

**Cosmo-coolies? Achievement oriented border passing among Indian IT professionals working  
on-site in Belgium**

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the multi-layered experiences of mobility of Indian IT professionals. As a leading theme of their boundless careers, three forms of mobility - geographic, social and existential respectively - as defined by D’Mello and Sahay (2007; 2008) come to the fore. In popular discourse Indian IT professionals are often depicted as ‘coolies.’ This anthropological article discusses the self-perception and dynamics of being on-site based on probing interviews conducted with Indian IT professionals on-site in Belgium. In the new capitalistic economy, which can be framed as “light and volatile” (Bauman, 2000, p. 153), their diasporic experiences demonstrate how Indian IT professionals on-site – tagged as knowledge workers or highly-skilled migrants in Western policy discourse – deal with feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. In this article it will be argued that being on-site implies multiple liminal positions, illustrated by two case studies.

**Keywords:** highly-skilled migration, occupational mobility, Indian IT professionals

## **Cosmo-coolies? Achievement-Oriented Border Passing Among Indian IT Professionals Working On-Site in Belgium**

Continental Europe is gaining importance as a new market to cultivate by outsourcing companies. Since the financial crisis, it is gaining importance as a valuable opportunity to explore as companies look for diversification in an attempt to reduce the dependency on USA-based clients. As India's comparative advantage lies in its abundance of qualified software engineers, Indian information technology (IT) professionals became a common concept in the corporate world in continental Europe as well, which has to deal with the challenge of an aging population. However, the presence of Indian IT professionals who do more than simply work offshore has more than economic consequences. It is also a tangible, socio-cultural reality. Mainly centered in the United States and the United Kingdom, this new Indian diaspora is the theme of this article on Indian IT professionals in Belgium, promoted as the gateway to Europe.

This paper first presents a brief overview of the discussion regarding highly-skilled migration, the methodology of this anthropological research and mobility as a leading theme to analyze the narrative data. The second section deals with the economic and political opportunity structure wherein the mobility of Indian IT professionals is embedded. This section contains a special focus on the supportive policy towards highly-skilled migration in Belgium. The third section elaborates on the class resources of the Indian IT professionals which can be defined as "motility capital", explained by Kaufmann and Montulet (2008) as the potential for movement. Briefly this entails the cultivation of soft skills as well as cognitive or hard skills. The flexibility of class resources to become mobile resources will be addressed as well as the urge to update and upgrade oneself in order to retain value in the volatile, global, labor market. A last section will deal with the multiple liminalities experienced on-site by Indian IT professionals. They oscillate between ambiguous identities that are traditionally Indian and a Westernized global professionalism. As an illustration of introduced concepts such as geographical, social and existential mobility, motility capital and experiences of liminality, two narrative case studies concerning Indian IT professionals and their spouses on-site in Belgium will be presented.

## **Mobility at Work: The Meaning of Being On-site in Terms of Mobility**

### **Highly-skilled migration.**

In Europe the demand for workers in certain sectors of the labor market is increasing and Asia has seemingly become an important source for this European enterprise. The information and communications technologies (ICT) sector is a good example where the need for specific categories of migrant labor is felt. Indian IT professionals equipped with skills that are demanded on an international level have therefore become a prototypical example of highly-skilled migration. The literature on highly-skilled migration deals extensively with the effects in terms of gain or loss for the exporting country. Regarding the mobility of academics, scientists and engineers many publications question whether this flow implies a brain drain or brain gain. Especially in the debate on migration and development the question stated above constitutes a leading theme (Wets, 2004). Taking the case study of India into account, the focus lies mainly on the positive externalities, remittances, brain exchange, brain circulation or reverse brain drain, and the returning diaspora (Khadria, 2001; 2002; Saxenian, 2002b; Commander et al. 2004; Sahay 2007; Kumar, 2008). The absolute number of more than one million skilled Indian migrants working abroad might be misleading. According to Docquier and Marfouk (2006, p. 166) India has a low emigration rate at 4.3 percent of the total, educated, labor force. According to the authors Beine, Docquier and Rapoport (2008) India is one of the winning countries with a positive emigration rate of 0.3 percent, meaning that the emigration of highly-skilled laborers fosters investments in education at home.

The brain drain debate regarding IT professionals from India becomes overshadowed by the transnational public debate over the outsourcing of white collar jobs to India and this especially in the USA (Chakravarty, 2006). The H1-B visa needed in the USA for seconded employees is a highly politicized controversy. It is generally accepted to recruit internationally to fill internal vacancies; however, the use of work permit arrangements can be deployed to support client-oriented interests such as cost cutting.

The opportunity structure wherein skilled migration emerges as a possibility is often regulated by the economic principle of demand and supply; however, this trend should be supported on the

policy level to be successful. In order to stay competitive in the global market, national and supra-national policy seems to be in favor of knowledge workers in the so-called 'war for talent'. In this article this macro-perspective will not be discussed but the focus rather lies on the individual actors of skilled migration flows. Professional careers and personal lives are shaped under the pressures of the global labor market, which implies a higher grade of mobility. It is a challenge for the agents of those processes to adjust time and again to the new living context and oscillate between their own identity and new socio-cultural environment. These on-site Indian knowledge workers perform outsourcing work at the clients' facilities and not directly from facilities in India. Indian IT professionals in Belgium are either intra-company transferees of a transnational corporation (TNC), employees hired directly by a Belgian subsidiary or company, or they are seconded by a foreign company such as an Indian or American multinational service provider to work for the client on-site. The Indian IT professionals in Belgium come from different regions of India. They share the common experience of arriving in Belgium by chance rather than by choice. Instead of the specific locality the job assignment as such has lead them abroad.

### **Methodology.**

The on-site Indian knowledge workers perform outsourcing work at the facilities of the client's locality and not directly from the facilities in India. This article is concerned with the experiences of on-site Indian IT professionals and discusses as well the self-perception and dynamics of being on-site based on probing interviews conducted with on-site Indian IT professionals in Belgium. To achieve this, a qualitative approach has been followed. To obtain an empirical insight into the questions addressed, 40 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with on-site Indian IT professionals were conducted. In addition participant observation was conducted in formal and informal networking parties by spending time in communities of Indians in Belgium in the social networking site Orkut, 'being there' and spending time online, commuting in the bus together to the workplace and back and visiting the homes of Indian IT professionals and their families or roommates. The respondents were recruited through snowball sampling. Getting in touch with the target group was established through different gateways or key figures, e.g. through friends or friends of friends of

Belgian IT professionals working with temporary Indian colleagues or through different forums such as the social networking site Orkut or the Indian Student Association in Leuven, Belgium and the Indian Embassy in Belgium. These networks were particularly helpful in gaining contacts with the highly ephemeral community of Indian IT professionals in Belgium (Roos, 2009).

The face-to-face interviews lasted between two to four hours and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were usually conducted at home or in the office of the Indian knowledge worker but sometimes in a public place such as a fast-food restaurant and were followed up through email when necessary. A topic list was used to collect information on the educational and socio-cultural background, the actual career path and aspirations, the expectations for coming abroad, the experience of living and working on-site and the interaction with the local population and other Indian country fellowmen. The interviews were analyzed according to those themes wherein different forms of mobility could be distinguished.

#### **Multi-layered experiences of mobility.**

Since Indians have moved into the globalized world, mobility has taken different routes and avenues. The virtual mobility of work mediated by ICTs is not only involved in the dynamic process of outsourcing. D'Mello and Sahay (2007; 2008) make a distinction between three intersecting mobilities: geographical, social and existential. These mobilities are a leading theme in the conducted interviews and especially come to the fore when IT professionals work on-site. Since outsourcing is not only performed in electronic places or offshore, it implies a geographic move to the client's on-site facilities.

With geographical mobility the authors D'Mello and Sahay (2007; 2008) refer to physical shifts of various sorts across space and place. The classical countries of immigration such as the USA, Canada and Australia attract many Indian IT professionals, respectively described by Saxenian (2002a), Walton-Roberts (2003), and Voigt-Graf (2004) or Xiang (2007). Although Europe is India's second largest market for IT services, it accounts for only 31 percent of India's IT exports. In comparison the USA accounts for 60 percent. The 12 percent share that continental Europe holds is quite modest in comparison with the UK's dominant share of 19 percent (Aghi, 2009). Due to the

rather limited economic interest of continental Europe to outsource non-core business to India, few Indian IT professionals have had the chance to work for an extended period in one of the continental Member States of the European Union. Therefore Europe remains largely unknown to Indian professionals.

Travel to so-called 'exotic places' such as Paris, Italy and Switzerland enhances cultural capital but also a stronger social status, which implies social mobility as well. By 'social mobility' is meant the ability to move across a network of social relations such as from a caste to a class hierarchy, to shift up and down the corporate hierarchy, and to move across groups such as work teams and on-site social spaces. Being on-site not only yields physical capital in terms of money but also provides access to status-related, consumer goods, which leads to a higher social position in the community. Branded, consumer goods such as electronic products, investments in real estate at home in India or even supporting the marriage of the sister(s) express a certain status.

In addition to geographical and social mobility D'Mello and Sahay (2007; 2008) take note of a different modality of existential mobility. They define existential mobility as "the thoughts, feelings and responses of the IT worker that relate to their experiences of fears and hopes, insecurities and successes primarily in relation to shifts in career trajectories and work contexts" (D'Mello and Sahay, 2007, p. 179). The description of the authors of these interrelated mobilities can be deployed on the situation of Indian IT professionals on-site. Later it will be described how those multiple mobilities imply immobility as well, as will be demonstrated by the multiple liminalities that especially come to the fore on-site. Highly mobile career trajectories of IT workers show certain phases of in-betweenness, which will be addressed below.

### **IT sector stands for upward mobility.**

In general, interviewees talk about being an IT professional as a necessity rather than as a personal choice. To study engineering and to get into the IT sector is perceived as the main route for upward mobility by the Indian middle class. Nilekani, former co-chairman of Infosys Technologies Ltd and current chairman of the new Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), states, "Over the last few decades, Indians embraced the ideas of education, entrepreneurship, globalization and

urbanization because they saw them as keys to a better life” (Nilekani, 2008, p. 479). The dream of achieving a top job and “being settled in life” by the age of 30 is nourished by the idea to make immediate family members, close and distant relatives and friends proud of them. The hunger for job security and financial stability drives many to study engineering and, later, to work for one of the top information and technology companies, which are highly reputable and give the employees working for them a degree of social status and prestige in their community. Career choices are largely determined by market conditions, which determine study interests and international professional career prospects. Although some software engineers express interest in other fields such as sports and trade or finance, the high remuneration with international work experience continues to make the sector attractive and is often understood as the most evident way to earn a living. One on-site software engineer with a background in Mechanical Engineering and a passion for old cars and motorbikes tells how he ended up in Belgium:

I hesitated over a proposal to go to Japan, that I missed the application deadline. However, the next day I got a call from my manager that there was an offer in Belgium. There was a friend in the office besides me, he said: “Stop thinking, just say yes!” And I said: “OK”. Then I went to check the Google webpage and saw where was Belgium!

Knowledge work is highly globalized. Work processes are highly differentiated or, in the words of Bauman (2000), liquefied. In this way an international division of labor is constructed. In this context Beck (2000, p. 75) speaks about a new type of high-tech, nomadic workers in the new, digital economy. Team members are dispersed over the world and form one virtual team. Work is migrating; however, in some cases there is a need for a physical presence to establish an interface between the business and the team, to sell work to India or, for example, for security reasons it is preferable that some work is performed on-site rather than offshore. Depending upon the allocation of projects to Indian IT professionals in India, there is a chance that at some point in their career they get the opportunity to work on-site. The locality and duration of the stay depends upon the customer; however, going on-site is part and parcel of being an IT professional in India. Therefore it is frequently stated by on-site junior software engineers that:

You have to go abroad otherwise there is something wrong either with you or the company you work for. Of course the parents are proud; they can boast about it in their

community. It is better that you can go to Western countries than to other Asian countries like China or Malaysia. The more you can earn the better.

Indian IT professionals declare that they feel the pressure and competition to go abroad in an early stage of their career. They face social pressure from colleagues, family and friends to get the opportunity to get out of the country. Many working in IT come from different fields of engineering. Since it is difficult to find a job in their own field, which is part of the so-called 'old-economy' that pays them as well as the IT sector, they feel more attracted to the 'new economy.' Dreams of people who opted for different streams such as mechanical engineering or a degree in BTech of Instrumentation Technology have to be flexible as well, molding towards this new economy. An IT professional trained in Mechanical Engineering explains:

But then an Indian services outsource company was offering me almost double! Company X (an Indian headquartered software services and consulting company) is a brand name. It has a lot of respect in the Indian community, in India. So it is good to join such a company. I shouldn't refuse such a good offer, that is at least what my relatives and mother thought. I thought, OK, let it be, at that point of time I just wanted to make money, to stabilize my family after my father passed away and this in a legal and fast way.

The high expectations that are created by the industry, fueled by the high remunerations, sometimes fosters a feeling of disappointment. A self declared software coolie states, "We have higher expectations that the job would be more interesting because the payment is so high. I thought the job would be more challenging, but it is not. We feel a bit disappointed. So I prefer to call myself a coolie, it is just a matter of self denigration, it is not forcefully imposed on us."

People are conscious of the fact that they are not irreplaceable or indispensable and feel the pressure of the quantity of trained engineers who are equipped with the same set of skills. This makes them feel more vulnerable to implicit exploitation by the services' outsourcing companies who use them as mobile resources. The individual and collective needs of families meet the interests of the IT business. Decisions and motivations are dictated by economics and the demands of the global economy. An on-site Indian IT professional declares, "The customer wants to get the job done at less costs at a reasonable quality. They don't mind who does it. If a java coder is working on a different technology, it's not their interest. At the end of the day, the developer should serve their service."

Indian IT professionals have internalized this economic discourse and perceive themselves in economic terms of demand and supply. Business models and labor market studies are consulted to explain their situation and self-understanding and to make sense of their career path and fleeting, migration history. Personal choices or interests are subordinated to the logic of the market. An Indian IT professional testifies, “When somebody arrived in his first job and is asked to do something, he will do it no matter what it is or where it takes him. If he wants to continue, if he wants to survive, he will do it. If you say no, there are 1000 of people standing in queue to take up your job.” This is confirmed in many stories of IT professionals who were able to work on-site: “In IT we are with many, it is like with coolies in India, you can find one anywhere, anytime.” In many narratives money enters the picture when talking about career choices. IT professionals are usually the highest earners in the family. It is a path towards upward mobility and social security. “Only government employees have a pension. The same rule applies to all the other retired people: If you don’t fix some money, than you are gone. That’s why I am loyal to my parents, money matters.”

### **Embedded in an Economic and Political Opportunity Structure**

The logic of markets and the logic of nation states are often opposed to one another. Employers may favor labor migration, while nations are more reluctant (Enzinger et al. 2004; Spaan et al. 2005). It is in the current era of a global talent contest or global brain race, in which the discussion of the European blue card comes to the fore. Indian IT workers were the pioneers in the German debate over the green card (2000-2004), which would facilitate highly qualified immigration. Although this program initially did not get a massive response, it can be seen as a paradigm change in the European debate on highly-skilled migration.

#### **A supportive policy towards highly-skilled migration.**

The most common and generally agreed upon arguments used in the debate on highly-skilled migration which are: a shortage of skilled workers in particular fields such as engineering and high technology sectors and the aging population in combination with declining birth rates. Also rigid

labor markets make the import of highly-skilled people attractive in a world economy that is shifting from manufacturing to services. In the new economy the need for internationally mobile human capital is felt; therefore, national borders become more porous. The social agreement scheme<sup>1</sup> between India and Belgium, which entered into force on September 1, 2009 to address the needs of so called “international workers” can be interpreted as a landmark to acknowledge the socio-economic reality of an emerging global labor market. In general, a B work permit is required for labor migrants who come to Belgium. It is valid for one specific position with one specific employer. In principle to work legally in Belgium, two permits are needed, a work and residence permit. The work permit is valid for a maximum of 12 months and can be three times renewed up to a period of four years. After four years a single extension for another four years can be granted. The B work permit is issued on the initiative of the employer while the foreign employee is still abroad. Even though Belgium has no particular scheme for highly-skilled migration, the law has been made more flexible towards highly-skilled<sup>2</sup> migrants. In Belgium highly-skilled workers are defined in terms of minimum gross annual salary (EUR 35,638 for highly-skilled employees; EUR 59,460 for managers per annum, 2009)<sup>3</sup>. In practice, the official qualification (requirement of at least non-tertiary higher education) and experience are also taken into account by the relevant migration offices who deliver the work permits (EMN, 2007, p. 12).

The immigration formalities differ amongst the different nation states as the immigration rules are laid down in the national law of each Member State of the EU. However on a European level there have been a number of initiatives to attract highly qualified workers into the Union. To stay competitive in the knowledge economy, the European Union has accepted the idea of an EU work

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<sup>1</sup> The Belgian and Indian authorities signed a social security treaty on November 3, 2006. Generally an employee in Belgium is subject to the social security of the country in which he works. The Treaty, however, makes it possible for a Belgian employee who is posted in India to remain subject to the Belgian social security system. Similarly, an Indian citizen who is sent by the Indian employer to work in or for a company in Belgium can remain subject to the social security system of India (Vandormael, 2007, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> The term highly-skilled workers is in Belgium interpreted as follows: “Persons who have completed university education, higher education or similar education and who are employed in that capacity for a minimum salary laid down in the Royal Decree” (EMN, 2007, p. 8). In the Belgian and even EU context, the terms highly-skilled and highly-educated are considered to be inter-changeable.

<sup>3</sup> The figures for 2010 are EUR 36,355 for highly-skilled employees; EUR 60,654 for managers per annum ([www.werk.be](http://www.werk.be) accessed on 11 February 2010).

permit designed to allow economic migration. The Blue Card Directive<sup>4</sup> adopted in May 2009, which will enter into force by mid 2010, allows the employment of non-Europeans in any country within the EU. Instead of dealing with different national legislations and different visa and work permit requirements, one single permit will come into place. The card will allow workers to bring their immediate family members along. The objective of the EU Blue Card proposal is to introduce a fast-track and flexible admission procedure and favorable residence conditions for third country nationals in order to make the EU more attractive for highly qualified workers in an effort to compete with the American green card (Smets, 2009, p. 14). The card would not replace existing national systems. The individual Member States can separately decide how many blue cards they wish to grant each year. They retain the right to refuse candidates even when they meet the requirements.

A survey conducted by Laga (Lommers, 2009) concluded that regarding the employment of third country, highly-skilled workers in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Italy and Belgium, the Belgian work permit process is the fastest and the easiest with which to comply. Lommers (2009, p. 3) concludes that in Belgium the gross salary needed to be earned by the foreign, highly qualified employee is rather low. The processing time is faster than in other countries which takes generally two to three weeks in Belgium. The highly qualified employee does not need to prove previous work experience. The issuance of the work permit is not subject to a prior labor market research as in many other EU countries. A bachelor or equivalent degree is sufficient. It is not required to hire local Belgian staff. It is not required to have a legal establishment in Belgium when applying for a work permit on behalf of seconded employees.

In summary, there is a supportive opportunity structure on the national and supranational level directed towards highly-skilled migration. There is a specific policy which allows third country employees to work in Belgium and Europe. In confrontation with the day-to-day practice for applying for work permits, the experiences of those employees might differ from what policymakers had in mind. Amongst highly-skilled employees of Indian origin working with a B work permit in Belgium, the procedures are often interpreted as unclear and the bureaucracy slow. Often an interpreter is

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<sup>4</sup> Council Directive 2009/50/EC of 25 May 2009

required in the communication with the local commune because in official communication no English is used but the regional, official languages, namely, Dutch, French or German.

### **Opportunity Structure in Interaction with Class Resources Defined as Motility Capital**

Human capital plays a major role for knowledge workers. However the capital linked to their migration opportunities can be more broadly defined as “motility capital.” Kaufmann, Berman and Joye (2004, p. 750) introduce the concept of motility and describe it as “the capacity of entities (e.g. goods, information or persons) to be mobile in social and geographic space, or as the way in which entities access and appropriate the capacity for socio-spatial mobility according to their circumstances.” As already stated above, in a knowledge-driven economy, it is imperative that there is a certain policy supporting the mobility of knowledge workers. Therefore human-capital linked migrants, equipped with the required skills, are supported by national and supranational policies in order to sustain and enhance a knowledge-based economy. Three related elements are distinguished by Kaufmann et al. (2004, p. 750) and Flamm and Kaufmann (2006, p.169): The access to mobility, competence or skills needed that give access to mobility, namely, physical ability, acquired and organizational skills; cognitive appropriation. As the motility concept describes and analyzes the mobility potential of an actor, the pivotal question is what motility capital means in the case of Indian IT professionals. Two main features implying mobility are fundamental, namely, flexibility, which is seen as a job requirement in the IT sector, and human or intellectual capital in terms of formal education and skills. In this way motility capital becomes a factor of social distinction.

#### **Cultivating of soft skills such as flexibility in order to become ‘mobile resources.’**

In addition to technical know-how, flexibility is an extra skill which is required to work in the volatile IT sector. In addition to a prowess in mathematics, which is recalled in the collective memory and traced back to ancient history (see for instance Sen, 2005), the quality of flexibility is mentioned as a trademark of Indian IT professionals. This specific feature is not only a smart business marketing trick but seems to be recognized by the clients as well. According to the biographical narratives of

Indian IT professionals and the way their career trajectories are perceived, the mimetic faculty (Taussig, 1993, p. xiii) of “being like and of being Other” (Taussig, 1993, p. 129) largely explains the personal and global professional success of Indian IT professionals. The adage by which they live is: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” The qualities of being adaptable, chameleon-like and to learn hands-on are praised by family, peers and management. It is perceived as a necessity to survive in a competitive, over-populated environment like India. As one Indian consultant in Belgium says, “We are aggressive to learn.” This strategy of conforming is followed in order to climb the career ladder. A sales manager in IT states, “Our basic mindset is: it might be not very convenient to live on-site but we get a very good job, a very good salary, a very good career, a very good future. So everything revolves around that.” From IT professionals at work in Belgium to their wives who joined them, the basic line is that compromises have to be made in life: “To gain something, you have to give up something else. In your mind, it’s always a tradeoff. If you get so many good things, and something is receiving bad, you can do a tradeoff and see OK, let it be a part of it, we have already so many good things. Actually we don’t have so much time to think”.

This aptitude for flexibility and competition is supported by a culture of joint familial relations, rich cultural diversity and high population in India. Many have already encountered intercultural experiences, having to deal with different languages, religious traditions, customs and habits within India itself. According to the interviewees this prepared them to assume any assignment in India or abroad. Some ascribe these qualities to the particular culture of the state or region from which they come. For instance: Punjabis are able to live anywhere in the world, “just as potatoes do,” or Kerala has been exposed to the Western world for many years, making it easier to integrate. References are made to the colonial past and to the history of trading contacts to elucidate their compliant disposition. This historic consciousness is also prevalent in popular thought, manifested, for example, in the circulation of e-mails quoting Macaulay’s (1835) “Minute on Indian education” to create a class of English speaking Indians who could be “interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (in Young, 1957). It is also referred to in Nadeem’s (2009) article on “Macaulay’s (cyber) children,” where he makes the parallel between the colonial mimic men and

today's global workers, dependent upon western assignments. Neither the innovative, creative abilities of Indian IT professionals are highlighted by the sector, nor the clients themselves, but the ability to follow the rules of the game and gradually excel in it: "Now we are doing the same and try to beat them at their own game, we try to play better." Once taught by the British, cricket is now one of India's most highly esteemed sports. As one of the most popular sports in India, it functions as a common point of reference through which analogies are made. It functions even as a kind of collective, hidden transcript (Scott, 1990).

Indians who adopt Western culture as their own are referred to as "coconuts" (Malkani, 2006). They are brown on the outside but white on the inside. Due to their English education and upbringing, they express themselves with Western words and concepts and are inspired by Western ideas, values and standards (see Fanon, 1975). The so-called process of "coconutification," however, is perceived as a necessary step in development, without losing identification with Indian culture. Expressed through the culinary imagery of "masalafication," in the words of an Indian team lead on-site, "Our culture is very open to change and we have been embracing traditions from the other parts of the world and then spicing it up with our very own brand of masala." Indian IT professionals feel much more attuned to an international work culture and are more aware of the technological developments in the USA.

Before we came to Belgium, we adjusted to the culture of Bangalore, Mumbai, and other big cities in India. We are learning the tricks of the trade much quicker because we have to. We have to change according to the business interest, the trends, like learning skills, changing lifestyles... People are ready to change.

**Life long assignment to update and upgrade cognitive or hard skills in order to remain valuable in the volatile global labor market.**

Education - with English as the medium of instruction - is highly valued in India's middle class. The system, based upon merit, fosters competition. The ranking of colleges, institutes of learning and universities is closely followed so that one may be able to attend the most prestigious institutions. Memories of school days are not always cherished; for, to learn in India means "to sit and work," often without time for extra-curricular activities due to intensive training, coaching and tutoring classes. Nevertheless, the prevailing attitude is that learning is highly valued. Educational

choices are driven by the industry whereby a global approach is followed. Accordingly, it is often stated by Indian software engineers, “We follow the value of the market. It’s all about being of value in the global market.” This is the underlying principle that motivated a young software engineer working on-site to quit her job at one of the leading Indian software service companies in exchange for a job in a Belgian subsidiary of a TNC. This meant a decrease in salary and, since she had no intention of settling in Belgium, the question is why she left a secure and comfortable position. She explained that this enterprising behavior was an emancipatory act designed to express her dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities to climb the proverbial career ladder since the work was not adding anything to her career prospective. In the new TNC, a transfer to India at a later date would not be a problem. In addition, the exposure gained by being on-site, the experience of working with different technologies and working with several European clients, could serve as a factor in receiving a promotion upon return to India.

Already quoted above, the Indian entrepreneur and Forbes Businessman of the Year for Asia in 2007, Nandan Nilekani (2008, p. 475), states: “It is precisely India’s strength in human capital that has spurred our economic transformation since the 1980s, even as we battled daunting infrastructure challenges, capital inefficiencies and land shortages.” In India there is an overall urge to embody skills which can be exchanged and converted in the international labor market. These are primarily technical skills but soft skills like being assertive, motivated and fluent in spoken English are also prized. This means that the family insists upon making rational choices in education. Parents push the children to follow the industry. An Indian lady working as an IT consultant in Belgium states, “Parents are aware what is the latest in the market and what is most in demand. There are not so many choices in India, so you have to make money after your graduation. If you don’t make money, it’s highly populated, with less resources, you will be nowhere, so you have to be really, really focused.” The international character of English education in India is highly valued, which is the reason why many Indian parents abroad ponder whether or not to raise their children in a local school in Belgium: “The best would be if I could give my children education in India. The education would be more international.” Through a high standard of education, parents endeavor to pass on tools to protect their

children in order to counter the threats of insecurity and instability. After more than 10 years abroad, an Indian mother stated:

Here they are losing their confidence, they are becoming more like Belgians. Ambition is very less in Belgium. In India if you don't take charge of yourself, you are nowhere. You have to study, you have to be there, you have to compete. [...] We can live in any part of the world. I want that my children are equipped with that. It's not our home country, they can change the rules every moment and say: 'bye bye, go home now.'

All interviewees have earned at least a bachelor of engineering or computer sciences. Indian employees working directly for a Belgian subsidiary or involved in research and development usually have a Master's degree or conducted a PhD. In an attempt to improve their prowess in management, some pursue further studies in business administration (MBA). The fear of losing value in the global market is ubiquitous. In order to keep the value of their formal education and certificates, on-the-job training in combination with online courses and training sessions are undertaken. At the same time, it is perceived as an antidote to job insecurity and a means of securing one's own position in the volatile labor market. Often IT professionals are worried about stagnating in a job at a certain level instead of growing and assuming more responsibilities. They are afraid of a depreciation of their meticulously acquired human capital by performing jobs that may atrophy their skills. "If you want to grow in IT, you have to keep on studying what's going on in your field. Everything is changing, nothing is fixed, you have to keep on brushing up your skills all the time." Everyday a new problem can arise which makes learning and the acquisition of new skills a perpetual vocation. Indian IT professionals declare that they benefit from the strong educational structure in India. A recurring theme amongst Indian IT professionals, whether working in the industry or involved in research and development (R&D), is the high prestige attached to human capital. Their skills, acquired on their own terms in a competitive environment despite lacking a supportive infrastructure, make them feel proud as it serves as a kind of international passport, which gives them access to work abroad. Not so much as a critique on the Belgian social security system but instead as an expression of this feeling of pride, an independent consultant and worried soon-to-be father comments:

India has a very good education system in the sense that there is much more competition, and competition brings the best out of a person. If there is not so much competition, than you get relaxed and the students don't study so much and some become lazy. Here [in

Belgium] they know that they get money even when they are unemployed. People would work harder if they know that they need it to survive.

### **Multiple Liminalities: Experiences On-site**

Victor Turner (1995 [1969]), drawing upon the threefold structure of Arnold van Gennep's (2004 [1908]) rites of passage, distinguishes between a pre-liminal phase of separation, a liminal phase of transition and a post-liminal phase of incorporation or aggregation. In a liminal phase you do not belong to the society of which you were previously a part nor are you reincorporated again. A liminal stage is an ambiguous period characterized by humility, seclusion, testing and haziness (Turner, 1995). This stage of transformation is characterized by ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy. The state of liminality is often described as a period of transition and creativity, opening ways to something new. However, it is also associated with disorientation as one's sense of identity tends to dissolve. The former system of reference is no longer a natural reality. As Indian IT professionals on-site are not working any longer in an Indian socio-cultural context but are following the official calendar of the client on-site. Important Indian festival days such as *Deepavali* or regional festivals such as *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Holi* or *Dussehra*, to name a few, become normal working days. However, as these significant days are part of a collective memory, they often do not pass by completely but are more or less reduced to a networking event. The experiences of liminality of Indian IT professionals abroad are addressed below.

#### **Oscillating between ambiguous identities.**

To go abroad is always an option in India. But when it is announced that there is an opportunity, so many employees would be willing to do that. The basic reason is earning money. Another thing is to gain good exposure working outside. Belgium was not my choice. I intended to go to Singapore, I applied, and everything was ready, but at the last moment, I couldn't go to join the team there because of the wedding of my brother. Later, my manager gave me an other option to go to Belgium. The place to work on-site is not so important for me. (Indian IT professional in Brussels, March 2008)

A common theme cited by on-site IT professionals is the importance given to exposure, which adds to the glamour of the industry and the tendency to identify themselves as rooted cosmopolitans. Working on-site does not simply imply an increase in finance, but it is also a learning process in new technologies, understanding the business as a whole, accumulating cultural capital while traveling, enhancing social skills when dealing with customers and expanding the social network. In the anticipation of being exposed to a new and promising professional environment, it is an aspiration to work for large companies with transnational ties.

I wanted to switch to a bigger company because I wanted to have more exposure. You will have a chance to work at challenging projects and you will have the exposure to different kinds of systems. [...] This is one of the most lucrative careers you can have. You are well paid and get a chance to travel. You get a chance to meet and get to know different people. And you get a more global view actually.

The importance of bridging social capital for mobile professionals and the opportunity of establishing “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973) through exposure is mentioned by Amit (2007) and is also highly valued by the Indian community on-site who does not aspire to encapsulate themselves. A recent OECD study (2008) suggests that “professionals diffuse the knowledge they acquire to their home country and maintain networks, thereby facilitating continuing knowledge exchange.” The diaspora networks play a significant role in the circulation of knowledge and information while functioning at the same time as an important source of social capital, which continuously expands through the interlinking with other occupational networks. However, opportunities in the on-site workplace are often limited due to language barriers, which imply an insufficient use of information exchange and social networking.

Going abroad is a social status symbol; therefore, social pressure and competition are involved in getting the opportunity to go on-site. There are preferences in locations. To go to the East and other Asian countries is not held in as high a regard as Western countries with strong currencies. This attitude is expressed by two Indian IT consultants working as permanent employees in Belgium:

Our mentality is: You should always move ahead, to put a step forward, not going backwards. When you go forward, your family and relatives will be happy. If you would compare the GDP of China and Belgium, you would see that China is growing at a faster rate than Belgium. But they are not aware of this, they only know who is high and who is low. So we think: let’s go to European countries, to the West, so our parents can have their head high in their community!

Diplomas from reputed institutes offer the only opportunity for an upwardly mobile middle class of Indians to cross international borders. However, uncertainty surrounds the duration and place of the on-site assignment, making family planning difficult. Dreams of saving in order to create a nest egg are shattered when projects are ended early or canceled due to an economic recession, while the individual is expected to be on-site for several years. The liminal stage of Indian IT professionals abroad does not stimulate them to invest in language or other long-term courses in the country where they work. Although language is not an issue that affects the technical side of the job, not knowing the local language increases feelings of vulnerability on-site, especially towards the local authorities. However, the ability to tolerate and deal with risks, uncertainty and insecurity, is often ascribed to the cultural background of being exposed to the two worlds India entails, that of the privileged and the deprived. This fuels the zeal to struggle for a higher standard of living. Being trapped in different realities at the same time, sometimes characterized as belonging to the life world of coolies at other times identified as cosmopolitans, the Indian society from which they originated simultaneously remains the point of reference and the significant other.

#### **Pushed to the edge: On-site.**

The corporate culture wants to grant employees the local exposure of the client's place. It is a necessary step in the career path of a global IT professional; however, growing in the hierarchy might imply circulation amongst multiple places. It can be called the rite of passage of going on-site. Working on-site is experienced in an ambiguous way. Social status is ensued by being eligible to work in Western countries, on the other hand the duration of the stay is often uncertain which affects family life, also often meaning an interruption of the schooling of the children and the career of the spouse. Indian IT professionals face glass ceilings and language barriers, which means that immobilities are part and parcel of their transnational career path.

The case studies<sup>5</sup> below will show how the global business model of outsourcing installs a phase of permanent liminality. This is also supported by a migration policy of highly-skilled employees which institutionalizes a position of in-betweenness.

*Narrative case study of an Indian IT professional directly hired by the local employer.*

Upon graduating I joined one of the local companies in Bengaluru, India. In this job I was sent to Europe for a technology transfer within a German company. For six months I have been living there. One of my friends already living in Brussels informed me about a vacancy in a Belgian company where I am still working as a project manager. As I was just married, I wanted to extend my stay to explore Europe with my wife. However, since I am working in IT, my ambition was to go to the USA or UK, either of the two capitals... Any typical IT guy would think that his career lies there. Brussels was no place!

For the moment I feel very confused. The short term adventure lasted longer than my expectations and I consider Belgium as my second home now as I am living here already for seven years. Now I am at a point when I should decide: Is it time to go back and fulfill my responsibilities or should I stay here? Will I miss something very important in life by going back to India or by staying in Belgium? In India you have certain liabilities which are part of the family culture. I know what my parents did for me to get me into the position I am now. They sacrificed a lot. Financially they had to reprioritize goals to permit their children to study. I feel that it is my responsibility to give something back for my parents. I want to take care of them when they are old as there is no other social security system like there is in Belgium. However, my parents would never complain.

To keep my options open I would like to take the Belgian nationality and go back over two or three years. I am also concerned about the education of my son. He is going to a British school in Brussels as we in India follow the British education system. We need some continuity to be built in.

There are plenty of people from outsourcing companies at my workplace. They moved out of India for the first time. Their only motivation is money and to earn as much as possible in the time they are on-site. Even I came with that motivation. However, after four to five years you start to recognize that you have a life here as well. You start asking questions such as: Should I consider Belgium as an investment point? Should I finally buy good furniture, television, a flat...? Indian IT professionals do not feel welcomed by the local employees as they do not allow them to integrate completely into the system, although the work is as such that team work is required. Belgium needs those technical people as you cannot hire and fire people just like that while at the same time a lot of flexibility is needed 'to run the show'. It is very difficult to find the right people at the right time, at the right cost. Nevertheless, it is a very sensitive topic. At work rumors go around that jobs have been taken and replaced by outsourcing services. It creates very tangible tensions sometimes. Of course the outsourcing companies make mistakes as well, as they have the tendency to send youngsters on-site with no experience and a lack of soft skills.

According to the local employees every Indian stands for outsourcing, which creates many confusions with my position in the company. However, I try to adapt as well as possible and in general we Indians understand where the aggression comes from. Indians are known for compromises. It is in our culture. We live for the society and are lived by

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<sup>5</sup> The two case studies are based upon semi-structured open-ended interviews and informal conversations.

rules. Everything is a compromise. In India it is a common mentality. I did not choose my studies or profession, I did not even choose my own partner! My parents did this for me. Can you imagine? Now it is changing in India. I think you should live for yourself as well and that we have understood by being outside. I feel very proud that I have raised three children. In India you would never be able to experience this feeling, as the family orientation is so close-knit that everybody takes care of the children. Today my wife and I feel strongly about what we have realized here abroad. Unlike my parents did, I would like to give my children enough freedom to think outside the box. As my parents insisted on studying computer sciences, I never had the chance to explore my own capacities and interests through extra-curricular activities for example. However, I gained from the IT industry and all the investments I have made. With all the mortgages I have taken, I have to continue in the IT industry, I will never complain.

*Narrative of the spouse of an Indian IT professional working for a leading Indian outsourcing services provider.*

I relocated within three months of marriage to join my husband who is working on-site in Belgium as a functional analyst in the telecom sector. After working in the Middle East, he moved to Belgium two years ago. I am proud of his good work, otherwise he would not be on-site. The whole procedure of collecting all the required documents and their processing was painfully slow as it took three months to join him in Belgium. It is not common in India to have a birth certificate due to a lack of awareness and infrastructure. Therefore most of the people use their Central Board of Secondary Education (10<sup>th</sup> board) certificate as a legal document for age proof as your name and date of birth are registered on the document. It takes a lot of time and effort to get the original birth certificate from the authorities. You often need to have connections with administrative people or should pay money to get things done. It was hard for my parents to send me abroad as it was the first time that I have left my country. It was an emotional moment, they literally cried at the airport. Every day they are calling and asking: When are you coming, when are you coming back?

In India I was used to working in the IT-sector as a software developer. I expected that I would find a job here in Belgium too. My education was in my mother tongue Telugu, but at work we speak English. The idea in the Indian mind is that they know English in the Western world. I was not aware that the national languages Dutch or French would be more prevalent than English. I did not expect that language would be such a barrier as I feel it now, not only in day to day life, but also for applying for jobs. It is an assumption that we Indians have that English would be one of the official languages, like it is in India. English is so common in India, at least in the professional world...

Going to the USA is quite popular in certain communities. In India, especially in Andhra Pradesh, there are some castes when after graduation a guy is going to work in the USA, he gets a lot of demand for marriage. And he will get more dowry too. The dowry system is still prevalent in India, especially in particular castes. Even though it was not a 'love' but an arranged marriage, it was not like that in my case as it is not a custom in my caste of Brahmins. Actually all castes are the same, especially in the IT sector. This sector is a great leveler.

I met my husband in Hyderabad. My family and his relatives met each other and agreed upon a marriage. So we got engaged and eight months later we got married in India. There was an engagement ceremony, which is a mutual understanding between the bride's and groom's families. I got an engagement ring, while my fiancé was not there. He was working in Belgium, therefore his sister gave me this ring. Normally the groom should give it, that is our cultural tradition, but since he was not in Hyderabad but in Brussels, we had to arrange it an other way. After engagement we were allowed to talk freely. So we had a lot of time to get to know each other better. He even sent me a

laptop because one of his friends is living in the USA and bought it there and brought it to Hyderabad. There is a built-in camera, so everyday we had a video chat.

When I came to Belgium, not so many ladies were on-site anymore. In Belgium I only know the people of my husband's company. We, the couples, live together in the same apartment block. Before my marriage I was working. I resigned to join my husband on-site, but I do not want to stop my career that is why I am applying for jobs here in Belgium. We women have our independence. I am allowed to work. If something would happen, I should be independent. So I am also trying for a job here abroad. When my husband would go back offshore, I will give my resignation and follow him to India. I cannot stay without him, right? Usually we stay in joint families and it is the girl who should adjust. From the beginning of our socialization period they taught us that we girls should adjust. It has been injected in our blood from childhood. It is good in many ways as we are ready to face hardships. In India I will continue my job for sure.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It can be concluded that diplomas from reputable institutes offer an almost exclusive opportunity for an upwardly mobile middle class of Indians to cross international borders. The meritocratic hallmark of the industry encourages a strong faith in the embodied knowledge and skills, and the aptitude to continuously change one's self according to the trends, which at the same time helps prevent feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. According to Bauman (2000, p. 161) these are the features of a modern mobile life. As Bauman (2000:147) argues, in a fluid world "working life is saturated with uncertainty." To understand and interpret how Indian IT professionals abroad deal with and protect themselves against this precariousness, the metaphor of motility capital has been deployed. Since motility represents a new social distinction, it is very important economically, socially and culturally for an IT professional to go on-site at least once in his or her career. The experience of working with customers is perceived as 'a good window,' increasing the market value of Indian IT professionals and pushing them to more rewarding positions. Working on-site is experienced as empowering, a place where new possibilities unfold, permitting exploration.

On the other hand, working on-site, or even working directly for a local company, Indian IT professionals and their spouses are in a limelight zone since being Indian becomes associated with the global phenomenon of outsourcing. They feel as if perpetually in a state of limbo, not only between the client site and the direct employer but also at the local corporate structure where growing into management as a foreigner is strictly limited. Also the Belgian immigration policy which has an utilitarian approach towards labor migration encourages a permanent state of temporality. Therefore,

as their added value in terms of labor is recognized, they feel caught in their globalized role of technically sound professionals. IT professionals offshore are denoted not only as 'electronic housekeepers' (Ramesh, 2004) but the term 'coolies' appears as well in the cosmopolitan transient community of Indian IT professionals on-site. In the narratives of on-site Indian IT professionals in Belgium it could be observed that the image of e-coolies is not only used ascriptively but as a mimic act it also seems to be absorbed in the self-description and self-definition of these so-called privileged or elite migrants.

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