 'The Rise of India', *BusinessWeek* (Asian edition), 8 December 2003, pp. 42–54.

[5] Offshore software exports, as a proportion of the total, rose from 34.7 per cent in 1999–2000 to 57.9 per cent (estimate) in 2002–3, and NASSCOM stated that 'the offshore delivery model became the preferred business model...during 2003–4': www.nasscom.org: Home > Resource Centre > Facts & Figures > Indian IT Software and Services Market [accessed November 2004]. In one leading software company, Cognizant Technology Solutions, the mix is around 70–75 per cent offshore and 30–25 per cent on-site, according to its chairman in 2004; see *Hindu Business Line*, Internet edition, 10 October 2004: www.thehindubusinessline.com.

[6] Data on export revenue ranking (2003–4) from NASSCOM; see www.nasscom.org: Home > Resource Centre > Facts & Figures > Top 20 Software Companies [accessed November 2004]. For Chennai, data from STPI (Software

mainly been interviewing staff in one of these six, which we call Indian Computer Services (ICS), although we have also collected information in other companies.

Let us now outline a profile of the IT professionals who work in ICS to identify the combination of features that makes them distinctive. ICS, like similar companies, operates in several 'vertical domains'—such as financial services, insurance or retailing—and some of its professional staff are experts in particular domains. The majority of staff, however, are qualified or trained in software engineering, and they normally have a particular specialist expertise.[7] Some of them come to ICS from other IT companies, but most are directly recruited from engineering (or other) colleges. Students should have a consistent record of high examination marks before they can sit the company's aptitude test and proceed to an interview, where only one out of twelve is offered a job. ICS's managers are promoted engineers or other people recruited from management institutes or other firms. Approximately one-fifth of new recruits are women; both they and their male colleagues generally insist that there is no gender inequality in the company, although the top management is still all male.[8] There is severe market competition for good staff and moving between software companies is fairly easy. Starting salaries at ICS, which are in the middle of the range for large software companies, are around 15,000 rupees per month for people in their early twenties and can easily double within a few years.

The Indian middle class is sometimes identified (especially by marketing experts) as a 'consuming class' (cf. Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 123–4; Deshpande 2003: 134–9; Mankekar 1999: 75–6), which may in turn be equated with the 'middle-high' income category, as defined by the National Council of Applied Economic Research; in 2001–2, this category included households with annual incomes over 90,000 rupees and made up 28 per cent of all Indian households. Extrapolated NCAER data also show that in 2001–2 only about 6 per cent of households fell into its 'high-income' category with an

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Technology Parks of India), Chennai; see www.stpc.soft.net: Home > Performance and Analysis > Major players [accessed November 2004].

[7] For a simple explanation of the software industry and software engineering, see Mir et al. (2000: 17–20).

[8] In Indian software companies, 79 per cent of software professionals were men in 2001–2, but this is projected to fall to 65 per cent by 2005: www.nasscom.org: Home > Advantage India > Why India > Knowledge Professionals [accessed July 2005].

annual income over 180,000 rupees.[9] Yet ICS recruits, like other IT professionals, enjoy *individual* incomes around this level, so that by Indian standards they are very well-paid and certainly belong to the country's new rich.

Staff in ICS undergo appraisal by line managers every six months; staff who exceed targets can expect rapid promotion and salary increases, but it is made clear to those who fall short that they will be 'let go' and should leave the company. Most staff work a 40 to 50-hour, five-day week according to a flexitime system, but managers often work longer hours; pressure to meet deadlines is also common and extra hours are then expected, from men and women alike. Most work is done by teams of software engineers, together with a few domain specialists, who are supervised by project managers; a team's size can vary from a handful to a hundred or so, and some team members may be working abroad on-site, while others stay in India. Almost all staff work in modern, open-plan offices and team members, male and female, work closely together; interactions between young men and women, many unmarried, are noticeably free and easy compared with those seen in most social situations in Chennai. Very importantly, major IT firms like ICS are, and are universally understood to be, part of a global industry, not just an Indian one, in which the US is the main market; on-site overseas project assignments, lasting several months or even a year or two, are a normal part of working life and, because there is a global software labour market, opportunities to secure posts abroad or to go there temporarily to earn large sums of money are abundant.

Finally, in this list of distinctive features, let us note that ICS, like many other IT companies in Chennai, is said to be dominated by the high-status 'Forward Castes'—especially Tamil Brahmans, who form about 2.5 per cent of Tamilnadu's population—and it is our strong impression that this is true (cf. Fuller 1999: 34; Harriss 2003: 333). On the other hand, no accurate figures exist and 'guesstimates' by people in IT vary greatly. All the same, in the public image of Chennai's IT industry, the large Brahman presence is a prominent feature for insiders and outsiders alike.

[9] NCAER's 'middle-high' category comprises 'middle', 'upper-middle' and 'high'. 'High' income households are defined as those with annual incomes above 140,000 rupees in 1998–9 prices, equivalent to 180,000 rupees in 2001–2. In 1998–9, this category made up 5.7 per cent of all Indian households. These data were reported by the Economist Intelligence Unit on 23 June 2004; see aigonline.com: Home> Regional Risk Analysis > South Asia.

Ethnographic Sketches

This section contains ethnographic sketches of some of the nineteen people working in ICS whom we have interviewed. All names used are pseudonyms. This admittedly tiny sample of a workforce of several thousand is the haphazard product of the problems of access besetting this sort of research among busy, urban middle-class people working in an industry that is unusually concerned with security and confidentiality.

One of ICS's personnel managers is Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna is in his late thirties and is married with two young daughters. He comes from a district south of Chennai, where his family owns some land; he belongs to the non-Brahman Reddiar caste. Ramakrishna studied at a reputed engineering college and then gained an MCA (Master's in Computer Applications). He worked for an advertising firm, an IT company and a US-based recruitment agency before joining ICS because it offered him superior career opportunities. Ramakrishna looked more stressed-out than anyone we have ever met; he never smiled, he kept rolling his eyes and closing them, he never sat still for a moment, and even though he talked to us quite freely, we are sure he was thinking about other things most of the time. Ramakrishna described his own job as 'tough and challenging'; it is his responsibility to ensure that in the 'war for talent' among the leading companies, ICS can recruit enough high-quality personnel, especially by picking the best graduates from the top colleges.

As far as Ramakrishna is concerned, his attitude to his work and family differs radically from his father's. He 'lives for the present', while his father, a retired manager in a state government corporation, 'lived for the future'; although he still lives with his parents, he puts his own nuclear family and himself first, ahead of the extended family. Ramakrishna's two daughters attend one of the city's most expensive Montessori schools and he spoke of spending 'quality time' with his children. His family takes an annual holiday as well as periodic weekends away; he and his family insist on their own privacy and he has learnt to say 'no' when it is infringed. At present, he said, he is happy to work in India because prospects in the booming IT sector are so good, but if it were better for his career and for his wife and children, he would move to America. Ramakrishna also emphasised that ICS, like all successful IT companies, is a very competitive place to work in which those who want to succeed must often work long and anti-social hours under the continual pressure of tight deadlines; good people in the

firm want 'careers', not just 'jobs', but they also want high salaries and they know that pay and promotion depend on individual performance, not age and seniority. Our information is that Ramakrishna earns about 70,000 rupees per month and, like other senior managers in the large IT companies, he has valuable stock options. Nevertheless, over many months in 2003–4, he was negotiating for a salary increase while continually threatening to leave for another job in Bangalore.

Ramakrishna, the first person we met in ICS and the most senior, conformed quite closely to the image of the driven, individualistic executive that is an IT industry stereotype. Interestingly, though, he turned out to be rather unusual. Our next three sketches are all of project managers, responsible with their assistant managers for teams of software engineers. The first, Ravi, is 33; he is married, without children, to a personnel manager, and he and his wife live with his parents. He is a Palghat Brahman (a Tamil Brahman from Kerala), brought up in Chennai. After finishing his first degree, he was offered posts in a bank and an insurance company, both state-run, but he turned them down to study for an MTech at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) at Kharagpur, West Bengal. By then Ravi had become interested in computing and his first job was in a Calcutta software company; in 1995, he returned to Chennai, joined ICS and has been with them ever since. In 2004, he was managing a team of 32 staff in Chennai and 20 in Britain, which was working on a project for a British company expected to last two years.

Ravi claimed to work twelve hours a day, but tries to keep his weekends free; he said that there is always some stress in his job, but that he can handle it by working with good teams. Building cooperative teams of people with the right skills is a crucial part of his job as a manager. Many members of his current team are women, including his assistant manager; he believes that ICS values both sexes equally, and recognises the domestic pressures that women often face in Chennai. Ravi repeatedly said that he finds the IT industry 'empowering', because he could never have acquired so much autonomy and responsibility so quickly in any other walk of life, and even at lower levels, people feel a 'sense of ownership' of their work. In a nationalised bank, by contrast, he would have had to put up with the oppressive bureaucratic hierarchy. He therefore has no regrets about his career decision and his parents have given him much support. He and his wife, who is happy because she wanted to marry an IT professional, spent one year in England working on-site, where he earned plenty of money and got 'good exposure'—a common phrase

denoting a wide range of new opportunities and experiences—but Ravi is close to his family, wanted to come home to be with his elderly father, and has no desire to live abroad.

Balaram is 37; he is married to a part-time IT consultant, they have two children and they live as a nuclear family. Balaram is a Brahman, born in Salem and raised in Chennai. He has a BSc in maths and an MCA from the University of Hyderabad, and under some pressure from his parents he took a selection test for the nationalised banks. But he never wanted a job in a bank or any other public-sector undertaking. Instead, after graduating, he obtained a job in another major software company and then moved several times before joining ICS in 1994. In 1995, however, he left ICS and migrated to Australia, where he worked in IT in a variety of roles, before returning to Chennai in 2003 and rejoining ICS. He is now a manager of a team of 100 staff working on a project for a US medical insurance company.

Balaram appeared to be fairly relaxed about his job and said that he always took the weekends off. For him, the most important aspect of a job is that it should offer variety, opportunities to improve one's experience, and a feeling of satisfaction about achieving something important. Balaram has worked in Britain and America, but prefers Australia as a place to live and bring up children. Nevertheless, he decided to return from Australia because the work available in Chennai is far more interesting and challenging, and the industry's growth prospects are much better. Balaram specifically said that he was under no pressure from his parents to return to Chennai. After the interview in early 2004, Balaram was transferred to ICS's offices in Ireland.

Anuradha is a project manager in her early thirties. She is married to another IT professional and has one daughter; they all live with his parents, and her own parents live in the same apartment block. Anuradha is a Tamil Brahman and a native of Chennai. She took a degree in electrical and electronic engineering at a reputed college in Coimbatore and then worked for two different software companies, for one of which she did on-site work in Britain and America. After marriage, Anuradha moved with her husband to America, where she joined ICS, working for the company there between 2000 and 2002. But she never wanted to live abroad and had made it a condition of her marriage that she and her husband returned to live in Chennai after making some money. Anuradha manages a team of twenty staff in Chennai working on a project for a major US medical insurance company.

Because she has a young child, Anuradha now refuses to go abroad on on-site assignments, and said that this is not a problem because she does not need any more 'exposure'. She does not find her job stressful and does not work at weekends; she is close to her family, finds living with her husband's parents easy, and can always rely on them and her own parents to care for her daughter during the working day. Anuradha firmly believes that the IT industry has helped to empower women, giving them choices that their mothers never had, and that women are no longer looked down upon by men. All in all, Anuradha is content with the comfortable life that working for ICS in Chennai has given her.

Shoaib, a native of Chennai, is in charge of ICS's intranet and website. He is 29 and recently married, and he and his wife live with his widowed mother. Shoaib's wife, who is a graduate, does not have a job; although his own mother has always worked, he does not believe that wives should work outside the home and he claims that his wife has the same opinion. Shoaib has a BSc in computer science from a Muslim college in Chennai and an MCA. He did a project as part of his MCA at ICS and joined the company six years ago; he worked in America for more than a year and briefly in England. Shoaib, however, is adamant that he does not want to live or work abroad in an 'alien country' where he would be separated from his family. His mother works in the Tamil Nadu government's fisheries department and his father was an engineer in the state electricity board; after his premature death, Shoaib was offered a post in the board as well, but he turned it down. He said that he would never work in the public sector, because there you always 'have to bow your head to somebody'. On the other hand, Shoaib remarked that 'there is no security in this job' and seemed more concerned than most of his colleagues about future uncertainties.

In March 2004, Jayashree, a Tamil Brahman and native of Chennai, was an assistant project manager for three small teams. Jayashree is about 35 and married with two children; her husband also works in IT and they live with his parents. She has an MSc in physics from IIT-Madras and an MTech from Anna University in Chennai. Jayashree first worked as a programmer in a leading software firm and then moved to an IIT research project. Her daughter was born in 1992, and afterwards she and her husband decided to go abroad to earn money; they spent two-and-a-half years in Hong Kong, where she did contract work, and six months in Singapore. On returning to Chennai, Jayashree took a job in ICS.

Jayashree could normally keep her weekends free, but she was pragmatic rather than enthusiastic about her job, and did not talk about women's empowerment. In the interview, Jayashree mainly wanted to talk about her family, not her work, and she explained that childcare for her 12-year-old daughter and 18-month-old son was an endlessly negotiated series of arrangements involving hired help and her parents-in-law and parents. She complained that her husband did not do his share of household chores, many of which, she joked, have been 'outsourced', so that take-away meals are now routine. She talked about the pressures of combining family life and work and, unlike Anuradha, Jayashree found herself burdened with the problems familiar to many professional wives and mothers. She spoke especially of her guilt about her son, who had seen so little of her, and because she wanted to spend more time with him, she later resigned from ICS, but now does contract work at home for the company.

Jayashree introduced us to Sarojini and Parvati, two young software engineers on her team. Sarojini, in her mid-twenties, is a Nayar from southern Tamilnadu. She took a degree in electrical and electronic engineering in Coimbatore and entered ICS as a trainee in 2002. She told us she was happy in ICS, and found her work exciting and challenging, although her first ambition had been to study medicine.

Sarojini said that she expected her parents to arrange her marriage soon, because in her community it is the 'tradition' for women to marry in their mid-twenties, but she was insistent that her husband would have to allow her to continue her career. Her mother also works and Sarojini appeared to attribute her determination more to her matrilineal Nayar background than to any empowerment brought about by the IT industry. Sarojini joked about marrying a professor, because her father is one and she has noticed that professors do not do much work, so that her husband could look after their children, although she admitted that she expected to marry another IT professional. Later in 2004, though, Sarojini was sent to New Jersey on an on-site assignment and by then she had acquired a boyfriend in ICS, a Tamil Brahman from Mumbai, who was sent to Connecticut; they now want to marry, and although her parents do not object, his do. According to Parvati (in early 2005), Sarojini and her boyfriend want to remain in America until his parents change their minds.

Parvati, who is the same age as Sarojini, is a Tamil Brahman and native of Chennai. She has a BSc in computer science and an MSc in information technology. In 2004, after six months in ICS, Parvati was finding her work boring, although one year later, in

spite of complaints about her project manager, she was much more enthusiastic and ambitious. She had become a team leader and was determined to get an early posting in America. Finding a groom for Parvati's elder sister, who works in computer hardware, is proving difficult and one of Parvati's weekly tasks is to browse through an internet matrimonial site, where statements about preferences for 'home-loving' wives increasingly irritate her. Parvati says that, like most of her friends, she believes that love marriages are in principle best, but finding a truly suitable partner is difficult. As far as we know, Parvati has no boyfriend, and we think that she is actually likely to have an arranged marriage, after her elder sister is finally settled.

When first interviewed, Sarojini and Parvati said that they normally worked about 40–45 hours per week, but never at the weekend, although Parvati now works around ten hours a day during the week. They laughed about a minority of young men who work at night and at weekends, pretending that they have to do so, whereas in fact they are just obsessed with computers. They both insisted that men and women are treated identically in ICS and that nobody thinks that women are technically less able than men, although Parvati believes that women make better managers.

Our last sketch is of Raghu, an unmarried 22-year-old software engineer who joined ICS after taking a degree in electronics and communication engineering in Coimbatore. He is a Tamil Brahman, brought up in Kalpakkam, south of Chennai, where his father is an engineer in the nuclear power station. Raghu works on the production support system for a British client's project and says that every day a new problem has to be solved, so that he never gets bored, although he thinks he is not learning much—except how to say 'no' to demanding, foreign clients—and he wants to leave the IT industry and study for an MBA fairly soon. In the meantime, he enjoys the money and commented that after one year he earned 200,000 rupees per annum, compared with his father's salary of 400,000 rupees after thirty years, although even now his father tends to save and spends less money than Raghu. Raghu shares a flat in Chennai with two single male friends who also work in IT, and they are unpopular with their neighbours, who fear that they may smoke, drink, cook non-vegetarian food and cause a nuisance. In fact, they never cook and eat all their meals out, and during the week they just come home to sleep, although many of Raghu's friends come to his flat at weekends to drink beer. In the IT industry, Raghu said, at least half the men drink every weekend, although this appears to be the extent of most people's alcoholic

indulgence; moreover, no women join these drinking sessions. Besides drinking, Raghu and his friends play cricket at weekends; he also does voluntary work for a well-known charity in Chennai that provides counselling for the depressed and suicidal, and he strongly disputed the perception that IT professionals are selfish materialists.

Information Technology and 'Disturbing the Social Fabric'

To those familiar with prosperous, urban, middle-class professionals in India, the lives of the ICS staff we have just sketched probably sound mundanely normal. Yet that is one point we wish to stress, because the world of IT is surrounded by a set of negative stereotypes (and occasional lurid fantasies). Thus middle-class people in Chennai—quoting a friend of a friend, or a similar source—commonly assert that IT professionals are overpaid, greedy, materialistic and obsessed by dreams of migrating to the west. They are all said to be overworked, too, which drives some of them into depression or even suicide, although many of them allegedly lead wild lives in bars at night and have lots of illicit affairs as well. In many respects, these stereotypes echo complaints about the newly rich middle class's materialism and selfishness as set out by Varma, for example, and they epitomise the way in which other middle-class people tend to project their supposedly worst sins on to IT workers. These stereotypes are an important element in the discourse about IT in Chennai and one initial goal of our research was to find out if any of them had any substance. Mostly, we have concluded, they do not, although some derogatory comments about the IT industry do raise salient issues.

Sampath, aged about 50, is the personnel manager in Chakra Vehicles (a pseudonym), a leading bus and lorry manufacturer in Chennai. According to Sampath, 'peer pressure' makes young engineers go abroad and those who take jobs in 'old economy' companies based entirely in India like Chakra wonder if they are losing out. More generally, Sampath believes that the IT industry has 'disturbed the social fabric', because its employees get 'quick promotions', 'fancy designations' and 'phenomenal compensation', whereas jobs used to offer security in the context of a long-term career with steady promotion prospects and a stable managerial structure, as is still largely true in Chakra. Sampath, whose own wife works, does not object to women going out to work and said that they actually do less 'hopping' from job to job than men. Nonetheless, though well aware that far more women

work in IT than manufacturing, he appeared unconcerned about their virtual absence in Chakra, which has recruited only a handful of women engineers in the last few years. Sampath's comments touch on several issues that we can separate for discussion. These include high salaries and consumerism; career trajectories and ambition; the position of women in IT; attitudes to job security and the state; and migration overseas.

High Salaries and Consumerism

In the first place, Sampath is of course grumbling about competition for staff from the IT companies. One of his colleagues specifically said that at campus interviews by the late 1990s, only fourth-rate men wanted to join Chakra, because everyone better was after the high salaries available in IT. But clearly, too, there is some envious distaste for the IT professionals' high salaries and alleged preoccupation with money, for salaries in manufacturing industry are generally lower, and promotion and increments come more slowly. Sampath, for example, probably earns around 60,000 rupees per month (with no stock options) after over twenty years of annual increments, whereas a competent IT professional could expect to reach this pay level in half the time. In manufacturing industry, there is also a tendency to be dismissive about the 'IT craze', which reflects disdain for a fashionable industry that is challenging an older, more established one based on 'real', rather than virtual, engineering.

However much other people may criticise them, IT professionals themselves readily acknowledge that high salaries matter because, as many of them said, the money means that they can now enjoy a very comfortable standard of living comparable with that available in the west. New forms of consumer expenditure—notably holidays, both in India and abroad—are becoming common, although most of the income, as far as we can tell, is spent on housing; for those with children, costly private education is also a major expense. Expenditure on prestigious housing and education is, of course, ostentatious consumption, as well as generally sound investment, but IT professionals, whatever their age or salary level, do not appear particularly preoccupied by consumerism.[10] Thus, for example, none of them has

[10] Although the evidence on India is less solid, it is interesting that none of it suggests a true parallel to the genuine 'consumer revolution in urban China'

ever talked to us about cars or restaurants as if they were matters of much concern, and none of them goes to work wearing particularly elegant, costly or fashionable clothes or jewellery. Software companies have dress codes, such as 'business formals' on Monday, 'business casuals' from Tuesday to Thursday, and 'casuals' on Friday and at weekends. On all days, however, a large majority of female IT professionals wear a shalwar kamiz, although some wear a sari or a 'western' blouse and trousers on formal days, and some wear a tee-shirt and jeans on casual days. No women in ICS are scruffily dressed, but we were struck by the modest and even unfashionable clothes worn by some of them. Nor did any of them display any anxiety comparable to what Purnima Mankekar (1999: 97) found in a young, lower-middle-class woman in Delhi who had obtained a job in a multinational company and was very worried about being poorly dressed at work. This woman's anxiety, however, was linked to her precarious class position (*ibid*.: 86), and her (and others') 'desire…to buy consumer goods seemed deeply embedded in a desire to attain middle-class status' (*ibid*.: 95). Similarly, writing about the newly-emerging middle class of Kathmandu, Mark Liechty emphasises 'the constantly contested, highly materialistic, and anxious character' of their lives (2002: 18) and the 'precarious and fleeting' nature of middle-class status (*ibid*.: 19), and he also argues that 'commodities. . .are the primary currency of middle-class life' (*ibid*.: 31).

For IT professionals, as members of the new-rich, middle class in Chennai, consumption—especially in housing and children's education—obviously is important for their class status (Lakha 1999), but it does not define the 'primary currency', which is rather educational qualifications and professional employment. Moreover and more significantly—although Shoaib is perhaps an exception—our informants' middle-class status is mostly felt to be secure and is rarely perceived as precarious or unstable. This contrasts with the situation of the white-collar workers in Mumbai discussed by Leela

described by the ethnographers in Davis (2000), or indeed to the rampant materialism found among the Chinese urban middle class (Rosen 2004). In China, economic liberalisation and the emergence of a market in consumer goods meant that the party-state, now promoting money-making entrepreneurship, also drastically reduced its control over all aspects of its citizens' lives, so that people could now establish new, freer forms of social relationship with each other, often mediated by patterns of consumption. But no such revolutionary transformation has accompanied economic liberalisation in India, of course, because the government never exerted so much control over people's daily lives.

Fernandes, who belong to a rather lower segment of the middle class and face much uncertainty owing to the restructuring of the city's labour market. Among these people, a contradiction exists between economic uncertainty and their 'aspirations' towards 'prosperity and consumption that characterize images of the "new" middle class dream in liberalizing India' (Fernandes 2000: 103). IT professionals do not have to deal with this contradiction, which is probably one main reason why none of them appears anxiously preoccupied by consumption as a signifier of status.

Career Trajectories and Ambitions

Sampath disparagingly compared the IT industry's career structure with the stabler one in manufacturing companies, although he also commented that young people in general change jobs a lot nowadays. Another senior Chakra manager summed it up well: in the past, people worked to achieve 'benchmarks', government jobs were preferred, and a 'monthly salary was looked upon as a great thing', whereas it no longer is. Or, as Viswanathan, a retired manager who worked in the public-sector Rourkela steel plant in Orissa for 32 years, put it—partly commenting on his own son, who used to work in ICS—young people today change jobs 'every two years' and move up the ladder each time. In his day, government jobs were the route to a 'settled life', but now they pay relatively badly, today's 'working culture' is more impatient and nobody just wants to 'count their yearly increment'.

In IT companies like ICS, staff who do well can expect rapid promotion and salary increases. Managerial hierarchies are flatter in IT companies than in manufacturing ones, which are more like the bureaucratic hierarchies of government and public-sector organisations with systems of promotion by seniority and age-related salary scales. Moving between companies, especially in junior and middle-management grades, is fairly common in both sectors, although movement from manufacturing to IT occurs more often than the reverse. In the IT sector, too, people constantly talk about moving and they can change jobs quite easily if they want to, so that all IT firms are very concerned about 'attrition rates' and retention of high-quality staff.[11]

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[11] According to a senior executive in Infosys, its annual 'attrition rate' of employees leaving the company was 7 per cent in 2003, which was claimed to be low for the software industry; see R. Sukumar, 'The Infosys Effect', *Business Today*, 14 September

Yet despite the differences between old and new industries, and between older and younger people, our evidence shows that hopping from job to job is less prevalent in the IT sector than Sampath or Viswanathan—or gossiping IT professionals—suppose and that, even when it does occur, money or promotion is not necessarily the main issue. Thus among the more senior ICS professionals we know, at least half have spent all or most of their working lives in ICS, and some IT professionals insist that staying in one company is actually the best career strategy. Among their peers, Ramakrishna and Balaram, repeatedly moving between firms primarily for career and financial advancement, are actually unusual rather than typical.

Among staff in ICS, whether they have been changing jobs or not, levels of career-minded ambition are variable. Software engineering does not demand exceptional ability, as some experienced people acknowledge; Shoaib was not the only person to claim that any school-leaver with reasonable intelligence could learn to do the job. He was exaggerating, but we have met several IT professionals who are bored because their work is too easy, and it is widely recognised that seriously ambitious people may have to move into new fields: for example, by taking an MBA degree so that they can apply for a range of top managerial positions. None of our informants in ICS has actually done this, but some, such as Raghu, talk about it as a possibility and about the limitations of a career as a software engineer. Quite a lot of people, though, are not especially ambitious; Shoaib, for example, does not want to go abroad again, which will probably slow his future advancement, and another man expressed his desire to move to a 'low-pressure' job eventually. Attitudes, moreover, are influenced by gender and, although Anuradha and some other women in the IT industry do refer to their sense of empowerment, career ambitiousness is certainly commoner among men than women.

Women in the IT Industry

As mentioned above, approximately one-fifth of ICS's new recruits are women (almost the same proportion as the Indian IT professional workforce as a whole) and the absence of 'gender bias' in the sector has

2003, pp. 56–60. A senior ICS manager told us that there is 'severe competition' for trained, talented staff and an 'incredible level of poaching' between companies, although our own material suggests that he was probably exaggerating.

been noted before (Kumar 2001: 4282–3). Almost all IT professionals in Chennai, male and female, insisted to us that both sexes have equal technical skills, although women are sometimes said to make better managers. On the technical side, therefore, the make-up and leadership of project teams is unaffected by gender considerations (cf. Arun and Arun 2002: 45). This is consistent with evidence that in India men are not thought to be better than women at mathematics, science and technology (Mukhopadhyay 2004: 476, 481; Subrahmanyan 1998: 90) and, in relation to gender, the Indian IT industry contrasts with its counterparts in Europe and America. Sarojini and Parvati joked about the minority of young men in ICS who are fixated on their computers, but in an English software company where she did ethnographic research, Ruth Woodfield found that such fixation was commonplace and contributed to the fact that women in the company 'reported a double bind whereby they were either deemed adequately feminine but. . .inadequate computer scientists' or vice versa (2000: 95). More generally, Woodfield concluded that 'the degree to which skills were defined, recognised and assessed was more dependent on the sex of individual workers than on the explicitly stated business requirements of the organisation' (*ibid*.: 146) and she cites a range of sources showing that her conclusions hold more generally for companies in the west.

Female software engineers in Chennai, however, are not thought to be inadequately feminine by anybody. The significant difference between men and women that exists in ICS and other Indian IT companies has to do, not with technical skills, but with attitudes to the family (cf. Fuller and Narasimhan n.d.). Married women professionals consistently give their families higher priority than their work; among the unmarried ones, who all assume that they will get married eventually, some talk about the importance of families in the same way as married colleagues, whereas others—thinking at this stage about possible partners—stress that they will insist on a husband who allows them to continue working. All single women, however, want to choose whether to continue to work, whereas many men want non-working, 'home-loving' wives. Hence both men and women commonly say that female IT professionals prefer husbands who are also in the industry, but males tend to prefer wives who are not.[12] Some single

[12] One leading IT company has reportedly started an in-house, online matrimonial service to encourage its staff to marry each other and thereby reduce the number of married women who resign to live with husbands working elsewhere.

women plainly express their career ambition and most people assume that numerous women will become senior managers in ICS fairly soon. However, it is impossible to predict whether today's young, ambitious women will, in future, actually give their work a higher priority vis-à-vis the family. At present, even women who feel empowered as software professionals and continue to work after marriage and childbirth invariably regard their responsibilities to their husbands, children, parents and other close kin as most important. Hence all IT companies have to institute fairly flexible work regimes that do (or should) allow women to come to the office late or leave early, or take time off to deal with these responsibilities. Furthermore, because men know that women place families first and also believe that this is right, they do not criticise women for their sense of priorities.

For some women like Anuradha, whose childcare arrangements are assured, working for ICS is compatible with her family obligations, whereas for others like Jayashree, partly because of her childcare problems, it was not. Major companies like ICS actually have mixed reputations for their attitudes to women, and some women interviewed in a small software company claimed that their male boss was more understanding about their needs than any manager in a big organisation could be. On the other hand, the managers of two other small companies—one male and one female—both admitted to reluctance about recruiting women, precisely because their family duties take them away from work, which small businesses cannot afford. Nevertheless, all IT companies in Chennai must recognise the differences between women's and men's acknowledged family responsibilities in order to operate successfully. In that respect, they differ from western IT companies, such as those in Boston discussed by Uma Devi (2002), whose Indian female professionals found it hard to cope with the assumption that an ideal worker has no family, although this conversely tended to benefit Indian men who were able to rely on total domestic support from their wives.

As already implied, a common stereotype about IT professionals concerns their alleged sexual misconduct. This is plainly related to suspiciousness about the moral conduct of young, independent women working long and late hours alongside men, which is a source of great anxiety for many of these women's parents. As is very common in India, parents particularly worry that their daughters may acquire a bad reputation, so that their marriage prospects will be seriously damaged. As far as we can tell, love affairs between young, single people working together in the same office or on project

teams are not unusual, especially on overseas assignments. Some relationships lead to marriage, as Sarojini hopes hers will, and this is most probable when the couple belong to the same caste and would anyway be suitable partners for an arranged marriage. Nonetheless, conventional, arranged marriages are definitely the norm. Some men say that single women are 'hard to catch' and refuse advances from male colleagues precisely because they feel empowered at work. Very like some educated, middle-class women in Bhubaneswar (Seymour 1999: 213–14), women IT professionals in Chennai, who know their value as potential partners, also tend to be confident that their parents will find them good husbands, so that in practice they mostly favour arranged marriage, despite an ideal preference for love marriage; furthermore, they know that life after a love marriage without support from both parents and parents-in-law will be very hard. For men, it may be slightly less hard, but for most of them, too, arranged marriage is actually the better option. In Chennai's IT industry, therefore, love marriage is rarer than outsiders often suppose, and in general most IT professionals appear to have conventional middle-class marriages and family lives.

Plainly, the IT industry has not revolutionised the position of Indian women. Yet comparison with Patricia Caplan's ethnography (1985) suggests that real change has occurred (cf. Arun and Arun 2002). In 1974–5, Caplan studied upper-middle-class women in Chennai and found, for example, that for most of them, 'employment outside the home is not considered at all desirable' (*ibid*.: 85) and, of those who did work, all in professional occupations, only half were or had been married (*ibid*.: 88). When at work, professional women faced numerous difficulties, especially in relationships with male colleagues and because of innuendoes about their supposed sexual immorality (*ibid*.: 91–2). A preference for 'home-loving' wives who do not go out to work after marriage is still common, as we have said, but there is no longer any objection to single working women. Unlike Caplan's informants, ours have also complained only rarely about their male colleagues' behaviour or about sexual harassment (which is still common in many workplaces). Moreover, companies like ICS do not underpay or exploit women, and they give many young women software engineers a felt equality with men and a sense of empowerment— or 'individual autonomy' (Harriss 2003: 333)—which, as they themselves stress, many women, not least their own mothers, have never had. This empowerment is not trivial; in particular, young women IT professionals appear to command greater respect and have

more bargaining power within their families—particularly over their own marriages—than women before them have had. Further, partly because they bring so much money home, women living with their husband's families can better resist exploitative demands from their mothers-in-law, and that is a genuine social change.

Economic Security and Attitudes Towards the State

One key reason why young people are unimpressed by safe monthly salaries and annual increments is that they just do not fear unemployment and poverty like many of their parents did at a similar age. Everyone knows, of course, that the IT sector is particularly prone to global economic cycles. Nonetheless, it is also widely believed, especially but not only by young people, that the Indian IT industry— as well as profitable companies in manufacturing industry—has a bright, long-term future in an environment of irreversible economic liberalisation and globalisation. Hence workers in these industries can be confident about their own futures, even if they must sometimes change or even lose their jobs during recessions. Within India, this optimism is probably confined to people working in the most expansive sectors of the economy, who do not include 'restructured' white-collar staff in Mumbai (Fernandes 2000); today's confidence also contrasts sharply with the 'near siege mentality' found among Chennai's middle class in the 1970s, when employment opportunities were so scarce (L. Caplan 1987: 92). Conversely, it interestingly resembles the 'new confidence' that developed among Japanese 'salary men' in the 1960s; in 1959, they 'were worried about economic stability [and] there was a sense that daily livelihood was precarious', whereas by 1969 confidence in Japan's economic prospects meant that 'anxiety about material welfare has almost disappeared' (Vogel 1971: 272).

Most younger people we have interviewed have fathers (and occasionally mothers) who are or were employed in professional or managerial positions in government, or public- or private-sector firms, and the only exceptional fathers are a few small businessmen or farmers. The younger generation's confidence in the future also means, of course, that they are confident about their middle-class status, unlike the more anxious people studied by Fernandes in Mumbai, Mankekar in Delhi and Liechty in Kathmandu. So far at least, this has not led to the self-questioning that arose in Japan's

newly prosperous middle class when, for example, many young men said that they hoped for a more interesting life than becoming salary men (Vogel 1971: 274). On the other hand, younger middle-class people in Chennai are notably less preoccupied than their elders have been with saving for the future and less willing to wait to buy property and consumer goods. Often using loans, young professionals buy apartments or houses much earlier than their parents did, so that people even say that housing now comes before children, which it never did in the past. Raghu contrasted his own spending pattern with his father's, and when Ramakrishna described himself as living for the present, whereas his father lived for the future, he may have been exaggerating, but he did highlight a real difference between the generations about deferring material gratification.

Linked to the younger generation's confidence is total disdain for government and public-sector employment; the majority of young people in ICS, Chakra and other private companies never even considered such jobs, except under pressure from their parents, and the minority—like Ravi and Shoaib—who were offered them turned them down. One ICS assistant manager even rejected a post in the prestigious Indian Space Research Organisation, because it would have been unchallenging and monotonous. Since the late 1990s, the state sector has been encouraging early retirement and recruiting new personnel at a very low rate. Nevertheless, much more salient is the assumption that low salaries, bureaucratic hierarchies and stifling conservatism characterise these jobs, and given their sense of economic and occupational security, younger people see no point in 'safe' employment with the state (cf. Fernandes 2000: 92).

For Brahmans and other Forward Castes, the reservations policy is also relevant. In Tamilnadu, 68 per cent of state-sector posts and college seats are reserved for the Other Backward Classes and Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and many people say that this is why many private companies employ a lot of Brahmans. Yet reservations alone cannot fully explain upper-caste predominance in IT companies. One important factor is that Brahmans in particular are nowadays an increasingly urban population, who are more likely than others to have the social skills and cultural knowledge, including fluency in English, needed to work in global IT companies and to pass their selection tests in the first place.

The notion that Brahmans have a special aptitude for software owing to their traditional learning in abstract religion is fanciful, even if it

is propounded by business commentators such as Das (2002: xvii), as well as many Tamil Brahmans themselves. Nonetheless, the high value that Brahmans give to education, notably in mathematics and science, and their position as the best-educated community in Tamilnadu are undoubtedly important (Fuller 1999: 34–5; Subrahmanyan 1998: 67, 88). In the early 1990s, Béteille analysed the role of the family and education in reproducing class inequality, observing that middle-class parents 'take an increasingly active part in their [children's] education and training. [They] have become increasingly career conscious, and this consciousness is implanted in their children at a young age' (1991: 17). This is still truer today and—even more than in the 1970s, when Lionel Caplan studied attitudes towards education among middle-class Christians in Chennai (1987: 62–6)—all middle-class children, encouraged and pressurised by their parents, know that they must strive to gain the best possible examination marks. Brahman and Forward Caste children, however, also know that they must secure exceptionally high examination marks to get into the best engineering and other professional colleges, where many seats are reserved. Because ICS allows only candidates with consistently high marks to apply for posts, its selection policy in practice favours Forward Caste candidates who, from a tender age, have been motivated to achieve repeated scholastic success. In fact, Forward Caste and especially Brahman beliefs about their unique need for very high marks are exaggerated.[13] Nevertheless, they have a real impact, so that caste significantly affects how strongly children are socialised into their education-oriented career consciousness, which is in turn salient for the higher castes' over-representation in the professional middle class.

Our informants' disdain for government and public-sector employment raises the question of their attitude to the Indian nation-state. Satish Deshpande claims that the middle class—especially its

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[13] Figures for 2004 show that the 'cut-off marks' needed for admission to the top engineering colleges are now not very much higher for the Forward Castes than for others. Thus, for example, for the most competitive degree course—electronics and communication at the top-ranking Anna University—these marks were 293.28 (out of 300) for Forward Caste candidates, and 290.57, 283.67 and 276.13 for Backward, Most Backward and Scheduled Castes respectively. The relative variation in cut-off marks was very similar for less competitive engineering courses (and highly competitive medical colleges). See 'Tamil Nadu: Uncertainty continues in admissions', *Hindu*, 27 April 2005.

upper, managerial-professional segment—is the principal beneficiary of globalisation, and that 'much of the celebratory rhetoric about [it] emanates from, and is aimed at, this group' (2003: 150). Our evidence largely confirms this; all IT professionals strongly support economic liberalisation and India's integration into the global economy (cf. Upadhya 2004), and so too do many manufacturing company managers, although enthusiasm is less in businesses that relied on the old regulated economy (Harriss 2003: 339–40). Those who gain from expansion of the market economy can be expected to support it, of course, but Deshpande also argues that the managerial-professional middle class formerly identified with Nehruvian development and, as globalisation has displaced it, any commitment to the Indian nation has faded away (2003: 150).

As Deshpande (*ibid*.: 147) admits, however, little empirical evidence exists about middle-class commitment to the 'Nehruvian enterprise', notwithstanding the alliance between the state and industrial capitalists (and other dominant classes), which has been identified as critical by political economists. In the 1960s, however, Béteille (1969) pointed out that high-ranking administrators and professional intellectuals advising the government and its Planning Commission—the core of committed Nehruvians—were a different social group, with different interests, from other 'elite' sections, including business executives in private companies. Interestingly, some of our older informants did speak positively about public-sector employment in the past. Visvanathan, for instance, reminisced about his long career in Rourkela with colleagues from all over India in something akin to the Nehruvian style discussed for the Bhilai steel plant by Jonathan Parry (2003: 221–3). Several retired bank officers also explained how bank nationalisation in 1969, partly because it led to many more staff transfers between regions, positively enhanced a sense of commitment to national development. Yet older people do not expect the younger generation, including their own children, to want to work for the state, rather than better-run and better-paying private companies. In itself, though, this does not amount to retreat from Nehruvian ideas of progress, let alone from any patriotic commitment. Many older informants, including those who worked for the government, tend to insist that the state has become corrupt and no longer serves the nation and people. Moreover, everyone who favours economic liberalisation and globalisation also argues that they are the best means to national economic development and prosperity, which the bureaucratic state and the old 'permit raj' failed to deliver.

Emigration and Reverse Migration

Attitudes to India and the nation-state are also highlighted by the question of migration abroad, which Sampath blamed on 'peer pressure' and many people in Chennai describe as a middle-class 'craze' or 'obsession'. It is also commonly said that people mainly want to work in IT so that they can go abroad, primarily to America. Even in the early 1980s, though, among the upper-middle-class people studied by P. Caplan, 'there [was] scarcely a family that does not have a close relative who has migrated [abroad]' (1985: 58) and in fact, as some informants recognise, the migration 'craze' long predates IT. Thus another senior Chakra manager said that in the 1960s, when he graduated from engineering college, the 'US craze' already existed and half his friends emigrated.

Yet the IT industry has brought about an important change. In traditional engineering, as in many other professions, Indians who obtained jobs in foreign countries—often after higher studies there— tended to become Non-resident Indians (NRIs) living overseas on a long-term or permanent basis. Of course, this was not always true, but well-qualified software engineers still have comparatively greater freedom, because—as ICS professionals illustrate—they can join global IT companies either in India or abroad, work on overseas on-site assignments for shorter or longer periods, go abroad to earn a lot of money for a few years before returning home and, in general, move in and out of India in a way that was uncommon in the past. The IT industry certainly is a route for permanent emigration, but it also enables considerable temporary emigration and reverse migration back to India.

In discussing Bangalore as a post-nationalist city, Sunil Khilnani refers to a new professional class with 'a secessionist understanding of the idea of India' (1998: 148). Bangalore incarnates an image of modernity and an idea of India 'at sharp variance with Nehru's one', and 'to the young MBA or software expert in Bangalore, India is merely one stopping place in a global employment market' (*ibid*.: 149). Khilnani cites no hard evidence for the latter claim, although Annalee Saxenian (2000: 265) reports that software companies in Bangalore in the 1990s had high staff turnovers, 'primarily because so many workers jump at the first opportunity to emigrate'. Saxenian, whose research focused on Indian and Chinese IT professionals in Silicon Valley, says that although the 'brain drain' from India to America continued throughout the 1990s, 'a younger generation of Indian

engineers now expresses a desire to return home, which distinguishes them from many of their predecessors' (*ibid*.: 267).[14] Plainly, as most of our informants acknowledge, a lot of talk about reverse migration is still just talk; nonetheless, it is a real phenomenon that is almost certainly growing. Moreover, it does not correspond at all to Khilnani's concept of India as merely a stopping place, nor to the notion that IT professionals form a transnational class for whom attachments to particular localities no longer matter. Several of the ICS staff discussed above—Ravi, Balaram, Anuradha and Jayashree, who are not unusual—worked overseas before choosing to return to Chennai, and we (with John Harriss) have also collected some data in three small, independent software companies founded by men who worked for several years abroad, mainly in the US, before coming back home.

One consistent theme in all middle-class talk about overseas migration, from India or back to it, is the care of elderly parents, although for people with children their upbringing and education are usually prominent as well. Many middle-class people in Chennai insist that nowadays everyone has family members abroad. Chennai, consequently, is said to be full of lonely old folk whose sons and daughters send them dollars, but only ever come on short visits, whereas other older people are continually visiting their offspring, so that they end up as bored, exploited childminders marooned in American suburbia under 'house arrest', to quote one elderly grandfather.

All the talk about lonely old parents implies, as one informant specifically said, that overseas migration damages the proper reciprocal relationship between parents and children in a way that migration within India does not. Grown-up children resident overseas can provide money, but, however well-meaning they are, they cannot provide the personal care for aged parents that is part of an Indian's traditional filial duty, so that emigration decisively undermines parent-child reciprocity within the family.[15] In reality, children living

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[14] Statistics from the 1990s and forward projections are not easy to interpret, but they do suggest that a rise in both the outflow of IT workers and their return could simultaneously occur (Kumar 2001: 4284–5).

[15] Chennai middle-class people, like other Indians including the Bengali villagers described by Sarah Lamb, understand 'family relations as entailing long-term bonds of reciprocal indebtedness', and the primary reason why adult children should care for their aged parents is to repay 'the tremendous debts owed for producing and caring for them in infancy and childhood' (Lamb 2000: 46). With some modifications—for example, that migration overseas, rather than to cities, is a problem

in distant cities in India cannot provide personal care either, and modern communications may mean that émigré children today keep in closer touch with family members in Chennai than their predecessors could do, whether they lived far away in India or overseas. Yet the move abroad is seen as a potentially sharper break, because it could not only destroy reciprocity between parents and adult children more decisively, it could also totally detach a new generation of children born and raised in foreign countries from their kin networks in India.

Older people with some or all of their children and grandchildren now resident overseas generally recognise that they face a new and serious problem, and many, though not all, are realistic enough to accept that they have to deal with it by reorganising their relationships with all their adult children. Because children working abroad normally return for only occasional short visits, older people believe that they should go and stay with them for extended periods, despite boredom and 'house arrest'. During these visits, they can look after their grandchildren, which is generally seen as a valuable contribution, and perhaps teach them some religious traditions, which helps to counteract the corroding materialism of western society. However, if there are also grandchildren in Chennai, foreign visits disrupt their childcare arrangements. Because working couples in the city commonly rely heavily on their parents for help with childcare, the travel plans of both sets of parents become critical to their own domestic arrangements and may in turn cause tensions between siblings and affines. Then sensitive inter-family negotiations are often imperative and are made worse if elderly people—rather like their peers in Calcutta (Donner 2005: 121–4)—resent being exploited as hard-working childminders when they had looked forward to a peaceful retirement.

As already mentioned, many professional emigrants have left India permanently to join the NRI population. Today's IT professionals, however, may choose not to follow them. Talk about migration is always also about career opportunities and living standards, and many people in the IT sector—much more so than in manufacturing— now insist that the conditions of life and work in Chennai are improving so rapidly that the relative attraction of foreign countries,

(ibid.: 91–2)—complaints about 'the degenerate ways of modern society' (ibid.: 88) and their effect on care of the elderly are very similar in Chennai and the Bengali village.

notably America, is declining.[16] Current US policy on immigration and visas is, of course, one major factor. More significant, though, is the conviction that the IT industry's evolution will ensure that the amount of high value-added work done offshore in India will steadily expand in comparison with on-site work done overseas, and we have not heard IT professionals in Chennai complain that they are cheap labour whose work is taken for granted (cf. Upadhya 2004: 5149). For men and women with the skills needed by large companies like ICS, or by the numerous small ones that have carved out their own niche in the software sector, the further development of the global IT industry does not require them to treat Chennai or Bangalore as way stations en route to foreign countries. In fact, almost the opposite is true; IT professionals need not choose, once and for all, between being resident and non-resident Indians, because they can fairly easily go away and then return. Furthermore, at least in their own eyes, they are not selfish materialists with a secessionist understanding of India, but modern professionals whose well-paid work in a new global industry enables them to lead better lives with their own families according to their own traditions in their own country. They are not Nehruvian nationalists, but, perhaps paradoxically, the professionals who are crucially responsible for building a global economy based on information technology may become more committed to living their lives in India than many of their predecessors in India's aspirational middle class.

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[16] Katherine Boo's *New Yorker* essay (2004) is mainly about an unusual BPO company run by two Americans and her claim that Chennai is being 'Americanized' is misleading. Nonetheless, especially in her portrayal of Harish, Boo captures very well the sense of confidence in rapid change found among IT workers, and she is also perceptive about the growing contrasts between rich and poor, and old and new, which have recently sharpened in the city.

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