{InDia(n)spora}
Uncovering the Current Narrative of Return: Bridging the Space between India and its Diaspora

by

Joshua Arjuna Stephens
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The very process of constructing a narrative for oneself—of telling a story—imposes a certain linearity and coherence that is never entirely there. But that is the lesson, perhaps, especially for us immigrants and migrants: i.e., that home, community and identity all fall somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit.

Chandra Talpande Mohanty

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Introduction: Setting the Stage
“I leave one place for the other, welcomed and embraced by the family I have left…I am unable to stay…I am the other, the exile within…afflicted with permanent nostalgia for the mud.”

Jessica Hagedorn²

“To go abroad could be to fracture one’s life”

V.S. Naipaul³

Indians, in India and across the world, love to talk about the state of their country. The obsession with India’s new status as a world economic power and constant headline grabber is consistent no matter where the far-flung Indian has landed. Everyday in the newspapers, constantly on TV, and on the cover of major magazines, India’s place in the world, and its economic and resulting infrastructure boom are declared.

I am curious about this “new” India, and the shift in attitude that accompanies it. In particular, I am curious how this supposedly changed India affects the identity of diasporic Indians in the United States. For a long time, a “narrative of return” has existed within Indian diasporic culture, but mostly as an unachievable nostalgia. The “narrative of return” refers specifically to the changing realities of a return to India, for Indians in the United States. This return did not come to pass for the members of the diaspora who came to the United States after the 1965 Immigration Act loosened the border. Yet as current economic conditions in India stimulate change, the narrative of return, the impractical yet unforgettable desire to return to India, is rewritten. This new

narrative reflects the change in the sentiment of return, from a nostalgic dream to an economic possibility. As professional opportunities increase, and facilities and infrastructure improve, the return of the diasporic Indian is now a probability, perhaps even an inevitability.

The shifting nature of this narrative of return is what I hope to uncover in this thesis as I discuss the various aspects of the Indian diaspora and the possible decision to return to India. In particular, I wish to analyze how the identity of Indians in the United States is shaped by the narrative of return. Further, I wish to examine the reality of the economic change in India that has fostered a strong shift in the narrative, causing Indians in the United States to rethink their relationship with the “homeland” they’ve left.

On my Air India flight from New York to Bombay, both people whom I sat next to engaged me in a favorite conversation topic: the “India of Today” and its relationship to the West. The first man, a north-Indian named Anand, originally from Delhi, now a U.S. citizen living in suburban D.C., casually explained his take.4

“The U.S. is it.” Anand spoke as he moved his seat back, to the chagrin of the heavy-set Punjabi woman sitting the seat behind him. “Despite the opportunity and money that is present in India, the U.S. is still a way better bet. Indians don’t know how to manage things, how to develop their money. They’ll throw up a lot of crap buildings that invite crap businesses and crap roads that will bring crap customers. Sure, there is a lot of talk of international investment, and of the quality of service, but for the most part, at a local level, all that talk is absent.” He continued, “In the U.S. you can really live.

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4 Notes from the flight. Dec. 27th, 2005
Everything is easy. You can enjoy good roads. Get good service. And for me, most importantly, you can get things done on your own without the constant hassle.”

When we first started talking, the inadequacies of Air India had been Anand’s topic of choice. I was the helpless victim of his tirade. He seemed to be upset with nearly every aspect of the flight: from their inability to properly confirm his flight, to the irrational delay of the flight, to the bad seat by the engine, to the shoddy stewardess service, to the lack of papad with his meal. Anand’s rationale for the various shortfalls of the airline was that it is still run by the Indian government. Inefficiency and slow bureaucracy, traditional traits of the Indian professional and governmental environment, had found their way into the management of an international airline. The problem with Air India, in Anand’s mind, is the problem with India.

Air India is generally the chosen airline for the N.R.I (Non-Resident Indians) and the R.I.T (Resident Indian Traveler) because of the moderately cheap fares, the direct flights, and the good food. Although, aside from the direct routes that’s all pretty much a myth at this point. However, there seems to be an almost nationalistic loyalty to the original Indian airline. Even in the past few years, as every airline offers extensive flights to India from the United States, including non-stop flights, Air India is consistently filled by diasporic Indians.

Anand got off in Delhi, stuffing his jacket in his bag, and bidding me goodbye. From Delhi to Bombay, I got a new neighbor who wasted no time engaging me in another aspect of the topic, and the country’s new tagline: “India rising.” Viral is a young, smartly dressed guy who works in a call center called “24/7” in Bangalore.

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5 The airline was originally started by conglomerate Tata Sons Ltd. in 1932 as part of their newly established aviation company. The airline was nationalized in 1953, when the government nationalized the air transport industry.
“There is no future for Americans,” he answers, upon my inquiry on the subject of India’s recent rise. “Look, I’m taking the job of some guy in Dallas, getting paid a comparatively smaller wage, but still living well. I’m aware of how this works, and I’m okay with it.” He became silent for a moment, and then added, “India is now important to everyone. This will be India’s century.”

Yet despite Viral’s assurances, and despite my sympathy with his stance, it is clear that India has a long way to go. While the country possesses the largest middle class in the world, the gap between the middle class and the upper class is large and getting larger, and the distance between the top and bottom of that middle class is vast. The Indian government has committed itself to halving poverty by the year 2020; however, currently over 300 million Indians live in abject poverty.\(^6\) Despite the strong democratic traditions and financial stability that act as forces of equilibrium in a volatile region of the world, economic development in India is uneven. The consolidated fiscal deficit (national, state, and public sector undertakings), at 10% of gross domestic product, is one of the highest among large countries. At a basic level, there is inadequate infrastructure; this fact and the public sector ownership of most core infrastructure act as principal constraints to both more rapid economic growth and poverty reduction. On top of this are serious health and education problems, as well as a lack of financial viability in the power sector. Only a third of Indian households have electricity, and Indians have access to thirty times less water than individuals in the United States. Widespread financial insolvency of the utilities, and the state governments that are

\(^6\) Figures are according to the USAID’s 2005 budget summary for India. 11 Nov. 2006
forced to bail them out, significantly contribute to increasing levels of state fiscal
deficits.\textsuperscript{7}

In the face of such difficulties, Indians, educated and otherwise, have migrated
around the world over the past fifty years in search of better opportunities. The loss of
the enormous amount of educated talent has caused the migration to be known as a
“Brain Drain.”\textsuperscript{8} Even today, in the face of rapid change, the story of the vast opportunity
and fortune of the “West” persists, continuing to entice Indians to leave India.

In particular, Indians continue to migrate to the United States, especially after the
1950s when the United States replaced England as the preferred destination. A recent
report by the United Nations Development Programme estimates that 100,000 Indian
leave the country every year to take up jobs, and/or pursue higher education in the
United States.\textsuperscript{9} This number is particularly reflected in students who take advantage of
the large quota of F1 visas given to admitted students. According to a report released by
the U.S. embassy in New Delhi, the U.S. remains the favored destination for students,
with 79,736 students from India studying in the U.S. in the 2003-04 academic year, an
increase of 6.9 percent from the previous year.\textsuperscript{10} For temporary workers and dependents
[the H1-B and H4 visa respectively], the US Embassy in New Delhi issued 78,506 visas
in 2006.\textsuperscript{11} If one considers the potential economic gains which these exceptionally

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid
\textsuperscript{8} The term “Brain Drain” was apparently coined by a spokesman for the Royal Society of London to
describe the outflow of scientists and technologists to Canada and the United States in the early 1950's.
However, this information is accredited to Wikepedia, and is without proper citation, therefore subject to
speculation. It has been since applied in many cases.
\textsuperscript{10} United States Embassy in New Delhi Press Release. “Reaching New Heights: U.S-India relations in the
\textsuperscript{11} United States Embassy in New Delhi Press Release “People to People: Reaching Out” 20 March, 2007
talented people could have brought to India, one realizes that the economic losses due to this mass migration are enormous.

Invariably, it is assumed that the main driving force for the brain drain is economic. But material gain is not the only reason. To go beyond the borders of India to work and study in the United States was traditionally to have access to professional opportunities not quite available in India. The Italian scientist Riccardo Giacconi, a Nobel Laureate in Physics, summed up what might be the most important factor behind such a brain drain when he said: "A scientist is like a painter. Michelangelo became a great artist, because he had been given a wall to paint. My wall was given to me by the United States."12 Beyond the pure sciences, similar sentiment is echoed by Indians in the fields of economics, medicine, engineering, and finance.

Over the years, while Indians have arrived and stayed, the narrative of return remained present. Monica Ali’s novel Brick Lane refers to this sentiment as the “always-going-home-syndrome.”13 While this attitude was initially a gesture of homage to the country of origin, a way of retaining a particular sense of cultural identity and close kinship links to the scattered fellow members of their group, it has evolved to become an important element of Indian-American identity. For a long time, Indians in the United States have struggled to maintain their “Indianness,” only to understand that it is not completely possible. Adjustment and adaptation leads to a gradual redefinition of identity. There are many associations between Indians and the Indian nation-state, and excesses of “India” in the spaces of the Indian diaspora suggest more than a long-distance nationalism. “India” becomes the means to be “American.” Sandhya Shukla

suggests that only “through a broadly symbolic India [can] Indians [abroad] see themselves not only as national subjects of a modern world, but also as citizens of postwar United States.”\footnote{Sandhya Shukla. India Abroad. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) 3} Vijay Mishra refers to the tendency to recreate India within a diasporic space as the “diasporic imaginary.” By this he means the creation of a diasporic identity built upon a nostalgic and imaginary understanding of India.\footnote{Vijay Mishra. “The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian diaspora.” Textual Practices 10.3, 1996, 421-447} Even as a new identity emerges, allowing Indians in the U.S. to make new claims to citizenship, the nostalgic desire to remain connected to India often manifests itself in the desire to one day return. Within that newly acquired space, the “always-going-home” mentality exists to comfort Indians seeking to adjust.

As current economic conditions bring change to India, the “always-going-home-syndrome,” although still an important component of the identity of Indian-Americans and Indians in America, takes on a new complexity. How will tensions between staying and going home, between saying that you are going home but really attempting to stay in the U.S., between trying to go home and yet finding the pull of the U.S. too strong, trying to go home but finding that it, and you have changed, play out for this younger generation in comparison with that which preceded them?

In this thesis, I will pay particular attention to Gujaratis, an Indian ethnic group identified by a common language, who trace their common origin to a region in the western part of India. Gujaratis have a tradition of traveling the migrational lines from India to other places of the world, notably the United States, driven by a culture that has encouraged the crossing of borders for economic opportunity. In the U.S., Gujaratis are one of the most populous groups of Indians. Like many other Indians, Gujaratis have
long come to the United States for higher education. These days they come to study not so much because they are certain that education in the United States is superior to their own, but because they believe that a degree from a U.S. university will give them access to top jobs in India. But almost all of these recent arrivals look upon life in the U.S. as a temporary situation, at least at first. So did, of course, those who came before; those who came and most often stayed. Yet with the narrative of return changing to encourage not just the nostalgic thought of a return, but rather an actual return, the dilemmas that surround such a decision have become pronounced. In attempting to understand the complexities at stake in this decision, Gujaratis serve as an example of, and sometimes the exception to, the themes and trends which govern the actions and decisions of the Indian diaspora in the United States.

My work is not so much an answer to, or full look at, this gathering point in the history of the Indian diaspora, rather it is an attempt to illuminate a set of concerns and dilemmas in two nations and one world. It is, in other words, a way of dealing with, in a divided way, what can be seen as a “there” and “now” of history. At home in neither one discipline nor in one country, this piece stakes its claim to citizenship in a variety of places. In my thoughts and queries, I wish to restore a certain weight to the importance of experience. Narratives of individual lives help counteract the superficial look we are given in the news, and contribute to the theoretical analysis with which I attempt to discuss the narrative of return. My writing alternates between personal accounts and academic writing; however, I attempt to do so in a way that complements my argument and provides a fuller understanding of the way the narrative of return is shaped. I believe that my attempts to uncover this narrative for Indians living in the United States

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16 A Gujarati Masters student at Boston University told me that in a typical Engineering school in Ahmedabad, more than half of the students would seek another degree in the United States.
would not be possible without an interdisciplinary method that seeks to analyze using a variety of analytical approaches.

In attempting to unpack and explore the diasporic challenges of the Diasporic Indian, often it is productive, perhaps even necessary, to think in terms of binaries. But having said that, what gets lost in the construction of binaries is the narrative of the tussle between them, the large gaping holes where the negotiations that define history begin. Growing in these holes, the spaces between the pull of “home” and the pure appeal of an adopted nation, a mixed-up culture springs forth, its dynamic form inevitably challenging a fixed binary. This new culture reshapes and remolds the given notion of “here” and “there,” and forces what Homi Bhabha would call a “third space” of possibility and existence, a space inherently critical of essentialism and conceptualizations of original or “originary” culture. Bhabha posits the term “hybridity” as a form of a “third space.” He writes, “For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges; rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge.”

Hybridity commonly refers to “the creation of new transcultural forms within this contact zone produced by colonization.” Hybridization occurs in many arenas including the cultural, the political, and the linguistic. What I am most interested in is the cultural hybridity that materializes for Indians who have grown up in India but no longer live in India, and who now seek to return. Within the post-colonial discourse, Bhabha argues that hybridity subverts the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures. The series of inclusions and exclusions on which a dominant culture is premised are

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deconstructed by the very entry of the formerly-excluded subjects into the mainstream discourse. Hopefully, embracing the hybridized nature of culture disturbs the problematic binarisms that have until now framed our notions of culture. In the narrative of return, the recognition of a hybrid identity allows for a more enlightened understanding of the complexities present in the decision to return to India.

For the Indian who can actually return, there is an importance in embracing what I call an “enlightened hybridity.” “Enlightened hybridity” is a state of mind that allows returning Indians to recognize the process of remaking themselves as composites of different experiences they have had: recently studying, living, and working in the United States; and before that, growing up in India. This ultimate recognition indicates an awareness of the predicament and difficulty of having been changed by the experience of life in the United States, and of the difficulty of combining that with the underlying understanding of the Indian society to which they are returning. An enlightened hybridity allows the returnee to see past simplistic notions of “cosmopolitanism.” While personal welfare and economics play a large role in the decision to return, the understanding of a hybrid identity allows that returnee to see that the naïve acceptance of cosmopolitanism, the state of living, easily placed anywhere and existing above nationalistic concerns, is not a reality in a return to India.

As Indians in the United States consider the realities of a return, their ability to leave the “developed world” and return to the “developing world,” inspired not just by nostalgic longing but also by economic opportunity, strikes a blow against the “disturbed” understanding of the term “diaspora.” As a term, “diaspora” refers to any people or ethnic populations forced or induced to emigrate from their homelands, without the realistic prospect of returning. For the Indian diaspora, this movement has
manifested itself in a number of ways throughout its long history. From the early
merchants, whose presence in the Indian Ocean and the Middle East caused a natural
movement of Indians in search of economic opportunity; to the indentured servants
who left India within the British colonial system for involuntary work in other colonies;
to the merchant opportunists who followed the indentured servants; to the recent
movement of skilled workers and students who left India, part of the “brain drain.” Yet
as Indians moved to more developed countries, they moved into a power dynamic where
their diasporic presence revealed a certain dependence on, and inferior status in, the
country. This type of sentiment helps contribute to the myth of the “first world” as
dominant over the “third world.” Hybridity is often viewed as a counter-narrative, and
as I attempt to shed light on the idea of a return, the concept of hybridity is essential not
only in understanding the shift in the narrative of return, but also perhaps in attempting
to reformulate the global movement of Indians as something other than a diaspora.

While I maintain that the Indian returnee must seek the in-between spaces that
are necessary to inhabit with an enlightened hybridity (Bhabha’s “third space”), I do not
wish to romanticize diasporic culture as easily able to find its own mediated and merged
space within the world. Rather I would like to invoke the potential for culture, any
culture, to move past traditional settings of law and custom. In the diaspora, lives and
culture find new ways of existing and thriving. The possibility for a returning Indian to
build upon various identities to create a hybrid identity that falls into a greater, well-
rounded structure in which to judge himself and his place in the world is, needless to say,
liberating.

In attempting to provide a full analysis and clear look into this topic, I will break
my discussion down in four ways. The first chapter turns to the history of the Indian
diaspora to provide the historical context for the themes of the diaspora that contribute
to the shifting nature of the narrative of return. Throughout the chapter, I first attempt
to provide a theoretical explanation of the diaspora that explains the historical
movement of Indians. I then look to the historical movement of Gujaratis, particularly
of the merchants whose tendencies to move beyond comfortable borders in search of
opportunity established a precedent within a Gujarati society now known for its large
presence within the diaspora.

In the second chapter, I turn to the formation of identity within diasporic spaces.
I discuss some of the broad themes that govern the diasporic Indian, such as nostalgia,
which plays a critical role not only in the reformulation of identity, but also in the
relationship to India from afar. My discussion then moves from broader theoretical
analysis of these themes to a more specific study of the experience of Indians in the
United States.

Chapter three investigates the present narrative of return that is emerging in the
form of a possible “reverse brain drain;” that is, the possible return of qualified Indians
from the United States to India, inspired perhaps by nostalgia, but pushed by economic
incentive. The reports of this possible trend in news sources and magazines give rise to a
new myth of the easiness and comforting reality of such a return. This chapter not only
attempts to analyze the reports of such a trend, but also to raise questions about the
realities behind the decision to return to an India that is still full of deep-seated
contradictions and inequalities.

In chapter four, I discuss the theoretical and personal issues at stake in a
potential return by critiquing the notion of cosmopolitanism. “Cosmopolitanism,” which
in an ideal sense would provide an easy buffer to any sort of return, is an inadequate and
impractical term with which to try to describe and evaluate the conditions for the potential return of the diasporic Indian. In this chapter, I seek to move past the idea of cosmopolitanism and suggest instead the idea of an “enlightened hybridity” as a state of identity that the diasporic Indian might ideally achieve to return and live in India in the most mature or enlightened way. This new understanding of the situation of the diasporic Indian is, in my opinion, critical to a full and complete understanding of the current manifestation of the narrative of return within the Indian diaspora.
Chapter 1- [Re]Defining Characters, [Re]Creating Narrative

“Friends,/ our dear sister/ is departing for foreign/
in two three days/ and/ we are meeting today/
to wish her bon voyage./

You are all knowing, friends,/ what sweetness is in Miss Pushpa/
I don’t mean only external sweetness/ but internal sweetness./
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling/ even for no reason/
but simply because she is feeling./

... Pushpa Miss is never saying no./ Whatever I or anybody is asking/
she is always saying yes./ and today she is going/
to improve her prospects/ and we are wishing her bon voyage.”

Nissim Ezekiel

The Indian diaspora has imbedded itself across the world, creating a powerful cross-cultural presence that reverberates through many societies. Before going into the identity critically at stake in the current narrative of return, I wish to provide an historical structure of the Indian diaspora that has long cemented a place for Indians living abroad, a place now challenged with the opportunity and possibility of a return. While there are many conceptions of diaspora, in this chapter I will provide an understanding of the Indian diaspora in two ways. First, by starting with the broader theoretical understandings, I hope to place the diaspora within a historical context and provide the theory necessary to explain the rationale behind the vast movement of Indians over the past four hundred years. In particular, I wish to highlight the contemporary flow of Indians to the United States, starting with the loosening of immigration laws in 1965 by the U.S. government. Second, I will look particularly at the Gujarati people and offer an

historical analysis of the mercantile communities of Gujarat, in order to demonstrate the
effect of their success on Gujarati society. I wish to explain the foundation of a Gujarati 
ethos by relating the historical mercantile mentality to the contemporary diaspora,
principally the Gujaratis who have established themselves as business people and
markers of success within the Indian community in the United States.

With an estimated twenty million people worldwide, the Indian diaspora is the 
third largest, behind the African and Chinese diasporas. People of Indian origin reside 
in over seventy countries; its members come from regions across India, and represent
dozens of religions and hundreds of castes and sub-castes. This diaspora is well
documented in numerous books that speak of its members and of their difficulties.
However, while much has been written about the theoretical nature of other diasporas,
Vijay Mishra in his seminal essay The Diasporic Imaginary makes the point the Indian 
diaspora has not been theorized. As Mishra notes, in the opening essay of the first 
issue of the journal Diaspora, William Safran, a leading theorist of diasporas, devotes only
twelve lines to the Indian diaspora, and “not unnaturally oversimplifies the
characteristics of this diaspora.” Mishra’s innovative discussion identifies the essential 
components of the diaspora, and provides an underpinning on which to build the
narrative of return. His contributions stand as the foundation for my discussion of the 
complexities and history of the Indian diaspora.

<http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/contents.htm>
421-447
22 Ibid. P. 421
“Diasporas are fluid, fluctuating systems determined by energy flows and the pressures of globalization and migrant labor,” writes Manoli Salgado. A term that has gained prominence and debate over the years, “diaspora” is generally used by a variety of ethnic groups who form communities because of an earlier migration to a foreign place, where they have established separate communities. It is perhaps problematic, as many recent theorists have noted, to attempt to draw a concise definition of diaspora, for as Monika Fludernik points out, “nobody has the same dream entirely; and nobody’s diaspora therefore looks wholly like their neighbors.” However, in order to build an understanding of the Indian diaspora, Salgado’s definition of the term is a helpful place with which to begin.

Mishra in particular offers a definition that strictly serves the Indian diaspora. He sees it linked on one hand to homogeneous, displaced communities brought to serve the Empire in imperial territories and co-existing there with indigenous/other races with markedly ambivalent and contradictory relationships with their respective Motherland(s). On the other hand, he also sees it linked to free migration and late capitalism. Lastly, he defines it as the group of migrants that sees itself straddling the border of cultures and nations, seeking to exist in one, or, sometimes, in both. In offering these characterizations, Mishra divides the diaspora in two. He refers to the first as the “Old (exclusive)” diaspora, the second as the “New (border)” diaspora. The “old” diaspora is concerned primarily with the movement of labor during the British Raj, and constitutes

what Mishra calls the “diaspora of exclusivism” because it created relatively self-contained “little-Indias” in the colonies. While this period of Indian diasporic history has a significant influence on the spread and existence of people of Indian origin all around the world, this thesis is more concerned with the history of the “new” diaspora.

The Indian diaspora post-1965 inspires a broader reconsideration of history, space, the public, literature, and culture for contemporary circumstances. This “new” diaspora is defined by Mishra as a “border, whose overriding characteristic is one of “mobility.” Embedded in this new diaspora is a sub-group of professionally motivated individuals. As Fludernik writes, “the movement of individual [Indian] professionals and their families to mostly Anglophone industrial nations,” consists primarily of people belonging to the cultural elite. Ultimately, I place the most focus on this group of middle to upper class Indians, members of the professional class.

In the United States, the Indian diaspora has a long and complex history, but until 1965, when legislation significantly opened up borders, the number of Indians immigrating to the U.S. was small. Indians started arriving in significant numbers at the start of the twentieth century. Although some had come earlier, most went to British colonies (part of Mishra’s ‘old’ diaspora). The few thousand Indians who did immigrate to the United States, mostly Punjabi Sikh men, settled primarily on the West Coast, working agricultural jobs. These men left their families in India, while working to earn

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money to send for them or to return to India. In addition to the Sikh farmers, a small number of more educated Indians also entered bringing the total number of arrivals from 1881 to 1917 to only about seven thousand. However, due to economic and racist nativism, jobs were hard to come across, and eventually federal authorities reacted to sentiment by tightening the immigration quota in the 1920’s. At the time, the California commissioner of state labor statistics remarked that the “Hindu is the most undesirable immigrant in the state. His lack of personal cleanliness, his low morals and his blind adherence to theories and teachings, so entirely repugnant to American principles, make him unfit for association with American people.”

However, that all changed dramatically after 1965, when President Kennedy enacted legislation to repeal the racial exclusion from the Asia-Pacific triangle. Kennedy envisioned a system that was primarily forged around the idea of attracting skilled workers, but within that system there was room for family reunification, seen as implicit within the idea of an “American Dream.” Kennedy expected the United States to set an example and precedent globally for cross-cultural and cross-national movement. The new law made available twenty thousand immigrant visas for every country not in the Western Hemisphere. However, according to Bill Ong Hing, these new provisions at the time were not expected to bolster Asian Immigration. Since most visas were reserved for family reunification, policymakers believed that the countries of Asia, with low rates of immigration prior to 1965, might in fact be handicapped, since their smaller numbers

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29 Discussion of this can be found in Karen Leonard’s work Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992) Leonard makes the point that many of these men in fact took Mexican wives while working in California, thus creating an interesting multicultural society. Also further complicating the nostalgic desire to return to family in India.


30 Ibid. 31

32 Ibid. 22

33 Ibid. 40
presumably meant there were fewer people in the United States who had relatives in Asia. However, because of the large amount of student visas available, as well as the occupational categories established that encouraged business, the number of Indians coming to the U.S. increased rapidly. Once in the States to study and work, these young and educated Indians stayed, seeing the United States as a better life option, creating the media favorite term, “Indian Brain-Drain.”

The 1965 legislation, provided the opportunity to easily come to the United States, resulting in a dramatic rise in immigration from India. According to a series of I.N.S. annual reports, the number of immigrants from India in 1959 was 506, while in 1989 that number had risen to 28,498. In the U.S. census for the ten year period from 1980 to 1990, a period at the center of this immigration trend, the Indian population in the United States increased from 361,531 people to 815,447 people, a 125.6 percent increase. Their presence not only created a large community, but that community created a trend that established the United States as the choice destination for the Indian diaspora for close to sixty years.

While Mishra’s characterization of the two major aspects of the Indian diaspora—the old diaspora of the indentures, and the more contemporary, border, diaspora of the post-1965 students, skilled workers, and their families—has provided a groundbreaking, and long-needed base for the understanding of the Indian diaspora, he fails to mention an important aspect of the diaspora, and of the trends that contribute to later aspects of the diaspora. This aspect is the global movement of Indians within the maritime sea trade, starting before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century. His

34 Ibid. p.40
insistence that the Indian diaspora began as part of the “British imperial movement of labour to the colonies” negates the role of the mercantile community, and does not consider the existence of a pre-colonial movement of Indians beyond the borders of the subcontinent.\footnote{Vijay Mishra. “The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora.” Textual Practices 10.3 (1996) 421} As Peter Van der Veer notes, “the pervasiveness of pre-colonial migration inside and outside of India may at least lead us to question the radical modernity of the experience of displacement, disjuncture, and diaspora.”\footnote{Peter Van der Veer. “Introduction” Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora, Ed. Peter Van der Veer. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) 4}

Even within Mishra’s description of the “old” diaspora, he essentializes the role of merchants by failing to place enough weight, or even mention, to their movement outside the framework of indentured servitude. Mishra obviously has the precise documentation of the movement of indentured servants, thanks to a colonial bureaucracy. There is no doubt that colonial rule encouraged the movement of Indians within the colonial space. However, Mishra fails to take into account that, due to the long history of global trade by Indian merchants, there was both a desire and a tendency by Indians to go overseas to do business, especially if a market were provided by other Indians (even in indentured servitude). While these intricacies of his theory may seem small, I would argue that in fact they provide a significantly important part of the diaspora. I will now go further with that, particularly using Gujaratis as an example and illustration of this sub-narrative critical to the current understanding of the diaspora.

While Gujaratis make up a large proportion of Mishra’s “new” diaspora, the mercantile ethos that exists in Gujarati culture and their extensive historical maritime presence in the Indian Ocean showed that diaspora was well established among Gujaratis as a professional option. Gujarat has always had a vibrant and influential mercantile
community that has crossed borders and oceans in search of opportunity. Even during the “old” diaspora, while Gujaratis were not necessarily indentures, they still followed the indentured communities, benefiting off the service demand created by those communities. Embedded in the work and lives of maritime merchants was the desire and necessity to understand the market overseas and prepare the Indian economy to respond to it. The Gujarati merchant existed in what can be seen as an early globalized world, where trade connected markets, and set cross cultural standards.

It is not mere coincidence that the three Gujaratis who played a critical role in shaping the Indian subcontinent—Dadabhai Naoroji, M.K. Gandhi and M.A. Jinnah—belonged to mercantile communities. Naoroji was from the Parsi community and himself a businessman; Gandhi was a Modh Vaniya whose father and grandfather held important administrative positions in the princely states of Saurashtra; and Jinnah belonged to the Khoja trading community. For almost a thousand years merchant communities—Hindus, Jains, Muslims and, later, Parsis—not only dominated the economic scene but wielded incredible influence in Gujarati society and power in political affairs. As representatives of Gujarat for the outside world, they established the image of Gujaratis as economically motivated people; an image which is still very present today both within and outside Gujarat.

Geography played a crucial role in giving merchants their prominent position. The strategic location of the region within Asia, and the placement of its ports along the northern center of the Indian Ocean put Gujarat at the intersection of a number of trading systems and proved propitious to Gujarati merchants. The overland interregional trade of Asia across the subcontinent proved a source of profit, but the greatest source of wealth came from the maritime trade, both along the coast and across the seas in
ships propelled eastwards and westwards by the monsoon winds. A quarter of India’s coastline is in Gujarat, and a string of ports and harbors have developed over the years to accommodate the business demand. Silk from China, horses from Arabia, ivory and slaves from Africa, cloth and indigo from Gujarat itself, opium and grain from the north, spices from southern India and the Far East, all passed through these ports for centuries. Local communities of skilled shipbuilders, navigators and craftspeople contributed to the prosperity of enterprising merchants and traders. The expanse of this maritime network is summed up by Tome Pires, a fifteenth-century Portuguese traveler: “Cambay [a kingdom in Gujarat] chiefly stretches out two arms, with her right arm she reaches out towards Aden and with the other towards Malacca.” That network was increased in the sixteenth century, as that second arm extended its embrace over a wider area, including most of the Bay of Bengal and Indonesia.

Gujarati merchants traveled to Western Asia, Africa, South India, and the eastern edges of the Indian Ocean, creating a diaspora consisting of kith and kin networks in the ports of the Indian Ocean trade. Gujarati cuisine has been partially shaped by the demands of long sea voyages and overland trips with a variety of dry snacks, chutneys, pickles and sweets which could keep palatable for long periods. These same types of snacks are still found in Gujarati households, being eaten for breakfast, during tea, or on any long trip. They are found in India, and they are found in numerous Indian grocery

39 Even today, the Gujarati coastline is making a resurgence as an important aspect of India’s developing economy and booming industry. Still the importance of Gujarat’s ports stems from its prime location in the global sea trade.
40 The Gujarati maritime trade reached a prominent point by 1500, when the port of Cambay became the greatest Gujarati port.
41 M.N. Pearson, Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 11
43 Ibid. 22
stores across the United States. This is indicative of the long-standing affects of the mercantile community on present Gujarati culture.

At first, the numbers of merchants traveling abroad was not large; however, by the more prosperous years of the seventeenth century, thousands of merchants set off from the coasts of Gujarat to take care of Gujarat’s overseas trade and connect the region with a wide array of other cultures. These worldly merchants created an import/export trade for Gujarat that was later appropriated by the British and Portuguese, and ultimately led to the early generations of the contemporary diaspora that claimed both indentured servants, and mercantile opportunists. Inherent in the movement of these merchants was the obvious relocation of bodies that inevitably takes place in trade and business. In his seminal work In an Antique Land, Amitav Ghosh seeks to uncover the narrative of a twelfth-century Indian slave who ended up in Egypt. While the slave, “Bomma,” was from the Malabar coast of India, south of Gujarat, his cross-cultural travels and existence from India, to the Middle East, to Egypt, can be held as representative of the very early presence of Indians in the Indian Ocean trade.

Much of the history writing that relates to this time period is excessively euro-centric. These authors would have it that we see the history of this period as the struggle between the Portuguese who were established in the area for a century and the British and Dutch who had only recently arrived. However, this history does not let us analyze the role and presence of the Indian maritime merchant, who were pivotal players in the Indian Ocean trade. Starting in the sixteenth century, Gujarat came under the rule

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44 Ashin Das Gupta. “The Maritime Merchant and Indian History” The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001) 25; In particular, Gujarati traders were most in contact with a variety of Arabs, Persians, Turks, as well as Chinese and South-East Asian traders.

45 Particularly in the writings of Moreland, Van Leur, and Chicherov.
of foreign rulers, starting first with the Mughals, then the Portuguese, who gained
control over major Gujarati ports, then finally the British.

However, foreign rule did not initially constrain the Gujarati trade, and even
strengthened it, first through the collaboration of merchants with foreign presences, and
then by the merchant’s rejection of that presence by necessitating a competitively
changed strategy. On the official level, the Portuguese, at least tacitly, were more
interested in seeing Gujarati trade flourish than in enforcing rigorous restrictions.\textsuperscript{46}

Unofficially, a network of mutual benefits evolved from which most Portuguese and a
few Gujaratis profited. The Gujarati merchants were able to get a cut of the
transportation of Portuguese goods, while the Portuguese took advantage of the Gujarati
presence in the Indian Sea trade routes. While some restrictions on trade by Gujarati
merchants were in place, the Portuguese relied on Gujarati goods and merchants to aid
their global network of trade. Because of this dependence, the Portuguese did not do all
that they could to stop infringements of their official system. Thus Gujaratis also
ostensibly personally traded innocently within the Portuguese system, maintaining their
economic freedom.\textsuperscript{47} By making deals initially with the Portuguese at the ports of
Dabhol and Chaul, Gujarati merchants were able to maintain their maritime presence
and continue to thrive, by existing beyond the Indian borders and staying in cultural and
economic contact with other nations overseas.

However, after relations with the Portuguese resulted in retaliatory attacks by the
British and the Dutch, Gujarati merchants in major ports like Surat opted out of an
Indo-Portuguese network, and created a new system where they used smaller, faster
ships. These ships played an important role in expanding India’s shipping and maritime

\textsuperscript{46}N. Pearson, Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 96
\textsuperscript{47}Ibid. 100
commerce for the next hundred years, through the 1800’s, and allowed more merchants to become involved. By the turn of the eighteenth century, Gujarati merchants were freely using Mughal land power against European sea power, in order to strengthen their hold in the area.\(^{48}\) The hold was secure up until the complete imperial sweep by the British Raj, which is essentially responsible for the end of the indigenous sea trade in India.\(^{49}\)

The success of the mercantile community and the cross-cultural interaction that came about as a result of their trade, carried over into Gujarati society as traders gained social prominence. Gujarati traders were originally called \textit{Vanik} or \textit{Vanijah}, which evolved over the centuries to \textit{Vaniya}, a caste term which refers to both Hindus and Jains. Members of these communities were called \textit{Vaishyas}. The commonly used English term used today, “Baniya,” is a corruption of \textit{Vaniya}, used first by the Portuguese and then by the Dutch and English as a collective noun for all Gujarati traders irrespective of religion. \textit{Baneane} was the Portuguese corruption and \textit{Banyan}, the English one.\(^{50}\) For the purposes of continuity, I will refer to the general Gujarati merchant community as \textit{Vaniya}, and members of the community as \textit{Vaishyas}.

The social status of merchants, and therefore the influence of their mercantilist mobility, began to rise in Gujarat with the spread of Buddhism, followed by Jainism (the faith of many of the merchants), from the fifth and sixth centuries AD onwards. In high offices of the state, \textit{Kshatriyas}, members of the warrior caste, were increasingly replaced by the appointment of \textit{Vaishyas} in high offices of the state.\(^{51}\) The first distinct mention of

\(^{48}\) Ibid. 31  
\(^{49}\) Ibid. 28  
\(^{50}\) Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth. \textit{The Shaping of Modern Gujarat}. (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2005). 21  
\(^{51}\) Ibid. P.22
this practice comes in the eighth century when Vanaraj, the founder of the Chavada dynasty in the city of Patan, appointed three merchants, as his prime counselor, the general of armies, and his chief minister. This trend continued and strengthened, and it may be noteworthy to point out that in the thirteenth century, the scholar Amarchandrasuri suggested that ministers be enrolled from the merchant class. Later, much of the success of traders in Gujarat stemmed from municipal decisions made in their favor by merchant caste ministers.

The end of the thirteenth century saw a considerable increase in the power and status of merchants in Gujarat. The extent to which merchant-ministers were transformed, acquiring skills well beyond their traditional role, is revealed in a statement by the thirteenth-century chief minister and appointed governor of the Cambay state in Gujarat, Vastupal: “It is a delusion to think that kshatriyas alone can fight and not a vanik…I am a vanik well known in the shop of battlefield. I buy commodities, the heads of enemies, weighing them in the scale of swords. I pay the price in the form of Heaven.” This combination of economic and political power set in motion a hegemonic order where merchants called the shots. The precedent of cross-cultural travel by the merchant class in the name of opportunity and trade, and the resulting importance of merchants in Gujarati society, continues in the contemporary present, as Gujaratis are among the largest of Indian populations leaving the country. Since at least the sixteenth century, and probably before, traveling beyond the borders of Gujarat has long been an accepted, and perhaps even expected, part of Gujarati thinking.

Within the contemporary diaspora, the traditional sense of movement among Gujaratis has manifested itself strongly in the flow of people to the United States in

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52 V.K. Jain, Traders and Merchants in Western India. (New Delhi: Oxford Press, 1990) 233-37
53 Ibid. footnote 239
search of opportunity. Gujarat is one of the top sources for immigration to the United States; Gujaratis comprise just five percent of India’s population, but an estimated forty percent of the Indian population in the United States. Their large numbers make them the most visible and widespread Indian community in the United States, and enable the creation of mini-Gujarati communities from the subdivisions of central New Jersey, to the suburbs of Northern California. Among the regional groups, Gujaratis frequently find themselves in celebrated films about the Indian diaspora like Kal Ho Na Ho and Mira Nair’s Mississippi Masala. Gujarati culture has traditionally held a strong grip, with their regional language and cultural specific food remaining part of Gujarati society no matter where it is relocated. In the famous poem, “Koni Koni Chhe Gujarat” the poet Narmad asked, “To whom does Gujarat belong?” and replied, “It belongs to those who speak Gujarati; to those who are foreigners but nurtured by this land; and those who follow other religions but are well-wishers of Mother Gujarat and therefore our brothers.” Thus, the Gujarati language, and the connection to the land of Gujarat became the binding force for all Gujaratis. Among those in the United States, it is common to find first generation Gujarati-Americans, whose parents had a “No-English” rule in their homes when they were growing up, and who ate only Gujarati food at home. This is especially evident in places like Edison, New Jersey, or Devon Street in Chicago. There is a joke in Edison that Gujaratis like to live there “because it’s so close to America!” Devon Street, on the other hand is known as “Patel Nagar” (Patel Place) because of the number of Patels, a last name associated with a Gujarati Vaniya community. In these places conversations proceed the same way they would in any

54 Praven Sheth, Indians in America. (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2001) 87
56 Conversation with my cousin Vishrut Pathak on Jan. 3, 2007
village across Gujarat, starting with “Kemchho” and ending with “Avvjo,” literally “How are you” and “Come again.” Suketu Mehta, a writer originally from Bombay, says in his book *Maximum City* about Gujaratis: “The Gujaratis I grew up among conformed to Nehru’s stereotype of a ‘small-boned, mercantile’ people. A Gujarati family’s peace rests on the lack of sexual tension within it; it is an oasis from the lusts of the world. It is the most vegetarian, the least martial, of the Indian ethnic groups. But it is easygoing. ‘How are you?’ one Gujarati asks another. ‘In good humor’ is the standard reply, through earthquakes and bankruptcy.”

In the wake of the liberalization of U.S. immigration laws in 1965, Gujarati professionals and graduate students arrived in greater numbers. As students in the sciences, engineering, or finance fields they emerged with high grades and found no problems getting jobs. Progressing through the conventional pattern of early struggle and a well-settled life afterwards, in the mid-1970s many of them opted for American citizenship so that they could, in turn, sponsor their close relatives for immigration. This was particularly true among the *Vaniya* communities, for groups like Patels. Thus began a second wave of immigration around 1980, which made the “green card” into a coveted currency among Gujaratis. There are stories of couples coming to the United States from Gujarat, and in twenty years sponsoring whole villages of family. The presence of Gujaratis became so visible in the U.S. Consulate in Bombay, that currently the consulate office displays their notices in English followed by Gujarati on the bulletin boards. Furthermore, if one decided to conduct the interview in any language other than English,

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the only option would be Gujarati, not even Hindi, the national language.\textsuperscript{59} This exists so as to process the interviews of the many applicants, especially elderly people who only speak Gujarati, going to live with their children.

The Gujaratis are most conspicuous in the hospitality industry (motels, later on followed by luxury hotels). In fact, among Indians in the United States, the first two moteliers happened to be Gujaratis.\textsuperscript{60} They proved to be Columbus to the Gujaratis back in India, showing the motel business to be a charted route to prosperity. As a result of the dominating influence they had on the trade, a stereotype developed among other Indians about Gujaratis, and in particular among other Gujarati communities about Patels, the common \textit{Vaniya} community. They were known as the Motel Patels, and the stereotype stated they would do whatever it takes to get to the United States.\textsuperscript{61} The continued presence of Gujaratis in the hotel trade is still evident, and of the eleven members on the board of trustees of the Asian-American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA), eight have the last name Patel.\textsuperscript{62} Yet, while most well known for their presence in the hospitality industry, Gujaratis are also prominent across the engineering and medicine fields, as well as in lower-end service industries, working at grocery stores, liquor stores, Dunkin’ Donuts’, and Laundromats.

Historically speaking, as noted above, the tendencies of the merchant class have permeated the social fabric of Gujarat. The talent that Gujaratis have most often wielded in the United States is their ability for entrepreneurship. They possess the characteristics

\textsuperscript{59} I was told this by two of my cousins who have patiently waited through the lines at the U.S. Consulate numerous times.

\textsuperscript{60} Kanji Manchu Patel and Dayabhai Patel. See Praven Sheth, \textit{Indians in America}, (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2001) 310

\textsuperscript{61} Even today, I come across young people in Ahmedabad, a major city in Gujarat, making fun of friends with the last name Patel.

of a commercially-tuned, bargaining culture informed by a pragmatic ideology. Such a community finds the incentive to, and comfort in, flexing their entrepreneurial skill in an open, market economy.

The successful spaces Gujaratis have carved within the diaspora are the result of the mercantile ethos that encourages transnational movement in pursuit of opportunity. However, within these spaces, economic incentive is tempered by the nostalgic wish to recreate the land they left. Leaving India for better opportunity in the United States sets up the basic dilemma that exists for the diasporic Indian: they have come to the United States to make more money and supposedly live the “good life,” yet the “good life” exists only nostalgically as the life they left in India. Gujaratis remain an example of, and sometimes an exception to, the themes and traits of the diasporic Indian. The historical presence of Gujaratis as major players in the maritime trade, and as early cross-border travelers, established the dilemma of balancing economic opportunity with nostalgia for “home” for the diaspora as a whole, long before the United States opened its borders. The basic problem of living prosperously in the United States, while remaining nostalgically drawn to return to India is the basis for the narrative of return that confronts for the members of the post-1965 Indian diaspora to the United States.
This is home. And this is the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colors won't be so brilliant,
the Jhelum’s waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.

And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped

Agha Shahid Ali

Parting from Gujarat leaves thorns in my chest
My heart-on-fire pounds impatiently in my breast
What cure can heal the wound of living apart?
The scimitar of exile has cut deep into my heart
....
And thank God’s mercy, O Wali? He let that passion remain
The heart’s still anxious to catch a glimpse of my Gujarat again

Wali Muhammad Wali

Columbia, Maryland seems to embody the American suburban dream, a planned community centered around a mall, home to moderately classy restaurants moderately priced, near a moderately large lake, and full of moderately large houses and apartments. It is designed so that the town’s residents never have to leave for anything. Columbia, created in 1967 and one of the first completely planned towns, has as its premise that the right organization, and the right mix of housing and people, will enhance its residents’ quality of life. The official website for the city stresses the importance of “human

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63 “Postcard from Kashmir” The Half-Inch Himalayas. (Middletown, Ct: Wesleyan University Press, 1987) 1
64 As quoted in Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth. The Shaping of Modern Gujarat. (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2005) XI
values,” and a desire to eliminate uncontrolled sprawl. The developers calculated that a town with such self-conscious values would draw people who shared these values. Columbia, Maryland might seem a strange, or a perfect, place for two young Indian immigrants to begin their lives in the United States.

This environment is where Antara Desai, and her sister Anokhee, landed and have now lived for four year. Unlike many of their recently arrived Indian friends, Antara and Anokhee had the good fortune to have already received their “green cards” before leaving their home city Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat, in 2001. At the time, Anokhee was just going into her final year of high school, where she was struggling to decide what she would do in the future. In a test-based environment, where learning “outside the lines” is almost unheard of, Anokhee always struggled to some extent. She desired a career in the arts, where she could develop her raw talent and express her creativity. However, in Ahmedabad, there is very little room for such aspirations. The education system is structured into four sections, in the following order of prestige: the pure sciences, the engineering field, and then the study of commerce. The fourth area, the arts, is generally assumed to be for losers. So when news of her green card came, Anokhee was headed toward a mediocre commerce college, an unexciting option. Legal entry into the United States provided Anokhee with a new and brighter field of options. A green card meant a certain kind of power and a large amount of prestige for the Indians who surrounded Antara and Anokhee. While Anokhee fretted about the future that awaited her in the United States, how she would afford anything, how she would make friends, all her friends sneered slightly behind her back at her fears. “I was scared by the prospect of leaving home, of leaving my friends…the general uncertainty of what would happen. When I decided to come, it was a totally blind decision. Yet they
all brushed my fears aside. They just said ‘what are you worried about, you have a green card’ like that was the whole battle.” Yet, for these two girls, the processing of their green cards was a long time in coming. So long, they weren’t even sure whether to expect it.

It’s a story that started in 1970 when their aunt came as a twenty-one-year-old to the United States as a young bride. In the early 1980s, when that aunt became a citizen, she filed family unification papers for her family. When these came through, her parents (Anokhee’s grandparents) filed for Falgun (Anokhee’s father). Roughly twenty years later, the authorization came through. The importance of this access was perhaps even more important for Anokhees’s older sister Antara.

In 1996, Antara made her first trip to the United States as a 16-year-old cancer patient. After seven months of intense chemotherapy, she returned to India, very weak but cancer free. However, as a result of the intense radiation, and its toll on her immune system, Antara has subsequently endured a number of ongoing health issues, including a bout with tuberculosis that weakened her lungs. Despite these health issues, Antara endured the heavy workloads of college and graduate studies, the pollution and traffic of Ahmedabad, and the difficulties of working within the local hospital, to achieve a degree in physical therapy. For her, a naturalized entry back to the United States meant not only a chance to practice physical therapy in an American setting, but also to keep close to the quality of healthcare that had saved her life on her difficult first trip.

Both sisters ended up in Columbia, because, around the same time the two arrived, their first cousin and close friend from Ahmedabad, Halley, moved to Columbia with her new husband. Antara and Anokhee moved in with her, because of the benefits

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65 Conversation with Anokhee recorded on June 20th, 2006
of being with close family, the number of schools in the greater Baltimore area, and the ability for Antara to get a physical therapy job there. In the past four years, Anokhee has gone from being a Community College student, taking art lessons and working full time at the GAP, to being a student at the Maryland Institute for Contemporary Arts, one of the top art schools in the country. Antara has completed the extra courses needed for her Maryland physical therapy license, passed the test authorizing her to practice in the state, and begun her career. Since then she has also met someone, a South-Indian American named Arjun. And at the end of December 2006, Antara and Arjun returned to India to get married.

The circumstance of their meeting is worth noting. As has long been the case, people have always needed forums that facilitate the process of meeting the right person. With Indians, traditionally, this was perhaps a marriage broker (and sometimes answering listings in newspapers), but most commonly it was done in a meeting between two sets of parents who, if conditions seemed felicitous, arranged the marriage between their marriageable children. Since young Indian professionals in the United States did not always have parents to work for them, but needed to meet others with the specific intention of getting married, they have gone online in this digital age to the web’s internet meeting places. Because the traditional arrangement process meant getting to know a potential partner’s qualifications and perhaps view a picture in advance of a formal meeting, the internet has provided this in the form of the website Shaadi.com, self-proclaimed the “World’s Largest Matrimonial Service,” geared for Indians abroad. Antara and Arjun came across each other’s profiles on “Shaadi” and, as they say, the rest is history. When I visited them, before the two were married, Arjun, Antara and
Anokhee had moved into their own three-bedroom apartment a five-minute drive away from their cousin Halley’s house where the two sisters shared a room.

Their apartment is in a complex that houses a seemingly endless number of similar homes. “Columbia Luxury Apartments,” reads the sign prominently displayed at both entrances to the winding side road that surrounds the complex. The design of their place is very modern. An off-white carpet matches off-white walls, countertops and linoleum. Off the living room is a wooden deck that provides a quaint view of other people’s decks and windows. In the distance, the hum of the highway breaks through, and the presence of both Washington D.C. and Baltimore casually hovers, the imagined proximity hiking rent prices and drawing families.

This life would seem to be very far and very different from the constant noise of the city Antara and Anokhee left in India. Ahmedabad has long been notorious for a pollution that assails the senses, and it has the open poverty and crowded chaos typical of most Indian cities. Its organization of wide boulevards and narrow lanes is bewildering to anyone trained to rely on the grid typical of U.S. cities. In addition to its long and illustrious history, Ahmedabad came into a new prominence in the twentieth-century as an industrial hub, the textile manufacturing center of India, where hundreds of smokestacks could be seen pumping out smoke. This industrial distinction complemented the ancient culture and artistic presence that characterized the city. Ahmedabad’s hypothetical ability to function as a reference for the past and a vision for the future enticed Gandhi to set up his first Ashram on the banks of the Sabarmati River upon his return from South Africa. However, only in the past ten years has the city really managed to confront the effects of industry and growth. Only recently have pollution
levels begun to subside, and the grime and poverty been pushed out of sight in the fashionable streets and centers that have emerged.

To find the family house where Antara and Anokhee grew up, one turns off a main highway into Jawaharnagar Society. The visitor is faced with narrow lanes, some tar, some covered by sanded broken cobblestones, all brown and worn by decades of use. Large trees spread over the lanes and houses, casting off flowers in February and March. While it is peaceful within the society, it is never terribly quiet. By five in the morning, the peacocks are piercing the air with their calls and many other tribes of birds are responding to them. Then the monkeys come swinging through, the high trees perfect for their feeding habits and general mischievousness. The cries and constant bustle as they shake the trees and bang on the roofs will waken anyone not used to this din. By seven, the fruitwalla and vegetablewalla push their carts through the back lanes, shouting the virtues of their goods in singsong at a volume that makes certain that any housewife or servant is aware they are there. Cars backfire as they depart from homes, scooters are gunned, and bicycle bells ring to warn those who have to walk. As the morning goes on, kids scream in sheer excitement as they bowl someone out in a pick-up cricket game in the lane, naked babies wail for their mothers, dogs fight, and not once do the many birds that inhabit the many trees stop their insistent chatter. Beyond the society, the sounds and the chaos have intensified as traffic, people, dirt, garbage, smells and sounds collide to make a frenzied din, which, after a while, becomes normal and soothing.

In Columbia the roads are very clean; each little community you pass is carefully manicured. The ambient soundtrack is the tiresome lull of sparrow chirps and the slow purr of semi-expensive family cars. Columbia, by conventional standards, is a pretty
place, but it is quiet, with few people outside their cars. It is, compared with Ahmedabad, boring. It is the stereotype of the suburbs, an unabashed combination of consumer opportunities and, even with its varied plan, a mediocre regularity of design.

In their apartment I sit amongst, what seems to my eyes to be, the attempts of Antara and Anokhee to “Indianize,” to bring some sort of familiarity to these otherwise foreign surroundings. While around them they must exist within a contradictory multicultural world—in the G.A.P. at the mall where Anokhee worked, at the physical therapy clinic where Antara works, or at the schools both of them have attended—at home they have attempted to recreate the space of India. They seem to be almost aware of the cliché of decorating a non descript American home with Indian-looking stuff in the attempt to emphasize authenticity, and as a result have done their very best to make sure their stuff is as “authentic” as possible. The pillow cases all appear to have been bought at an outdoor shopping area called Law Garden in Ahmedabad from craftspeople in small stalls. A few small religious statues are present around the house, and on the walls a few Kutchi wall hangings meagerly fill space.66 In the bedrooms, big colorful comforters cover the beds, comforters that at one point were stuffed into suitcases along with certain spicy pickles, favored salwaar kameez, and other poignant reminders of what they were leaving. However, the two sisters don’t seem fully aware of how their attempts to keep an “Indian household” is tied to their need to stay connected to India in any way they can.

In the kitchen, Antara is making khardi, a well known Gujarati soup made from yogurt. Khardi is not easy to make, yet Antara has become recognized amongst her family as being the best at it. The smells of the curry leaves, cumin, and mustard seeds mix with

66 Kutch is a district in Gujarat, known for its crafts.
the thick smell of rice coming from the rice-cooker that sits amongst a horde of other American appliances that these girls never used before arriving here. While cooking, Antara watches a small T.V. that her fiancé Arjun has installed in the kitchen. Yet instead of the nightly American shows that one would expect to see, Antara watches popular Hindi serials like “Kasam Se,” and shows like the singing competition “Sa Re Ga Ma Pa” (the Indian singing equivalent of Do Re Me... An Indian equivalent of American Idol). In fact, Antara and Anokhee watch almost no American television; instead, a separate cable box sits beneath their television, providing them with strictly Indian channels. Their knowledge of the world is influenced strictly by the occasional flip through NDTV, India’s major news channel, or through the headlines at Rediff.com, the Indian-run website that owns the newspaper India Abroad.

Antara laughs while she stares intently at her little television screen, her hands forgetting to periodically stir the khardi. Over her shoulder I see two women on screen, wearing brightly colored saris, engaged in a shouting match. Behind them, sitting in a chair looking sheepish, is a man wearing an ugly suit, his mustache and hair both well oiled. Antara sighs as the show ends, and she momentarily returns her attention to the food at hand while the credits roll. Nostalgia floats across the room, consuming Antara with sentimental memories, and the pensive glimmer of regret. One could find this same nostalgia in the lives of diasporic Indians across the United States, individuals who struggle to define their identities here and their relationship with the country they have left.

What is Nostalgia? It is a wistful or excessively sentimental desire to return in thought, or in fact, to a former time in one's life, to one's home or homeland, or to one's
family and friends; a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time.\footnote{My definition is forged from a combination of definitions, most prominently that of the Webster’s Third New International Unabridged Dictionary, and of the 2006 Random House Unabridged Dictionary.}

This desire, in thought or in fact, is prominent in the lives of diasporic Indians, who yearn for India after leaving, fostering dreams of a return. The presence of nostalgia for these Indians is an indicator of the presence of the narrative of return as a constant in their lives. Etymologically, the word is split in two, the Greek word \textit{Nostos}, meaning “return home,” and \textit{Algos}, meaning “pain” or “suffering.”\footnote{Webster’s Third New International Unabridged Dictionary (2002)} Putting that together, “nostalgia” becomes the suffering caused by the longing to return home. For Antara, it is indeed suffering she faces. Her longing to return runs counter to her desire to practice physical therapy in the United States, and to have access to proper healthcare. Anokhee too desires to live again in her childhood home in the Jawaharnager Society, yet she is caught by the contrary desire to pursue a career in graphic design in the U.S.\footnote{The Greek words can be easily applied to Homer’s tale of the journey of Odysseus and the heroes from Troy. Odysseus can in fact be viewed as a great Nostalgic, a man who spends twenty years of his life ultimately attempting to return to his exalted Home, Ithaca. Rather than the fervent explorations of an adventurer, for whom an infinite future exists, Odysseus continually chooses the finite decision to return to his home. His years away result in a constructed notion of Ithaca that resides high above his head, a pedestal holding the image of his wife, Penelope. This nostalgic image of home remains stronger than any obstacles that emerge on his journey, such as the temptations of Calypso. However, even after returning to Ithaca, and beating off the many suitors, Odysseus is restless. The two parts of Nostalgia are hard to reconcile. For Odysseus the return home and suffering that return causes are critical in the story.}

Gujaratis have no word for nostalgia; rather they use the word \textit{gharniyaad}, which means literally “memories of home” (in Hindi the word is \textit{gharkayaad}, and means the same). For Gujarati culture, and Indian cultures generally, this larger conception of “home” stands constructed equally of both the physical home and the family. Within the family, “home” is connected to a shared set of expectation about the self among others in the family, and a shared sense of achievement, morality, and survival. For Antara, “nostalgia” would also involve a deep worry about whether she, as an immigrant who
has come to the United States to build a new life in a new world, will ever return to the India she pines for. For often, the theme that holds this concept of nostalgia together is the sadness and complexity caused not only by the difficulty, but more, the impossibility of returning to India. When referring to this impossibility, “nostalgia” becomes more an automatic longing for what cannot be obtained. And nostalgia in this more automatic sense can become vague, a screen for un-knowing, for ignorance. Milan Kundera, sheds light on this problem in his novel Ignorance, where he analyzes a variety of interpretations of nostalgia.

One of the oldest European languages, Icelandic (like English) makes a distinction between two terms: soknudur: nostalgia in its general sense; and heimpra: longing for the homeland. Czechs have the Greek-derived nostalgie as well as their own noun, stesk, and their own verb; the most moving Czech expression of love: styska se mi po tule (“I yearn for you,” “I'm nostalgic for you”; “I cannot bear the pain of your absence.”) In Spanish anoranza comes from the verb anorar (to feel nostalgia), which comes from the Catalan enyorar, itself derived from the Latin word ignorare (to be unaware of...to lack or miss). In that etymological light nostalgia seems something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing. You are far away, and I don’t know what has become of you. 70

This ignorance, this uncertainty of what another person has become, can be generalized into nostalgia for a home, or home country, which is remade in the mind, ignoring how it was when you were there, and how it has changed since you left. Certainly, once home is left, it becomes increasingly difficult to define. Salman Rushdie notes in his essay on the film The Wizard of Oz, that for Dorothy in Oz,

The imagined world became the actual world, as it does for us all, because the truth is that once we have left our childhood places and started out to make up our own lives, armed only with what we have and are, we understand that the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that ‘there’s no place like home’ but rather there is no longer any such place as home: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz, which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began.\textsuperscript{71}

But most people actually leave home with less self-knowledge than that of Rushdie. Rather, most diasporic Indians, perhaps like most of us, are more like Dorothy.

Nostalgia, including the terrible separation from family and the uncertainty whether that family will be seen again, is the heavy baggage that the diasporic Indian carries across the border to new surroundings. And, like most people, they have little time to think as they cross that border. But that border is important. Although it is an elusive line, visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, concrete and transient, moral and amoral, to cross that line is to be transformed, to be privy to the secret truths which move unhindered in the world. As the diasporic Indian leaves India and crosses to another country or society, the old assumptions that help to perceive and control one’s surroundings are temporarily stripped away, leaving the wits as the sole tool to navigate this unknown place.\textsuperscript{72} Yet, the need to overcome, to breakdown boundaries and walls and surpass the limits of one’s own nature, is central to the quest theme. As the poet Cavafy suggests in his poem “Ithaka,” the point of the Odyssey is the Odyssey itself.\textsuperscript{73}


\textsuperscript{72} In literature, this type of character is represented in the picaresque form of the novel, where the cynical and amoral rascal makes the distinction from the bravery and chivalry of knighthood, to instead live by his wits.

Yet as with Odysseus, the migrant in a new land, stripped of institutional supports, becomes obliged to deal with the larger issues of change and adaptation, the difficulties of a new language, and new social protocols within a community. In the face of such difficulties—a new language, new social protocols—alienated by difference and hostility, and surrounded by piles of memories, the migrant retreats into the old culture, and constructs new walls made up of ingredients both brought along and left behind, to create a new structure to exist within. Antara and Anokhee live in Columbia, work at the GAP, overcome paper barriers put in their way, yet watch Indian television, and fill their new place with nostalgic objects to ease their sense of displacement. In a new land they try to build a new space in which they find comfort and meaningful identity.

Vijay Mishra’s concept of the “new” diaspora is important in clarifying the theorization of a contemporary Indian identity in the United States. This “new” diaspora, as defined in chapter one, is a diaspora that straddles “borders.” Its overriding characteristic is one of mobility. This “new” diaspora keeps in touch with India through networks of family, friends, and marriage, and is generally supported by a state apparatus that encourages reunions, and a cultural ideology that becomes, as Althusser would say, interpellated into the minds and actions of Indians living in the United States. The new diaspora is essentially characterized by greater mobility and a tendency to see one’s existence in this new space as negotiable, semi-permanent or even perhaps temporary. As opposed to the old diaspora which also viewed diasporic space as temporary, the members of the new diaspora have willingly decided to leave India, and thus find themselves in a more complicated space in which to forge their identity.

74 Althusser uses the word interpellation to describe how someone is drawn into an ideology, or in this case an identity. The example he uses is the physical nature of calling out to someone “hey you!” and the way that can really drag someone in. See “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in Lenin and Philosophy. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978) 127-186
In attempting to maintain connections with India in diaspora, the hypermobility of postmodern capital and ideas has had the effect of reinforcing the connection between diasporas and the politics of the “homeland.” In particular, this is illustrated by the influence of overseas Indians on the rise of the right-wing fundamentalist *hindutva* ideology in India. Diasporas reconstruct homelands in ways that are very different from the people in the homelands themselves. For instance, India in the eyes of an N.R.I. (Non-Resident Indian) may be a different place than for the resident Indian.\(^7^5\)

Mishra coined the term “the Diasporic Imaginary” to refer to any ethnic group that defines itself as a group that living in displacement. This term links the concern for diasporic self-fashioning with Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities”\(^7^6\) to suggest that people who identify themselves with a particular diaspora create an imaginary homeland, a fiction built “around a narrative imaginatively constructed by its subjects,” in effect, a nation.\(^7^7\) Mishra points in particular to the fantasy of the homeland as linked to the trauma of the recollected moment of departure, or in the case of the “old” diaspora, being yanked from the homeland. As Avtar Brah observes, “‘Home’ is a mythic space of desire in the diasporic imagination…It is a place of no-return even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’.”\(^7^8\) In general, the term “imaginary” further implies that this constructed world is often filled

\(^7^5\) At the same time, as Mishra points out, “the nation-state as an ‘imagined community’ needs diasporas to remind it of what the idea of homeland is.” Vijay Mishra. “The diasporic imaginary: theorizing the Indian diaspora.” *Textual Practices* 10.3 (1996) 424


\(^7^7\) Vijay Mishra. “The diasporic imaginary: theorizing the Indian diaspora.” *Textual Practices* 10.3 (1996) 423; In addition, an interesting anecdote that illustrates the “diasporic imaginary.” When the author Mira Kamdar interviewed the filmmaker Mira Nair, Nair refused to acknowledge that she lived in the United States, despite her twenty years of residency. Kamdar related the story to me: “She’ll say she lives in Africa, or she’ll say she lives in India. She has all these absurd things that she says like ‘I could never adjust to America, my feet are usually barefoot, I’m not used to wearing shoes’ and I said ‘well, I just came from Delhi, and it was pretty cold [laughs]. It’s just really interesting, because she would never ever say that she even lived in this country. But excuse me; her child goes to school here. She owns an apartment here.”

\(^7^8\) Avtar Brah, *Cratographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1997): 192
with contradictory markers, and when a diasporic identity forms, it is around some of these markers particularly, rather than others. Therefore, no one’s “diasporic experience” is the same, for no one is constructing their identity around the same imagined notions of their homeland.

The creation of a diasporic identity which is forged around the idea of an imaginary relationship with India forces the diasporic Indian to question not just the relationship with India, but also his place within U.S. society. Homi Bhabha contributes to Mishra’s understanding of the “new” diaspora by commenting that there are communities at the margins of nations, whose counter-narratives “continually evoke and erase” the totalizing boundaries of the modern nation-state. These equivocal narratives supplement those of the nation-state. “We must always keep open a supplementary space for the articulation of cultural knowledges that are adjacent and adjunct but not necessarily accumulative, teleological or dialectical.” That so-called “third space” becomes equally important for diasporic Indians to acknowledge and adapt to. Their influence on that “third space” affects the ever-changing construction of “nation” in the United States. Diaspora is where constructed nationalisms come into contact. The Indian diaspora is heterogeneous, and composed of many fragmented and often contradictory groups that in turn construct an overseas Indian nationalism, but also contribute inherently to the community in the U.S. which benefits from their presence. Yet the very contributions they make are laced with ambiguities about their belonging. As they form identity through the narrative of return which inspires a nostalgic thought of a return, they are unable to establish the concrete sense of being in the right place.

79 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994): 149
80 Ibid, 163
Migration itself has ambiguities, based on what Van der Veer would call “the dialectics of ‘belonging’ and ‘longing.’” He notes that “the theme of belonging opposes rootedness to uprootedness, establishment to marginality. The theme of longing harps on the desire for change and movement, but relates this to the enigma of arrival, which brings a similar desire to return to what one has left.” While these themes, longing and belonging, may be seen as modern issues, I would argue that in fact they have been intrinsically embedded within the history of the diaspora. As I have argued earlier, there is a great deal to be said for the connection between the two ends of the Indian diaspora, the pre-colonial migration, and the modern “brain-drain” diaspora. In stating this, I recognize that there are obviously huge differences in the construction of the identities of Gujarati maritime merchants and the post-1965 Patel Motel types. However, intrinsic to each of these cases are the difficult decisions that surround the notions of “belonging” and “longing.” There is no easy way to grapple with these decisions, and essential to these questions of how-to-belong, versus whether-to-go is the notion of “home” and the borders the émigré has crossed. The constructed nostalgic relationship with India contributes powerfully to the continued belief and understanding of India as “home” for those members of the Indian diaspora who seek to find a place in United States society.

“Exile,” Salman Rushdie writes, “is the dream of glorious return.” I find “exile” an appropriate word, despite its connotations with punishment, and a forced departure from one’s country of residence. Perhaps in the context of diasporic Indian identity, it is useful to view “exile” as a self-imposed departure from one’s homeland. In this case, it is

also perhaps important to see “exile” as different from “immigrant.” As Bharati Mukherjee has written, “the price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation.” These “exiles” are preoccupied by a sense of loss, an urge to look back at what they’ve left, to look forward to a potential return, and to resist any change that would inhibit that chance. Inherent in this desire is the tendency to construct an India to which one can return, modeled after the nostalgic diffusion of culture within the diaspora, what Vijay Mishra refers to as “fossilization.”

Anokhee, upon hearing that there was talk of possibly rebuilding the house in Ahmedabad that she had grown up in, looked aghast, immediately stating that there was no need for the house to change, no need to build a new one. “It’s fine the way it is, it never needs to change,” she said breathlessly. Anokhee’s inability to deal with any change to the India, and her literal home, which she left, speaks directly to the fossilization present in the diasporic imaginary. Anokhee’s conception of India as a place that, in her mind, she might return to one day, is entirely formed around the image of the country at the moment of her departure. However, behind this fossilized mentality is the profound truth that physical separation from India invariably results in an understanding that, no matter what, the lost intangible will never be reclaimed. As Salman Rushdie puts it, “we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.”

The clichéd phrases, “there is no place like home,” and “home is where the heart is,” are ambiguous formations. They superficially suggest that there can be no other

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place like home, a sentiment often espoused by those who are seen as having gone away. But alternatively, and perhaps more importantly, they can also mean that the idea of home is a delusion; it never existed in its safe pure form.

In *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, Chanu, the husband of the main character, Nazneen, is said to have the “always-going-home-syndrome,” as he continually promises his wife that they will return to Bangladesh, to the guaranteed happiness that their “home” country will offer them, after years of hard work in England. Yet the years pass, and the family becomes more firmly embedded into the British-Bangladeshi world, and further from a possible return, despite Chanu’s frequent remarks. To his teenage daughter, whom he originally wishes not to grow up in England, he says, “you see, when we go there, what will you lose? Burgers and chips and tight jeans. And what will you gain? Happiness.” While *Brick Lane* is obviously concerned with Bangladeshis in England, the “always-going-home-syndrome” is fully present for Indians living in the U.S as well. Within diasporic spaces the sentiment and rhetoric of return establishes kinship links with fellow scattered Indians. It is something said between people as a matter of manners, a way of establishing social cohesion.

The social currency that the “always going home syndrome” has become was made apparent to me sitting in Ahmedabad at a desk in the offices of an NGO called The International Center for Entrepreneurship and Career Development where I had the chance to come in contact with a woman who passed on a startling realization. The NGO was located on a campus outside of Ahmedabad, on a brief piece of green space that was carefully kept up by a few gardeners employed by the organization. Outside the walls of the place, meandering goat herds mixed with dust, sparse vegetation growth, and

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new housing developments. The woman had driven up and strolled in as if she owned
the place, her swagger and startling good looks intimidating. Upon hearing that I was
from the United States, she sat down to talk. As an actress, she had had the pleasure of
performing with a traveling Gujarati theater company in the U.S. As they performed at
community halls around the country for various groups of Gujaratis, she had the
opportunity to speak and stay with many of these upper middle class NRI Gujaratis who
had left India to pursue opportunities in the U.S. I asked her if she thought about
settling abroad, maybe to the United States, but she quickly brushed my questions aside.
“No. Indians in the U.S. don’t want to be there. They are only there because they have to
be.” She continued, “If they had the choice they would return here immediately. All of
the people I stayed with spoke of how that country ‘wasn’t for them’. How they all were
going to return to India when they retire.” This woman was misreading the polite
protocol inherent in the diasporic community-- to share the simple sentiment that yes,
we all want to go home-- as the simple truth instead of a nicety covering for a much
more complicated set of feelings.

But the “always-going-home syndrome” has evolved from a matter of protocol
within these groups to become an important part of the identity embraced by Indians in
the United States. As diasporic Indians in the United States have struggled to maintain
their “Indianness,” the conscious, or subconscious, decision to adjust and adapt, leads to
a redefinition of identity. In that sense, the “always-going-home” sentiment is more than
a point of social procedure, and more than a way to relate to fellow members of a similar
space. Rather, it has become part of what one actually believes, something diasporic
Indians will tell themselves, and let serve as a buffer against some of the difficulties they

87 From Notes of the day, February 26th, 2006
face in the lives they live. They believe that before they get married, they will return; then before they have kids, they will return; then after they retire, they will return; the syndrome sucks the diasporic Indian in. But positively, more than a rhetoric, the “always-going-home-syndrome” becomes a front for the Indian in the United States to quietly get used to the life and culture of this adopted home, while seemingly not compromising any allegiance or longing for the broadly symbolic “home” left behind in India.

As Indians in the United States seek to assimilate, in part by hiding behind nostalgia, to some extent it would seem logical that the possibility of a hyphenated identity would be embraced. To some members of the diaspora, a hyphenated, Indian-American, identity provides a sense of citizenry and dual connection. Vishakha Desai has written: “Another condition of making a life in the United States is to acknowledge that being in ‘the land of opportunity’ also means giving up a very comfortable sense of emotional well-being and familial connections.” This mixed blessing is one of the necessary conditions of being a hybrid or hyphenated self. When Desai made the decision to take a U.S. passport in order to sponsor her parents, and subsequently three of her younger siblings, she came to grips with the notion that she would always be perceived as an Indian. It had not occurred to her, nor had the idea caught on in the cultural milieu of the society in 1980, that one could be an “Indian-American.” As Garrett Hongo has remarked, the marginalization of Asians in this country was so

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complete that their Americanness, or their possible role in the center, was not yet fully acknowledged at the time.\textsuperscript{89}

Yet as Vijay Mishra notes, in the politics of hyphenation, despite its desire to be actively engaged, the very act of hyphenating is in itself disempowering.\textsuperscript{90} This sentiment is furthered by Samir Dayal, who argues that the very rhetoric of the inclusivity of “hyphenation” hides the fact that “Americanness,” or “whiteness,” is by implication associated with normativity.\textsuperscript{91} At the heart of this argument is the notion that to embrace a hyphenated identity (Indian-American) is to acknowledge a certain “otherization” of one’s self. As Mishra notes:

For these hyphenated bodies (in spite of an enlightened ethos of citizenry) an extreme form of double consciousness occurs whenever the views of the dominant community begin to coincide with the rhetoric of what Sartre once observed as the racist question about the presumed ultimate solution of diasporas: ‘What do we do with them now?’ For diasporas this question always remains a trace, a potentially lethal ‘solution,’ around which their selves continue to be shaped.\textsuperscript{92}

By adapting such a hyphenated understanding as a way of assimilating in the United States, there is a danger within the diasporic Indian community, in associating “Americaness,” as Dayal does, with “Whiteness.” Such sentiment has the problematic

\textsuperscript{89} The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America, Garrett Hongo, ed (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1993) xxii
tendency to promote a racialized understanding of the United States, as a place where the association with “Whiteness” is seen as the goal to assimilation.

But regardless, for the diasporic Indian, seated on the edge of inclusion, the dilemma between assimilation and the preservation of a diasporic sensibility seems prominent. However, why does the decision to assimilate prove particularly difficult, even among upper class Indians in the United States, who have the social tools to easily slip into the American landscape? As Dayal questions, “is it possible that they perceive or imagine advantages to accrue from a calculated self-positioning as diasporic? Or is it maybe that they feel they must remain in between the home they left behind and another that will never truly allow them to feel at home?”

Perhaps the existence of a color line, formed by race and ethnicity, weighs too heavily in the United States, and prevents ethnic groups from being able to forget their differences. A prominent Indian in the United States, or even an ordinary Indian on the street for that matter, is almost never viewed separated from ethnicity. A novelist like Jhumpa Lahiri, is recognized as an Indian-American, not just as an American. The same is true for the actor Kal Penn, whose roles almost never go beyond the color of his skin, despite the fact that he changed his name from Kalpen Modi in order to gain acceptance within Hollywood.

There is something ironic in the inability to see such a hybrid background as essentially part of United States culture, yet there is a harsh reality that the tendency to point out the differences around us as a way of forming identity is strong in the United States.

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While many Indians who currently come to the United States do not find a large cultural wall to climb, due to the existence of the large numbers of Indians already here, early waves of the diaspora came to this country without a concrete space to claim. The lack of identity at that time created a group of people who are perhaps the most aware of the relationship between diaspora, ethnicity, the nation-state, and of the struggle to possess the “hyphen.” The desire to embrace a hyphen signals the attempt to identify with some larger group, as well as remain problematically situated between “here” and “there.” Vishakha Desai falls into this group, as someone who was forced to reconsider her identity as an Indian in the United States, because of the lack of Indians, and the lack of Indian diasporic space. For Indians who have come more recently, and who have had the comfort of the presence of other, settled Indians, the hyphen is not necessarily desired; these Indians are content to exist purely as outsiders within another society and culture. Anokhee and Antara fall into this later group. They surround themselves with other recently arrived Indian friends and family, they eat strictly Indian food at home, they decorate their house with Indian things, and, as a result, see themselves simply as Indians living in the United States, taking advantage of the country’s opportunities, but always considering a return to India.

However, the “there” (Indian) part of the equation is not easily linked to a teleology of return, because this belonging (to India) can only function as an imaginary index. Like the “always going home syndrome,” the desire to be firmly in both places signifies its own impossibility. Within the Indian diaspora in the United States, the narrative of return has initially emerged around this dilemma, as the story of belonging to both India and the United States remains more of a myth than reality. The narrative of return formed around this myth, and around the nostalgic desire to return, but with the
embedded understanding that a return was not a reality. Rather, the narrative of return was a way to maintain comfort about the distance from India, and ultimately a way to help form an identity as an Indian in the United States. As Anokhee and Antara live in, and work out of, Columbia, Maryland, and as they cook Gujarati food with Ahmedabad, India, on their minds, and as news of the growth and development of the India they left flash before their eyes, they remain nostalgically ignorant of how they will define their identity in the long term, as Indians in the United States.
Chapter 3: Threats in, Hopes for, a Return
The Possible Phenomenon of a Reverse Brain Drain and its Implication for India and the United States

The long-term trends in the world economy are clear: We are shifting inexorably toward a knowledge economy, where productive, well-paid work is based on ideas, information and adaptive thinking. Work involves more intangibles (brains) and fewer tangibles (muscles). The country and the companies with the best brains will win.

Alan M. Webber. Founding editor of Fast Company95

You don’t have to go there—don’t have to taste pani puri from carts at Chowpatty beach in Bombay or smell the mixture of dust, garbage, and diesel that might assault your senses as you leave a cinema after seeing Bollywood’s latest—to be there. You can go to India in the United States. It might be the Indian restaurant down the street where the lights are low enough and the décor exotic enough for a suitable date, or it might be the dentist you trust with your teeth. Perhaps it’s the fact that when your new computer starts acting funny, the man speaking to you on the phone is in Bangalore.

Few modern Americans are surprised by the number of Indians in American society, or are shocked to hear that Indians have been vital to the high-tech boom in the United States. Most probably wouldn’t even contest the notion, found occasionally in magazines and newspapers, that Indians are changing the world.

For decades, India has watched as thousands of its top students and technologically gifted citizens left for the United States, enticed by the opportunities of the West. Today, India stands second only to Mexico in the amount of legal migration to the United States, and among all countries it has the largest degree of students coming to

study for a degree. The mass migration by India’s educated classes to the United States and other industrialized countries has been dubbed the Indian “Brain Drain.” Through the 1990s, this “drain” remained a harsh reality for India. However, a mere decade later, the downturn of the U.S technology industry, along with a booming economy back “home,” is providing incentive for Indians and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) to repatriate, in what is being called, perhaps naively and ambitiously, a “Reverse Brain Drain.” The possibility of excelling within a booming economy and maintaining close proximity to cultural roots serves as a powerful lure, creating a possible shift in the nature of the Indian diaspora. Thus, as the narrative of return, changing with economic realities, continues to encourage the repatriation of Indians from the United States back to India, it also poses a variety of threats. Indian growth and development may not continue at a strong pace, deflating the myth of a return in the United States essential for the continuation of a reverse brain drain. For the United States, the potential loss of talent implicit in a reverse brain drain threatens to destabilize the country’s economic dominance. Both of these concerns are at odds with each other, and their delicate relationship is essential in determining whether the economic factor in the narrative of a return will continue to draw Indian back to India.

In his search for a job in a high-tech hub with opportunity for career growth, Pavan Tadepalli, an Indian-born software developer, found it easy to turn down a permanent job in the Boston area, and return instead to Hyderabad. “There are more opportunities in India right now. What I can do in Boston, I am confident I can do the same thing in Hyderabad.” In a discussion about the future, my great uncle in India

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once remarked to me with a sad shake of his head, “I can’t understand why anyone wouldn’t want to come back.” In fact, that India is “the place to be” has now become a common sentiment among Indians in India and NRI’s alike.

While Indians are returning for many reasons and in a variety of fields, it is predominantly in the I.T. sector that this phenomenon is taking place. The Indian software trade body, the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) has estimated that about 5,000 NRI technology professionals with more than five years of U.S work experience moved back to India from 2002-03.\(^98\) Anna Lee Saxenian, in her book *The New Argonauts*, says that a job fair in the San Francisco Bay area, sponsored by the magazine *Silicon India*, drew 1,200 Indians all looking for potential jobs.\(^99\) The combination of personal and professional reasons for returning, the humanitarian pull to contribute to their “home” country, along with a newly challenging and profitable work environment, provides a very strong incentive. “We are really betting on the Indian Diaspora returning home,” said Vicent Pluvinage, chief executive of ipValue, a company that commercializes intellectual assets for large technology companies. His firm recently hired a top executive from Oracle to head its Indian offices, and expects that soon a large percentage of their twenty-member team in India will be returnees.\(^100\) Most recent émigrés are experienced professionals who have spent significant time in the U.S. developing their professional skills.

While Indians in the U.S. are being lured back by the same factors that attract foreign investors—a huge potential market in one of the world’s fastest growing


\(^{100}\) Saritha Rai, “Indians Find They Can Go Home Again” *NY Times*, Dec. 26, 2005
economies—they are also stepping into positions that in some, high-profile cases let them live lives similar to the ones they left in the U.S. Because of the higher corporate positions some of these returnees return to, they are welcomed by so-called “soft landings”: nice cars, gated communities, and international schools for kids.\textsuperscript{101} But while this “Silicon Valley star” treatment only applies to a certain group of highly qualified individuals, their experiences add to the narrative of return, creating a new myth of a comfortable and economically favorable return to India for all Indians in the United States. In fact, many of the people who return do not receive this star treatment, and thus must deal with the difficulties of readjusting and living in India, after years of living in the United States. The actual difficulties that are present in a return and the ability to deal with these complexities in order to make the informed decision to return will be discussed in the next chapter.

Despite the numbers, and despite the talk, the Reverse Brain-Drain phenomenon is a relatively recent thing. Up until the late 1990’s, there were almost no jobs to return to. In 1985, Utpal Vakil came to the United States to get a Masters and Ph.D in Engineering, specifically in the field of Polymer research. After five years in school in the United States, and after working for two years as part of a prestigious research team at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, he decided to return to Mumbai where his parents were. “What I did was almost unheard of,” he remarked. “Everyone around entertained the idea about going back at some point, but no one ever seriously went through with it.”\textsuperscript{102} In 1992, back in India, jobs of the same caliber as his work at Wright-Patterson were not as easy to find. “U.S. Returnees need not apply,” was the common sentiment in recruitment postings placed by many Indian software companies in the late 90’s. Their

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid
\textsuperscript{102} Notes from day. May 6\textsuperscript{th}, 2006. Bangalore.
mentality was that returnees, softened and pampered by their years in the U.S., would be detrimental to the company’s larger interests. 103 This ambivalence toward returning Indian “hybrids” speaks to the prejudiced undertone that has been present in discussions on hybridity, because a hybrid has lost “authenticity,” which can be read as the ability to truly fit within Indian society as an Indian. For Vakil, this repressive sentiment led him to take a position with an Indian-managed company, whose vertical structure demanded years of service in order to achieve a higher status. Only in the late 1990’s, as the outsourcing boom started to grip India’s technological sectors, and with the sudden abundance of international companies, did Vakil find a managerial job with General Electric in Bangalore.

A stable work environment in India is a shift from earlier decades, when the diaspora left India in search of such an environment. “At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom,” Jawaharlal Nehru said on August 14th, 1947; these were words that introduced an independent India to the world. Nehru continued, “the achievement we celebrate today is but a step, an opening of opportunity, to greater triumphs and achievements that await us. Are we brave enough and wise enough to grasp this opportunity and accept the challenge of the future?” At that time, the note of caution issued by Nehru went unheeded as the new country faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Now, nearly six decades after independence, India seems ready to take its place in the world.

While the American media has had a field day making economic comparisons to the rapid growth of the so-called Asian Tigers and the Chinese Dragon, the new player, the Indian Elephant, has gained both momentum and attention, instilling a new

optimism across India. The economy is expanding at a current rate of over 8% annually, making it one of the fastest growing markets in the world.\textsuperscript{104} This surge is being felt across all sectors of the Indian economy, as both firms and people are jumping at the emerging opportunities. Over the past fifteen years, the central government has slowly liberalized the economy, easing regulations and opening doors to overseas investors, as well as lowering import tariffs and granting generous tax breaks to offshore businesses.\textsuperscript{105} These slow, yet bold reforms have provided security and bolstered expectations for foreign investors. For the global business community, an “India Strategy” has become a necessity, as multinationals lick their chops at the sight of a secular state; a free press; a decent, if imperfect, legal system; and one of the largest consumer classes in the world.\textsuperscript{106}

However, an economically open India has not come easily, and the difficulties of the Indian State directly led to the start of the post-1965 diaspora to the United States, where opportunity and lifestyle seemed in strong contrast to those of India. Under Nehru, prime minister from 1947 till 1964, the dynamics of centre-state relations shifted power away from the Parliament toward the Executive, into the hands of the prime minister. Post-Independence India became Nehru’s private laboratory for the ideas—a state-controlled economy, industrialization—that he had acquired from his time abroad, and his British education.\textsuperscript{107} Although a strong believer in modern democracy, Nehru represents the closest thing India has to a feudal royal family, the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty


\textsuperscript{105} These reforms are discussed in: Arvind Panagariya. “India in the 1980's and 1990's: A Triumph of Reforms.” \textit{International Trade}, April, 2004


\textsuperscript{107} Nehru was particular influenced by Fabian Socialists, the British counterpart of the German Marxian revisionists. The “Fabian Society” emerged as an intellectual group in 1884 as a part of latter-day utopian socialism. For further reading, see writings of George Bernard Shaw, and Graham Wallas.
in the Congress Party.\footnote{108} At the fragile beginning of the nation, many foreign political analysts predicted that democracy would not last ten years; and indeed many similarities to other post-colonial leaders like Nasser, Nkrumah, and Sukarno exist. However, Nehru was aware of the dangers of his situation. In 1937 the Modern Review, a well regarded Indian magazine at the time, published an anonymous analysis of Nehru stating: “he has all the makings of a dictator in him—vast popularity...an intolerance of others and a certain contempt for the weak and inefficient...His overmastering desire to get things done, to sweep away what he dislikes and build anew, will hardly brook for long the slow process of democracy...” \footnote{109} This remarkably astute description proves all the more interesting when you learn that the author was Nehru himself.

At the birth of an Independent India, with much of the power resting in his lap, Nehru played off the notion of Swadeshi (self-sufficiency) that had become the order of the day during the late years of the Independence movement. The centralization of state authority led to a centrally planned economy that Nehru opted for in order to achieve an effective and equitable allocation of national resources, as well as balanced economic development. This “mixed-economy” combined features of both a capitalist market economy and a social command economy. Under this economic policy, the public sector was stipulated to include areas that were deemed too important or not profitable enough to leave to the market, services like the railways and the postal system.\footnote{110} A series of five-year plans organized the supposed progression of the Indian state, placing great responsibility and trust in the central government for development. There were strong

\footnote{108} It was pure coincidence that led Indira to marry the Parsi, Feroze Gandhi, who was of no relation to the Mahatma Gandhi.
\footnote{109} As quoted in Pankaj Mishra’s Temptations of the West. (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006) 39
controls on all private investment, especially license requirements, high tariffs, import barriers, and little governmental interest in exports. The result of this, aptly named the “license raj” period, was moderate growth in state-run industry, but negligible foreign investment, ultimately causing developmental problems for India, especially while attempting to deal with a rapidly growing population. India’s average growth rate of just 3.2 percent between 1950 and 1980 was subsequently labeled the “Hindu rate of growth” since it was barely higher than population growth (thus doing little raise per capita living standards).\footnote{Edward Luce. In Spite of the Gods. (New York: Doubleday, 2007) 25} This India was what Naipaul would call, “a wounded civilization.”\footnote{Reference to V.S. Naipaul book of the same name, where he capitulates the feeling that the vast, mysterious, and agonized continent had, as of yet, to find an ideology of regeneration, after 1000’s of years of foreign rule.} At this time, the diaspora gained strength, as many educated and skilled Indians left the country, seeking opportunity in countries of higher growth. The unstable world they left made a return from the “developed world” difficult.

In 1991, this image shifted, as major economic reforms liberalized the Indian economy, casting off the License Raj, and providing more of a free market to the world. At the time, the Congress party had regained power with a working majority. And the government, led by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, dismantled some of the pillars of Nehru’s economic model. The impetus for economic reform came as a result of a balance of payment and national solvency crises in mid-1991, sparked by skyrocketing global oil prices. This crisis forced the Indian government to seek a loan from the International Monetary Fund, and accept certain terms of a stabilization and structural adjustment program. The finance minister at the time, Manmohan Singh (the current Prime Minister), dismantled the old system in favor of a free-market system that removed the many barriers to the entry of international firms in the industrial sector.
The decision to liberalize resulted in a dramatic acceleration of growth, and the economy has grown at an average of 6.1% a year since 1991. “Let the world hear it loud and clear,” Singh famously spoke in announcing India’s new economic reforms and investment regime. “India is now wide awake.”

Yet reformers only addressed the first part of the problem facing Indian economic development. The economic reforms of the early 1990’s concentrated on redressing the negative effects of over-intervention by the state in certain sectors, and removing the more stifling bureaucratic controls on industry. However, they failed to address or rectify the state negligence of important social sectors, such as the problem with poverty. As a result, India still faces large problems that stand in its way to becoming a fully developed country, problems that complicate the easiness of a possible return for members of the Diaspora, by providing harsh circumstances.

Over the last thirty years, India’s history has been tumultuous. A nineteen-month period of autocracy; the assassination of two leaders of the Nehru-Gandhi family; clashes with separatist movements in Punjab, Kashmir, Assam, and elsewhere; a crossover from a closed economic regime to a more open economy; the movement from secular government to a Hindu nationalist government, and then back again; single-party rule to twenty-four party rule; an anti-nuclear stance to nuclear power; undeclared border wars with Pakistan to a lengthy peace process; virtual bankruptcy to lengthy boom. A rapid flip of the headlines chronicling these events reveals an unpredictable reality, sprinkled with scandal and glamour.

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But in the statistics buried on the inside pages, a different, glummer character emerges. For despite the headlines, India is still a developing country that is overwhelmingly poor. Upon further investigation, the numbers begin to rush at you with intensity. Despite the levels of wealth (there are over 60,000 millionaires), still, close to 300 million people live below the poverty line of Rs.300 per month.\textsuperscript{115} That is roughly the same amount of people living in the United States. There is widespread and inescapable poverty, high unemployment, a 40 percent illiteracy rate, an AIDS crisis, a struggling infrastructure consisting of crumbling roads, and large scale water and power issues. The recent economic growth that has captured the world’s attention has been confined primarily to a handful of high-growth urban centers, while most rural areas have experienced no change. In those rural areas, the population is largely dependent on agriculture to make a living, a risky industry dependent on the unpredictable monsoon and often a victim to the lower costs brought about by globalization and conglomeration in the food industry.

T. N. Ninan, the editor and publisher of the Indian newspaper the Business Standard, has called India the “one percent society.”\textsuperscript{116} By this he means that by whatever indicator you choose, either economic or social, India is improving at a rate of roughly 1 percent a year. For example, India’s poverty rate is declining at about 1 percent a year. In 1991 it was 35 percent. By 2000 it was 26 percent.\textsuperscript{117} We can only assume that

\textsuperscript{115} “Good Governance” India Watch: Wake up India. 4 March, 2007 <http://www.wakeupcall.org/administration_in_india/poverty_line.php>


\textsuperscript{117} Ninan takes the largest estimate, which is the official figure used by the Indian government and the World Bank, but the number is debated. Clearly India’s measure of inequality, known as the “Gini Coefficient,” has risen since 1991. But that is not inconsistent with a sharply falling poverty ration. Improvements in other numbers, notably India’s human development indicators, corroborate the poverty reduction data.
it has probably continued to decline at roughly the same rate since then. Another example is the literacy rate. In 1991, it was 52 percent. By 2001, it was 65 percent. Or with life expectancy. In 1991, the average Indian would live to the age of fifty-eight. By 2001, that had risen to the age of sixty-five. To judge by the living conditions of ordinary Indians and not by the drama of national events, the country is moving forward, but at steady and slow pace. Perhaps too slow. An improvement of 1 percent a year is fine when you have a developed economy. But when almost 300 million people live in complete poverty, it is painfully slow. India’s fragmented political culture makes it very difficult for governments to take the decisive action that would convert India into a 2 percent society, like neighbor and current rival, China.

The 1991 reforms have greatly benefited India. If carried out sequentially, further liberalization of the economy would lead to higher growth and bring greater benefits. But India’s free market liberalizers cannot just wish the State away, nor should they want to. A just and meritocratic state is integral to the economy’s continued success. To thrive, India’s businesses need good infrastructure, a literate and healthy workforce, a sustainable environment, and the promise of law and order. Very little of this can be accomplished by the private sector on its own. The division in India, as in the United States, is too often between those who believe the State should play no role in a citizen’s life beyond defense and law and order, and those who believe it should dominate all aspects of life. India’s ability to handle these questions is directly tied to its ability to fully exploit its opportunities. Successfully tackling these problems would tax the powers and resources of an efficient and forward thinking state. In the present Indian state, a question mark hovers over its ability to achieve these objectives. Yet the continued growth of the economy and the subsequent desire for members of the diaspora to return
relies on the continued alleviation of the problems that grip the Indian state. The ability
to successfully proceed in improving infrastructural problems will play a critical role in
the future form of the narrative of return. While a company like General Electric might
offer an ideal work environment in Bangalore, the question remains whether the world
outside its gates offers the same satisfaction, and thus the same lure for Indians seeking
to return.

Today Bangalore, India’s fifth-largest city with 6.52 million people, stands near
the center of the booming IT industry, which has carried India’s economic growth. At
General Electric’s John F. Welch Technology center on the city’s outskirts, 2,300
employees—among which there are 1,800 engineers and 450 doctorates—look into the
molecular structure of polymers in the attempt to make better and more effective
products and machines, like airplane engines.118

It is May, 2006, and I am in the city for the first time, curious to see and learn
about the global hype surrounding the city. Utpal has driven me to the tech parks to
show me around the G.E. complex where he works. On the way we pass a number of
major multinationals, including Dell, Perot Systems, and Texas Instruments. As we pull
up to the G.E. entrance gate, an America Online billboard catches my attention. A
young, good looking, Indian man sits at a computer; his head is turned, as he stares out
of the billboard with a smile. Next to his face is the printed message: “We’re connecting
100 million people and making the internet a better place for you.”

Inside the G.E. complex the buildings are all state-of-the-art, the lawns all neatly
manicured, and the cafeteria full of gourmet foods. With all the facilities present in the
complex, including a gym for employees, I realize that, much like the corporate offices in

118 Figures quoted by Utpal Vakil. In notes from day, May 7th, 2006. Bangalore
the United States, the building has been designed so that there is no reason to leave. The difference is that, driving out through the gates of the complex, one returns to another world. The amenities of the complex ensure these workers will have no reason to think about the bad roads, grueling traffic, and general hassles that lie beyond the gates.

Among the employees of G.E., as with similar multi-national companies that inhabit the tech-parks of Bangalore, these are now expected advantages, at least while on the company’s clock. Utpal tells me that in his office, at least 40% have either studied or lived in the U.S. While we gaze into the labs, and across the many neat desks, he continues to say how the team he oversees is part of an international G.E. research and development team that is connected to centers in Schenectady, New York, Munich, and Shanghai. Twice a year, Utpal comes to the United States for meetings and interviews.

Gazing around Bangalore’s Welch G.E. Center, I realize that it could be located nearly anywhere in the world. The complex is fenced off, and designed in a way to be ecologically prudent in an Indian environment, but aesthetically it could be just as easily found anywhere in the “first-world.” G.E. has effectively succeeded in recreating a “developed world” business environment in the “developing world,” by making sure global business practices and setting take precedence over the influences of national and cultural properties. As a result, opportunities with the more sophisticated R&D companies continue to encourage the repatriation of Indians and Indian-Americans. Vijay Anand, the managing director of Sun Microsystem’s India Engineering Center in Bangalore put it best when he noted that, “first-rate talent is moving back and helping bridge cultures.”

119 These multinationals are banking on the presentation of top-of-the-line working environments in an exciting place to continue to encourage a reverse-brain

drain. For despite its relatively young age as a nation-state, India has changed considerably to reach this economic highpoint, and the G.E. center stands as an impressive example of this newly lit India, capable of formerly unheard of possibility. Yet this new level of achievement is not yet entirely stable, and as a result the new myths of comfort attached to the narrative of return remain unfixed.

Considering the hype about Bangalore, the city itself still remains a contradiction. Arriving by plane, I am struck by the modern airport that sits across the tarmac, the modern terminal covered with bluish glass, and surrounded by foliage. For the first time in the twenty years of flying domestically in Indian, I notice that I won’t have to walk across the tarmac to reach the terminal. Inside, as I wait for my bags, the revolving ads above the conveyer belt display glamorous signs for The Leela Hotel, and The Oberoi Bangalore, both 5-Star hotels. Recently, the prices of Bangalore’s hotels were ranked the highest in the world, ahead of New York, L.A., and Miami. The existence of such high class hotels in an Indian city still struggling to provide basic amenities personifies much of the contradiction present in the economic boom gripping India.

Bangalore was once known as the Garden City, because of its lush vegetation, the huge trees that canopy the streets, and the existence of public parks and a botanical garden. Yet today, those trees fight with rapid development, and the streets under them are constantly packed with cars. Furthermore, there is a gap between the I.T. and service sector companies that have set up shop in the city, and the local government that cannot keep the infrastructure up with the development. Traffic jams, power shortages, full hotels, and a congested airport make conducting business a trial. On my way out of the airport, I got stuck in bumper to bumper traffic on the main road going out of town (a

120 Around $299 a night, as quoted in: Simon Long. “Now for the Hard Part” Economist, 3 June, 2006
questionable four-lane road). After a few miles, I found that the source of the congestion was a two lane bridge that was under construction. There were doubts as to whether the bridge would ever be finished. This road was the main road linking downtown Bangalore with most of the major I.T. parks located at the city’s edge, and the traffic was always there.

Deeply imbedded in the international attention given to the city is a fear by local politicians of that same global attention, of westernizing influences changing the city at a rate beyond their control. The fear of losing cultural “authenticity” as multinational companies have their way stands at the center of this debate. In part, it is the returnees, the members of this reverse brain drain, who are to blame for the changes they bring with them. The dilemma that a possible return might in fact disrupt cultural (and ultimately personal) authenticity, becomes a real factor in the narrative of return. This fear has played out in Bangalore in an official decision to change the name back to its vernacular original, Bengalooru, much to the chagrin of global businessman banking on the precedent established by the name in a global community. ¹²¹ “Bangalore represents a cosmopolitan, multicultural brand,” said Nandan M. Nilekani, the CEO of Infosys Technologies, one of India’s most prolific I.T. companies. “It’s not prudent to abandon the name of India’s most global city.”¹²² What is imbedded in the sentiment of the business community is the threat to the continued construction of a professional India that stands ready to welcome home its long lost brothers and sisters to a certain global name. The vision of a productive and efficient India is necessary to maintain the myth of an easy return that exists within the current narrative of return drawing Indians in the United States back to India.

¹²¹ Saritha Rai. “You Say Bangalore, They Say Bengalooru” NY Times. 2 Nov. 2006
¹²² Ibid
The conflict of these two attitudes is loudly on display in Bangalore, and the city has developed a two-sided nature which is evident when you walk the streets. On downtown M.G. Road and its neighboring streets, young, presumably well-paid workers, many in their 20’s, dress in the latest American and European brand names, speak an accented English, shop in fancy malls, and drink at classy pubs. In contrast is another class of people, the indigenous Karnaticans, who speak Kannada, and live their lives according to the traditions of the area. These people exist in the same places, but often without the same kind of money to spend. They cram the public city buses, they bicycle the streets, they walk hand in hand through the gardens, but they remain outside the fancy restaurants and clothing stores.

This divide in Bangalore is representative of the contradiction that has come to represent India. In downtown Bangalore, wealth and poverty compete for the rapidly disappearing space. Yet for the vast middle class that exists between these two extremes throughout India, the prospects are continually improving. The challenge, as previously discussed, remains for the country to bring its people, in all its great diversity, to the same economic table. And while much of the solution lies in the hands of the Indian government, India is also pinning hopes on its human capital. It is commonplace to say a nation’s future lies in its youth. For India it specifically lies in its youthfulness. A large percentage of the current population is young, meaning that the level of able and qualified people will continue to grow. It is critical for the country that even if some of these youth decide to go abroad to pursue academic or economic opportunity, they return to India. This demographic bulge in the eyes of many is guaranteed to produce explosive economic growth, and is seen as a major reason why India is expected to
become one of the world’s three largest economies in thirty years, for the proportion of

What is true for Bangalore is equally true for Ahmedabad, the largest city in
Gujarat. As the city has developed on the strength of its manufacturing industry and its
increasingly well-developed infrastructure, the posh parts of the town have become more
posh. A city with a variety of colleges and universities that draw in young people, as well
as the home to the Indian Institute of Management-Ahmedabad, the top management
school in the country, Ahmedabad is posed to become one of the leading cities in India.
Recently, at the Vibrant Gujarat Economic Expo, companies from across India
promised an astounding $100 billion in investments (Rs.2 trillion), with plans to develop
The result of that kind of investment is obvious in the
continued growth of the state, as well as the continued expansion of opportunities for
those looking to be in Gujarat. At the expo, before announcing his investments, Mukesh
Ambani, the head of Reliance Industries (originally a Gujarati company that is now one
of India’s most successful), thundered out to the audience “Reliance is first a Gujarati
compny, then an Indian company, then a global company.” Ratan Tata, head of the
Ahmedabad has been ready for this kind of attention. Already the city has grown
considerably over the past few years as new roads, over-bridges, under-bridges, and shiny
new buildings have arrived in a storm. On the centrally located C.G. Road, international
stores like Nike and Levi’s sell their merchandise at the same prices they would on Broadway in New York City. And in the many hip new coffee shops and hookah bars, cosmopolitan young *Amdavadis* (as in “Ahmedabadis”) speak in a mixture of Gujarati, English, and Hindi. The presence of these signs of “modernization” remains important in presenting Ahmedabad as a city that can accommodate Gujaratis who are looking to return, and who seek the same sort of comforts and amenities.

India’s current economic and social growth has a direct effect on the United States that will play out in the abilities of the U.S. government and private institutions to deal with India’s rise. Thomas Friedman points out that in the past, the focus of India’s youth on the sciences and engineering has played a crucial role in the brain drain to the United States. According to Friedman, the percentage of those taking a bachelor’s degree in science and engineering in the United States remains at roughly 31 percent.\(^{126}\) Yet the demand for such jobs in the United States has always been high, and to keep them filled, a large percentage of foreign-born Science and Engineering graduates migrate to the U.S for professional reasons. In 2004, the National Science Board noted that between 1990 and 2000, the proportion of foreign-born people with bachelor’s degrees in S&E occupations rose from 11 to 17 percent; the proportion of foreign-born with master’s degrees rose from 19 to 29 percent; the proportion of those with PhD’s in the S&E labor force rose from 24 to 34 percent.\(^{127}\) By attracting scientists and engineers who are foreign-born, the United States has managed to maintain growth in the S&E labor force without a commensurate increase in support for the long-term costs of training and attracting U.S. born citizens to these fields.

\(^{127}\) Statistics come from a report by the National Science Board published in Science and Engineering Indicators. As referenced by in Ibid, 259
However, the simultaneous flattening and wiring of the world have made it easier for foreigners to innovate without having to emigrate. World-class work for world-class companies at very decent wages is available in India, decreasing the need to leave. In a post-September 11th world that is fraught with visa hassles, Friedman notes that visas for students and S&E workers have been issued more slowly owing both to increased security restrictions and to a drop in applications. As India steadily gains from the large amount of talent quickly being trained in a country full of young people, the United States steadily stands to lose from this decrease in foreign-born students.

When the world was round, as Friedman might say, these Indian-born and educated Science and Engineering workers could not go back home because there were no labs to go back to, and no Internet to connect to. With technology and opportunity in place, both nostalgia and economic opportunity draw Indians back or keep them from leaving India. Friedman calls this lack of brain power moving to the U.S. a “quiet crisis” that involves the steady erosion of America’s scientific and engineering base, the base of which has always been the source of American innovation and its rising standard of living.128

While the movement of Indians to the United States, part of the continuing “brain drain,” does continue, the themes behind the emergence of a “reverse brain drain” suggest that India is pursuing certain policies in both the private sector and at a governmental level that over the long run could lead to a significant shift in the world’s balance of brain power. For the United States there is much at stake in the continued growth of countries like India. As the economy globalizes, and as first-class creative minds go abroad, stay abroad, or are produced abroad, other nations may challenge the

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128 Friedman derives this phrase from an interview with Shirley Anne Jackson, the president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and president of RPI. In Ibid, 253
United States’ role as the leader in innovation and creativity, the two areas in which this country currently leads. Within the U.S., a high quality educational system, the one sure way to grow new brains, has failed to produce enough homegrown talent. Ultimately, the challenge tomorrow, as opposed to the loss of jobs today, is what the United States’ economic future ought to be about. In The Rise of the Creative Class, Richard Florida makes the persuasive case that the most competitive communities are those that have the highest concentration of talented individuals, a high degrees of technological innovation and a high level of tolerance for diverse lifestyles. But Florida says that the United States is losing its edge in all of these areas, and that part of the reason is that the Bush administration’s immigration policies are “shooting this country’s economy in the brain.” A National Science Board study found that U.S. visas issued to immigrants for work in science and technology dropped by 55 percent from 2001 to 2002, largely because of the post-September 11th clampdown. American firms are contributing aggressively to reverse the brain drain by outsourcing work to countries like India, where the high number of skilled employees can handle the work, effectively saving money and boosting profits. At the same time, these companies are offering early retirement or attractive buyout opportunities to their most experienced, most knowledgeable, and probably their most expensive workers, in the name of economic savings.

It is a fool’s bargain. Foreign or younger workers cannot replace what the older workers have to offer, just in the way of experience, institutional memory, long-term relationships, and creativity. In this process, there is a loss of both knowledge and social

130 Ibid
capital. However, this dilemma for the United States is not simple. The benefits of a flat world are clear, as are the drawbacks. Ultimately, by working together, both India and the United States can progress in a flat world. Infosys’ Nandan Nilekani, puts forth an enlightened description of the way the flat world could economically function: "You have this whole ecosystem that constitutes a crucible for innovation. The whole process where people get an idea and put together a team, raise capital, create a product, and mainstream it—can only be done in the U.S. It can’t be done sitting in India. The Indian part of the equation [is to help] these innovative [U.S] companies bring their products to market quicker, cheaper, and better, which increases the innovative cycle there. It is complementarity we need to enhance. By working together, both India and the United States can win."

India’s recent economic pull has indeed disrupted the dominance of the United States over global human capital. And, while Indians living in the United States are confronted with the difficulty of making the decision to return to the economic opportunities present in India, the United States has to confront the difficulty inherent in the decisions of those Indians. A compromise is reachable, and as Indian struggles to come to grips with its own success as it emerges as a global leader, the United States will have to come to grips with its own problems if it expects to continue as a global leader.

Ultimately, the current narrative of return will continue to promote the movement of Indians in the United States back to India, as long as global businesses continue to invest in India creating jobs, and forcing development beneficial enough to create the conditions to move back. Yet the promotion of a return and the reality of return are not necessarily harmonious. The recent economic growth that has pushed

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132 Tom Friedman, “India helps itself to a slice of the American Pie” NY Times. 5 March, 2004
India remains subject to a slowdown, due to the many constraining problems that still grip much of Indian society. Furthermore, there are larger problems that exist in the actual logistics of a return. Beyond the economic incentive to return, there are many counter-forces present in the ability to live again in India after living in the United States. The easy return, insinuated by the term “reverse brain-drain,” propagated by newspaper and magazine articles, as well as word of mouth, is not a reality for most returnees. The understanding of this myth, and of the difficulties of a return to India—not only of living again in India, but also in the way identity is adjusted to deal with these changes—is essential for the reality and continuation of the movement of Indians from the United States back to India.
Chapter 4: Conscious Complexities
The Intricacies and Difficulties of the Glorious Return

On days when I am far away, in very different landscapes, I only have to see a patch of mellow light on a lawn, only have to feel a fresh bracing quality in the air, or hear the rain being fierce with a roof, to know that I want to be back, and never leave; and it’s no use reminding myself then that the senses—those semi-magical faculties of sight, smell, hearing—hold not only your most truthful memories but also your most hopeless desires.

Pankaj Mishra

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone…She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign…For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she’s worked. She will miss throwing parties…She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind.

Jhumpa Lahiri

The arrival in the United States is the obvious beginning of a never-ending bicultural journey. A more subtle marker of one’s changed life is a return to the homeland. If most immigrants are ill-prepared to face the reality of their new life on arrival in the United States, when the time comes they are often unprepared to deal with

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133 Pankaj Mishra “There’s no place like home” in Away: The Indian Writer as an Expatiate ed. Amitava Kumar. (New York: Routledge, 2004) 388


135 How profoundly one is affected by this act depends largely on how long one is away, the relative age at the time of departure and first return, and the circumstances under which one returns.
the life in India when they return. Few believe in advance that they could feel alienated from their “mother” culture. But they have been abroad, they have experienced and navigated another culture in depth; so, on return, they have to deal with the imposition of their experience in the United States upon their expectations of the way they will live their lives in India. It could be said that they return, to a greater or lesser extent, as “cosmopolitans.”

A recent article in The New York Times on Indians in the United States returning to India, would have the reader believe that the returning Indian comes back to India and lives a life he could live anywhere in the world, a “cosmopolitan” life. Describing a group of Indians who have returned to India as part of the “reverse brain drain,” living in Bangalore in gated communities with names like “Palm Meadows” and “Lake Vista,” the article makes a direct correlation between their lives in Bangalore and the lives they left in California. As the article states, “Living in Palm Meadows, Mr. Kela and his neighbor Sanjay Swamy…face very little transition anxiety.”

This article reflects an assumption, widely held in the media, that the cosmopolitan identity allows for a comfortable existence in multiple places. While there is some truth behind this assumption for a tiny and privileged minority, the situation for most is much more complicated, and the idea of cosmopolitanism is problematic and archaic.

The concept of cosmopolitanism assumes a smooth transition from one culture to another because of the presumed identity of “global citizenship.” Often the term has seemed to claim universality by virtue of its independence, its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain regular nation-bound individuals. This problematic concept is both idealistic and naïve, because transnational experiences

are particular rather than universal. In fact, it is more likely that upon arrival in India, returnees will be confronted with the experience of alienation or dislocation to which they will have few resources to help them explain or explore their altered sense of identity. Instead of cosmopolitanism there is the need for a more specific construct, an “enlightened hybridity” made up of an understanding gleaned from the life lived specifically in the cultures of India and the U.S. This need is especially urgent in the present moment when the elements for this explanation or exploration are changing.

The narrative of return has always been central to the formation of an Indian diasporic identity, from the outgoing mercantilists, to the indentures, to the more recent “new” border diaspora discussed by Mishra. For the post-1965 group, because their return rarely came to pass, the narrative of return became something of a myth which resulted in the “always-going-home” syndrome. But the narrative has now become complicated by the publicized new economic opportunity in India. As a result, the nature of the dilemma changes and a piece of the Indian identity in the United States has to be readjusted. The two incentives for the return, the economic and the nostalgic, remain at the center of the narrative. And of course, these two sides are not mutually exclusive. Yet how they interact is complicated.

In this chapter I will analyze what is at stake in viewing an economically motivated return as an easy shift that falls under the umbrella of “cosmopolitanism.” Then I will consider the realities within the nostalgia embedded in this decision. Ultimately I wish to propose that the best conditions for returning Indians to explain and explore their circumstance, is not through a traditionally cosmopolitan identity,
rather it is through the formation of an “enlightened hybridity.” This term points to
the ultimate recognition that Indians in the United States seeking to return are involved
in the process of remaking themselves as composites of two different experiences they
have had: living and working in the United States, and growing up in India.

Speaking theoretically, Bruce Robbins points out that the old understanding of
cosmopolitanism as a singular and universal concept, a worldwide community of
enlightened global citizens, is no longer helpful. Cosmopolitanisms are now plural and
particular, and should be addressed as such. As a result, the term needs to be resituated
so as to include the transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal. I
will look at some necessary modifications of cosmopolitanism and address a number of
individual cases.

As I have written, an enlightened hybridity is necessary for the clearer
understanding of the complexities of returning for the returnee. Unlike
cosmopolitanism, this self-conscious reconstruction would theoretically consist of at
least three main factors: culture, economics, and nationalism. By culture I mean lifestyle,
class, region, and caste. Each of these cultural components plays a particular role in the
way the diasporic returnee must adjust identity, and would need to be looked at from
both a U.S. and Indian perspectives. For example, caste might have been important
growing up in India, was suppressed in the United States, and might again become
important upon return to India. Living independently away from the parents’ house may

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137 The factors which are important to my formulation of enlightened hybridity are often used in
articulating theories of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, as well as through discussions of nationality
and ethnicity as factors implicated in globalization. Other terms that have been used are “flexible
citizenship” (Aihwa Ong), “cosmopolitics” (Robbins and Pheng), “global citizen” (Arjun Appadurai),
glocalism” (Roland Robertson), “sojourners” (Robert Cohen), and “traveling identities” (James Clifford).

Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 2
have become an important part of lifestyle in the U.S. and an Indian might want to continue that in India. Further, taking a new job in India may mean that one cannot even return to one’s home region; you may be Gujarati, but find yourself working in Hyderabad where everyone speaks Telegu. Cosmopolitanism connotes a mentality that is above consideration of these cultural particulars; the cosmopolitan can go hypothetically go anywhere and remain unattached to nation, region, or a particular cultural set. By economics I mean the level of labor skill, employability, and salary of the returnee. Just because an economy is improving, for example, does not mean that there are necessarily jobs for the Indian professional living in the U.S. Furthermore, pay in India will be lower than in the U.S.; lowered labor costs are one of the reasons the Indian economy is strengthening. Finally, nationalism refers to the extent to which an identity is tied to a nation or, in this case, two nations. Previously, diasporic Indians expressed their sentimental connection to India through concrete acts of humanitarianism, most obviously illustrated in the amount of money being sent back to India from the United States. Implied in this connection was a certain amount of condescension that Indians in the United States had more money than counterparts in India. Now, as Indians look to return, this humanitarian impulse, along with its underlying attitudes, must be reconsidered. Cosmopolitanism implies certain condescension to any one specific place, and does not concern itself with the particularities that are present in the present narrative of return to India.

The theorists Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma, who have written particularly about the experience of South Asians, have attempted to re-forge the definition of cosmopolitanism within a South-Asian context by coining the term “New Cosmopolitanism.” They use this term to describe people who
blur the edges of home and abroad by continuously moving physically, culturally, and socially, and by selectively using globalized forms of travel, communication, languages, and technology to position themselves in motion between at least two homes, sometimes through dual forms of citizenship, but always in multiple locations.¹³⁹

This “new cosmopolitan” creates and defines itself by existing within the in-between spaces of identity and culture, redefining the archaic notions of old ethnic nationalism and the assimilative logic of host cultures. This concept goes beyond the older dichotomy of remaining strictly “Indian” or attempting to submerge oneself in the culture of the United States.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, this concept goes beyond understandings of “transnationalism” because it acknowledges a form of duel citizenshipship that emerges through symbolic documents like the “green card” in the U.S., and the Person of Indian-Origin (POI) card for non-citizens in India. This description proposed by Rajan and Sharma is a productive place from which to begin discussion of enlightened hybridity.

But Rajan and Sharma’s theory does not specifically deal with the narrative of return, nor the psychic conditions that surround the possibility of return for Indians in the United States in the present moment. Rajan and Sharma write that as capital and travel continue to globalize, a growing class of Indian immigrants is created “whose modalities of migration and settlement overturn older ways of thinking about home and abroad, as well as accompanying it with high and mass cultural practices.”¹⁴¹ However,

¹⁴⁰ What Mishra calls “fossilization,” especially prevalent in the “old” diaspora.
for the present returnees who act upon the opportunity to return to India from the United States, Rajan and Sharma problematically play down the role of economics. And economic class does play an important role in the actual ability to return. Without considerable money to invest in a return, giving up a life in the United States, and establishing a comparably comfortable life in India, is extremely difficult. Regardless of what the New York Times suggests, pay is less in India with very few exceptions and the cost of living there has risen considerably in just a few years. Rajan and Sharma’s “new cosmopolitanism” is not adequate in attempting to explain the contemporary narrative of return, because it does not invoke the same notions of economic class implicit in old notions of “cosmopolitanism.” With enlightened hybridity, economic class is crucial when speaking of the tangible relationships between the United States and India, between home and abroad, between native and diasporic.

Going beyond Rajan and Sharma, for an Indian seeking to return, enlightened to the hybrid nature of the situation, there is no necessary rupture between the individual and the nation, as older notions of cosmopolitanism would suggest. More than living in the spaces where they can fit in both cultures (suggested by Rajan and Sharma), as the diasporic Indian leaves India, and then looks to possibly return, the personal connection to India remains vibrant. The experience in the United States builds on the Indian allegiance which preceded it, creating a nationalism of informed hybridity in both places. This is true for the Indian in the gated community in Northern California or the gated community in Bangalore.

To look at this theoretically, one might follow Bruce Robbins who points out that cosmopolitanism is more than a group of separate identities; it is rather a space of
contested politics.\textsuperscript{142} Louisa Schein furthers this idea by writing that the state and the cosmopolitan are intertwined so that “the State has a dialectical relation to the production of the transnational.”\textsuperscript{143} The Indian who resides in the U.S. has to think through the complex relationship between the two countries and fashion an understanding of what this means for him or her as an individual or for the family. Therefore, a certain amount of accountability of the individual to the “State,” both India and the U.S., is required as different cosmopolitanisms collide in a space that becomes essentially political. Given the dilemma of the individual returning with a “cosmopolitan” mentality, there is a need to understand the conflicts produced by multiple States upon the individual. This understanding of the conflict and benefits produced by the convergence of multiple political spaces is an integral component of enlightened hybridity, as the returnee attempts to deal with the particular story in which he is involved.

As mentioned earlier, within the individual’s connection to the nation, the role of humanitarianism often manifests itself with certain condescension, as the diasporic Indian seeks to stay connected to the nation of origin. Another aspect of this humanitarianism that needs to be analyzed by the enlightened hybrid is the dangers of incorporating “portable nationality” as a new identity. This means the tendency to carry problematic nationalities across borders, and continue to enforce such sentiments from afar. For diasporic Indians, for example, this can be seen in the way the Hindu fundamentalist group the \textit{Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh} (R.S.S.) is supported by Indians in

\textsuperscript{142} Bruce Robbins “Introduction Part I” \textit{Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the nation}. Ed. Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 3

This manner of attempting to stay connected to the homeland plays into another notion of the diasporic imaginary, whereby these diasporic Indians create an identity by actively contributing to an imagined notion of the country they left. Benedict Anderson makes the striking argument that nationalism operates according to a “universalist logic of unbounded seriality,” and it is the cosmopolitan migrant who obeys the logic of a bounded essentialized ethnicity that remains unchanged in exile and leads to fundamentalist identity politics. So the understanding and analysis of one's nationalism is an important function in the formation of an enlightened hybridity.

Ultimately, I think it is important to recognize that cosmopolitanism within its current frame is in some ways an ideal and necessary state of practical consciousness that overcomes the drawbacks of nationalism. Yet it is obvious that nationalism is not an outdated form of consciousness. As Pheng Cheah writes, the existing global condition should not be mistaken for an “existing mass-based feeling of belonging to a world community (cosmopolitanism) because the globality of the everyday does not necessarily engender an existing popular global political consciousness.”

This type of idealistic thought is what is being expressed in newspaper articles that talk of the gated communities of Bangalore, where an ex-Silicon Valley software executive can live as if he had never left the United States. Yet the reality is that to portray a life within the comforts of a gated community, an apparent attempt to separate from the surrounding nation, is to portray a false construct for the returning Indian. Furthermore, for that returnee, attempting to define oneself as cosmopolitan outside the relationship to the

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144 The R.S.S. is a group of organizations and political groups that further a fundamentalist Hindu ideology.


nation does not help in the attempt to adjust. Instead of indulging in the smug understanding of nationalism as an archaic, unnecessary discourse, or moralistically condemning cosmopolitanism as indifferent bourgeois detachment, we ought to sharpen our critical focus so that nationalism and cosmopolitanism are invoked together in practical discourses. As Indians in the United States look to return to India because of encouraging economic factors and opportunity, the successful understanding of the intersection of the nation and the cosmopolitan is necessary for a successful transition. In attempting to deal with return, an enlightened hybridity combines the space between cosmopolitanism and nationalism to provide knowledge of the identity issues critically at stake in a return to India.

Speaking more concretely, as the narrative of return is rewritten by the media and word of mouth, some Indians in the United States seek to return buoyed by economic opportunity, while others respond to the nostalgic whisper that calls Indians back to India, to family, to friends. Indeed, that second impulse grows stronger as the pull of economic growth increases. However, the existence of the “diasporic imaginary,” in their formation of identity, and the breaking down of the “always-going-home-syndrome” makes the reality of a return more difficult to achieve, especially if concrete economic plans are not in place. Within the narrative of return, economics and nostalgia overlap.

Returning home full of dreams, projects and plans, the returnee will find hurdles at every step. Form-filling bureaucracy, the lingering importance of caste, and the generally feudal style of functioning will exasperate the returnee. Time will be wasted as he runs around collecting papers or getting forms signed. While he frets and fumes, he will think how he would never get this type of treatment in the States. In the nostalgic thoughts that followed and swirled around him in the U.S., family, food, weather, and
good-natured smiles were all that accompanied his potential Glorious Return. As is it
does now, nostalgia hid difficulty.

Three narratives illuminate the complexities between economics and nostalgia,
inherent in the decision to return. Suketu Mehta, as chronicled in his book Maximum
City, returns to India, supported by the money advanced for the book, but with the
nostalgia of an uninformed returnee. Vishrut and Reema Pathak, recently arrived
Indians, have since been in the process of wanting to return to India, pressured and
squeezed by the media hype and word of mouth that have built the current narrative of
return. Vishakha Desai has lived in the United States for many years since coming from
India, yet her extensive experience has provided her with the critical understanding
necessary to contemplate the realities of a return.

In Maximum City, Suketu Mehta writes of his decision to take his family and
return to Bombay, the city of his birth, after years of living in the United States. He
writes, “You can’t go home by eating certain foods, by replaying its films on your
television screen. At some point you have to live there again. The dream of return had to
be brought into the daylight sooner or later.”147 This decision, clearly motivated by his
intention to write about it, is also influenced by his desire to reclaim what was once his,
as well as chronicle the difficulties that keep back so many of his Indian friends in the
United States. The passage illustrates how Mehta’s impulse to return is based heavily on
nostalgia, yet without a full consideration for the complexities present in such a return.

Mehta writes at length about how, while living in New York City, he was
nostalgic for India and Bombay, how he attempted to recreate India in Jackson Heights,
Queens through viewing Bollywood films and by screaming Hindi curses on the streets

with friends. Mehta also mentions going back to Bombay, when he was much younger, for the first time, and how he had difficulty dealing with the changes even then. He remembers how the changes in his childhood bedroom upset him, “We need to have the rooms of our childhood preserved intact, the same pictures up on the wall, the bed in the same corner, the sunlight to come in at the same angle at the same time of day. I felt this room had been let out to a boarder, and I could never move back in. I was no longer a Bombayite; from now on, my experience of the city would be as an NRI, a non-resident Indian.”\(^{148}\) This reflects an early disabuse of his nostalgic imaginary. Yet this nostalgia still manifested itself many years later when he returned to Bombay to write.

In *Maximum City*, Mehta highlights his irritation over the extreme difficulties he encounters upon the recent return to Bombay—the severe disputes over car spaces, the difficulties in setting up basic amenities, the expense involved getting anything done, the constant thievery, the demands for money, the filth, the pollution, the people. He asks, Why do I put myself through this? I was comfortable and happy and praised in New York; I had two places, one to live and one to work. I have given all that up for this fool’s errand, looking for silhouettes in the mist of the ghost time. Now I can’t wait to go back, to the place I once longed to get away from: New York. I miss cold weather and white people. I see pictures of blizzard on TV and remember the warmth inside when it’s cold outside...how you go outside on a bad night and the cold clears your head and makes everything better…My father once, in New York, exasperated by my relentless demands to be sent back to finish high school in Bombay, shouted at me, ‘When you were there, you wanted

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\(^{148}\) Ibid, 10
to come here. Now that you’re here, you want to go back.’ It was when I first realized I had a new nationality: citizen of the country of longing.\textsuperscript{149}

I like this term, “longing.” It implies indecision and uncertainty mixed with blind desire. Much of the desire to return to India, even in this time of economic prosperity and opportunity, is based on the nostalgia incurred while away. And nostalgia, as I have noted, always has some blindness.

Mehta’s realization that he is not immediately happy upon return to India, even among familiar neighborhoods, people, and family, speaks to his ongoing understanding of the difficulties of being an Indian returnee, a hybrid whose ideas and expectations have been shaped by both India and the United States. While Mehta is not completely candid about the economic difficulties of living in India, nor its impact on his career, it is safe to assume that money was not an immediate problem for him when he returned to India. However, it is obvious that, in India, he is forced to realize the difficulties in adjusting, as well as assessing his relationship to the country he had nostalgically longed for. The understandings which he reaches after living and writing in India for several years reflect his discovery: his enlightenment about his status as a person whose “cosmopolitanism” is in fact a specific hybrid of the experience of, and allegiance to, two different locations in the world.

We do not know from his book what other people in India thought when Mehta decided to return to New York from Bombay. But it is clear that Mehta can go back and forth and work in either world given the enlightened hybridity he has developed and self-consciously explored. One also feels that he chooses to live in New York. But as pride in India grows due to the growth of the Indian economy, there is a general expectation

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid. 31
held there that those who go to the United States will certainly come back. This is a distinct change from years past, when the attitude surrounding opportunity in India was one of grim realism. The ability to go abroad was expected to be the gateway to a life lived abroad. Mehta’s case puts him above either of these simple attitudes.

However, the giddy new optimism about the possibilities inherent in the return to India weighs heavily on the Indian in the United States. The expectation from family and friends back home to return, as well as the added pressure placed upon the self, makes the decision very difficult, especially when no overwhelmingly definitive financial plan is in place, such as a book project or a gated community in Bangalore.

Vishrut and Reema Pathak have been in the process of attempting to return, fueled by the media hype and word of mouth that built the current narrative of return, since they first arrived in 2001. However, the couple has been disabused by their personal economic situation because they find India to be more expensive than they though, and as a result have been forced to develop an enlightened understanding of the complexities and dilemmas of a return. The two of them left an India that was already in the midst of an economic boom, and had already begun to draw people back. As a confident, intelligent, business student, Vishrut always spoke of his plans to return. His early mentality reflected the change in the narrative of return for the diasporic Indian. He had a set plan; get another degree, take a job that gave him significant experience, then return home. The United States served a purpose; it was a means to an end, and a way to beat out competitors back in India. It was a way to success in India.

But every year that plan changed. The economy in the U.S. prevented Vishrut from getting the perfect job he wanted for the ideal experience, and the longer he remained in New York City, the more used to the life he became. Furthermore, after
patiently coming to the U.S. to be with her husband, and dropping the option of getting a job in India, Reema began to excel in the interior design world of New York City, getting hired by a successful architecture firm and taking over their interior design department. The nostalgic persistence to live again in India clashed with the life they had in New York.

In August 2005, on what seemed to be the hottest day of the summer, I trekked out to their apartment in the upstairs of an old beat-up house off the Grand Central Parkway near St. Johns University in Queens. It was *Raksha Bandhan*, a Gujarati holiday where a sister will tie a *rakhi* bracelet, around the wrist of her *bhai*, her brother, while he will bless her, thus ensuring a prosperous and successful year. Two of Vishrut’s cousins were in town, and the five of us were going to celebrate the holiday together. Despite the heat, Reema was in the kitchen cooking spicy Gujarati food, her face flushed and perspiring. In the other room, Vishrut and his two cousins watched the recent Hindi film *Sarkar*. As I talked with Reema in the kitchen, she remained upbeat about her time in the United States. “We want to go back. I especially want to go back. But right now, Vishrut wants to hold out a little while longer with his job.” He had at the time just been hired under the CFO of a technological service firm, working within their financial sector. The job was a big step up from the jobs he had taken in the past, in sketchy sectors like the diamond exchange. Reema at that point had just finished coursework at Parsons School of Art in Interior Design. “So I think we will wait one year, and after next summer we will return.” That year has stretched on, and priorities and circumstances have changed. The two have reached a moderately high level of prosperity with their combined jobs, and now live in a nice sixth floor apartment in

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150 Based on video footage from Aug. 14th, 2005.
Forest Hills, a twenty-five minute subway ride from their respective offices. The comfort they have achieved has set a precedent in their lives. They are still nostalgic for India, for the potential for a life there, but they realize that a crossroads is approaching quickly, and if they do not make a decision soon, that alternative life will remain shrouded in nostalgia, perhaps in the “always-going-home” syndrome.

In Bombay, I was introduced to a journalist named John Bussey who is an editor for The Wall Street Journal Asia; when he heard about the subject of my research he got excited and related a story to me about someone he knew who had recently come back to India. This man had lived and worked in the United States for ten years with his wife, “Green Cards, good jobs, a successful life…everything you’d think they wanted.” But they both felt that the U.S. was not the right place for them, and as the sentiment around screamed at them to go back, they began to see what they could do about finding jobs in India and returning. When all the arrangements were made, all the good-bye parties thrown, and all the bags packed, the couple got on the plane and returned to Delhi. A few months later Bussey met them in India when he was in Delhi for business. He asked them if they had any temptations to go back to the life they left in the United States. Bussey said, “they both looked at each other, then told me ‘of course we think about it,’ but when they returned they knew that they would think about returning to the United States, so to ensure that they followed through with this huge life decision, they both burned their Green Cards!” Bussey leaned back and laughed, “No return with no ticket.”

The symbolic need to burn a Green Card speaks specifically to the emotional difficulty of following through with the nostalgic desire to return to India. When you are an Indian in the United States, India continues to exist as the home left behind. When

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151 Conversation took place on March 16th, 2006. Recorded in notes from that day.
that dream is acted upon, the kicker is that reality may never be as nice as that dream. Bussey’s friends possessed an enlightened understanding of their own hybridity and of the challenges a return would place on their identity. I related the Green Card burning story to Vishrut, and he smiled. “It might strike you as strange,” he told me, “but I would think about doing the same thing with my H1B. I wouldn’t want to have anything drawing me back to this country [The United States].” But the difficulties of finding work and living and working in an Indian environment are not lost on the Pathaks. The more they get used to the working environment in the United States, the more they realize the difficulties of making the same kind of money in India, or even of living the same type of life.

Currently, the Pathaks are unable to return without some sort of offer from a company that will include a hefty economic package. On a recent trip back to Ahmedabad, Vishrut saw clearly that a return would mean moving back in with his parents, and taking a professional step back until he could re-establish himself. Reema would have to start her own independent interior design business from scratch. Both of them recognize the sacrifices that would have to be made in order to follow through with their nostalgic desire to return. Behind this recognition is the knowledge that they have become hybrids, Indians influenced by life both in India and in the United States. They have become critical of the lifestyles and of the politics of their friends in India. They see that many of those friends live only for money. They note the friends’ lack of awareness about the international world, their indifference to the larger social problems facing India. And Vishrut and Reema are less tolerant of the simply pro-Hindu politics and the anti-Moslem attitudes that would surround them there. Their enlightened understanding of what is at stake in the decision to return makes them an example of
diasporic Indians who are well-equipped to make an informed decision. If they do return to India, it will be with the expectation and understanding of the variety of difficulties. If they decide to stay in the United States it will not be with the nostalgic “what-ifs” that might plague a diasporic Indian who has not given the same consideration, and while they will feel torn in an ongoing way, they will better know why they are torn and what tears them. They represent the tension at the heart of the present narrative of return; they live it daily, waiting for some definitive indicator to help them make a decision that seems to recede into the future.

When Vishakha Desai first came to the United States from India in 1966 it was as a foreign exchange high school student in a one-year program in Santa Barbara. A return to India was obvious and inevitable. However, what were not obvious were the emotional and cultural changes that would take place within her, which would influence her understanding about, and feelings of, home. The psychological and emotional difficulties she has come across during her time in the United States are not only common, but also still prevalent in the immigrant Indian’s desire to return. She recounts: “One of the ways that I could make sense out of my contradictory responses to the first year in the U.S. was through the clear awareness that my ‘Home’—capital ‘H’—was in India. I would return there at the end of the year and everything would return to ‘normal.’ Little did I know that I had embarked on a road to a kind of multivalent existence from which there was no return.” Desai ended up returning to the United States to pursue a life here. In eventually navigating the complexities surrounding the

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152 Vishakha Desai’s story comes from both interview, and her own writing in an essay called “Whither Home?: The Predicament of a Bicultural Existence.”
decision to return to India to live, or stay in the United States, she showed the ability to clearly understand not only her own changed hybrid identity, but also of what was at stake for that identity in a return.

When Desai returned from that first year in Santa Barbara, she was not prepared for the difficulties she initially encountered in reentering her ‘childhood’ culture. Desai recounted a particular episode involving hairpins and a hairbrush within her first month back. In keeping with the customary Indian familial practice of sharing one’s accessories, especially within her family of four sisters and three brothers, her younger sister, Anuradha, casually picked up her brand-new American brush and hairpins and proceeded to use them. Vishakha remembers that “after a year of both privacy and sense of individual possessiveness, and frustrated by the changes that I felt I was forced to go through on my return, I screamed at her as if she had committed a major crime! Her tearful response, that I had forgotten how to be a family member and thought only of ‘myself’ or ‘my things,’ was among the more powerful expressions of my fractured psychic existence at the time.”

When Desai ultimately returned to the United States a few years later, she attempted to assimilate by adopting a hyphenated identity. Yet she writes of how just when her political identity as an Indian-American was being formed, and as she had begun to accept the United States as her “home,” she was aggressively pursued for a job in India. At the time one of the major arguments given to her about why she should return was that as an Indian who was successful in the United States, she really needed to do something for “her” country, just as her parents had dedicated their lives to Indian independence before her, a nationalistic argument. Desai notes that up until that point,

\[154\] Ibid. p. 31
she had maintained a somewhat exaggerated sense of self-assurance that she could live in either country, or that she could belong to both cultures, while feeling completely comfortable and “at home” in other places. Yet this “cosmopolitan” pretension was, she discovered, naive, and it was not enough for her to effectively make the decision to return.

While considering the offer, Desai came across resistance in unexpected places. Listening to jazz in her Japanese car on the way to a Thai restaurant after a French movie, she realized that not only would none of that be possible in the India she would return to, but there was the hard realization that a part of her had indeed become “Americanized.” To acknowledge that meant that she had to confront her unwillingness to give up that non-India part of herself, and to understand her basic lack of desire to, and the extreme difficulty of, living as a hybrid, an Indian and an American, in India. Desai’s understanding represents the thinking of an enlightened hybrid, because of her clear understanding of the various elements at stake in the decision to return to India. While she ultimately decided against going, it was an informed decision that broke past any notions of nostalgia or longing; had she made the decision to return, it would have been with the clear knowledge of what to expect, and with a hybridity made up of her thoughtful analysis of elements drawn from both her experience of the United States and India.

Vishakha Desai’s experiences provide an illuminating and powerful example of an Indian who has become aware of her composite identity in considering a return to India. Furthermore, in her professional life as the president of a major international

155 Notes from interview, Jan. 5th, 2007
organization, she has taken that enlightened hybridity to the next level, by applying it to other cultures and nations with which she now has significant contact. These additional societies have influenced her, creating a hybrid identity that goes beyond the binary of the United States and India, but that is still based on the principles of that binary enlightened hybridity. In looking again at the critiques of cosmopolitanism, and the naïve assumptions of a “global citizen” identity, Desai’s multivalent enlightened hybridity provides a striking alternative to an old cosmopolitanism, by indicating her awareness of having been changed by her experience of life in a variety of cultures. Thus any decision to uproot herself and return to India, now or in the future, would be made with the understanding of the difficulty of combining her varied cultural experiences with the fundamental understanding of Indian society to which she would return.

Behind abstract theory and the larger narratives presented here are the particularities of cultural and economic conditions that influence each individual’s life. In the epigraphs to this chapter, both authors reflect the awareness of the difficulty of having been away from a nostalgically desired place. Pankaj Mishra’s sentiment speaks specifically to the realization that intrinsic in the memories and desires of the returning Indian is a certain hopelessness, for they will never truly be fulfilled. The pathos of nostalgia in the narrative of return is brought to light by Jhumpa Lahiri, whose Ashima, the mother in The Namesake, shows the understanding that emerges late in her life on the eve of her return to India, a gleam that acknowledges she will not be returning to the India she once left, and for so many years imagined. Her life has been formidably changed by her years in the United States, and to return to India, to the city she grew up in, is to start over, a lonely and difficult acceptance. In the continuing struggle to theorize the desire of Indians in the United States to return to India, the recognition, like
Ashima’s enlightened comprehension, of the hard realities at stake in the decision to return, is critical; it points out that beyond the larger themes of economics and nostalgia lies an individual sentiment composed of hybrid experiences, that makes any decision difficult and sad, and that is ultimately not a guarantee of rightness. However, the ability to face that decision, to grapple with that decision, and to come to a conclusion based on a thoroughly sincere examination of the complexities inherent in a return, is not only a goal, but a necessity, as Indians seek to critically return and contribute to Indian society, in a position that makes them able to explain and explore their new role as hybrid in their country of birth.
India has changed dramatically in the years since people like my mother, aunts and uncles left twenty to forty years ago. The country that my mother left when she went to the U.S. to study in 1970 would be barely recognizable to young Indians today. Even to those who left in the past ten years, the visible evidence of change in India today brings both sighs and smiles. This change is reflected in the variety of cars on the road, the number of channels on my grandmother’s television set, and in the chic malls that shoot up across urban and suburban areas that previously were fields or slums. This part of the new India is attractive. Indians in the U.S. no longer have to think of their homeland as a dusty layer of poverty and decay residing on a series of ancient civilizations. It has become a destination with opportunity and expectation: a place to return, stay, and live.

But how to put a human face on the new attitude and the energy that flows on the streets of this new India? “Defining moments” can be clichéd, but my realization came while watching the first Indian Cricket test against South Africa at the Wanderers Ground in Johannesburg just a day after arriving back in India for my cousin’s wedding. India’s new bowling hero, Shantakumaran Sreesanth, was batting, facing the large and powerful, charged-up, South African speed-bowler Andri Nel. “As soon as I walked in to bat, Nel said ‘I can smell blood, I can smell blood,’” Sreesanth later revealed. His first ball beat the Indian tailender all ends-up. Nel then marched up to the young Indian, taunting him that he didn’t have the heart to stand up to the big man’s pace bowling. “I

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am playing for this. You are a scared fellow, rabbit. I will get you next ball. You are like a
bunny to me,” Nel reportedly said, thumping his own chest in full view of TV cameras.

Nel ostentatiously changed the field for the next ball, moving the short-leg
fieldsman to deep square-leg and informing the wicket-keeper Mark Boucher to stay
back. Sreesanth later recounted, “Being a fast bowler myself, I knew Nel was going to
bowl a bouncer. I just took my own chance and prayed to God.” Sure enough, Nel
charged in, believing Sreesanth was expecting a short-pitched delivery, and bowled a fast,
full-length ball on the middle stump. Sreesanth, having guessed correctly, stepped back
and with a swing that had all my uncles around me sucking in their breath, hit the ball
over the fast bowler’s head into the stands for a six. What followed, to the joy of all,
became one of the most memorable television moments of the month. Sreesanth went
running down the pitch in triumph, twirling his bat like a baton, then breaking into a
little dance that showed his relief and exhilaration. It was like the relief of the kid who
had gotten back at the bully in a playground fight, the exhilaration of one who knows
that after such a risky play, he had gotten away with it.

This moment can be read as a metaphor for young India’s transformation in
attitude. For in the old India, a tailender, confronted with a fast bowler’s aggression,
would have been cowed. He would have either backed away from the imminent threat of
decapitation, or he would have put his head down and attempted to block the next ball.
He would have been grateful to have survived at all; there would have been no doubt
that the foreign paceman would have maintained his psychological ascendancy. It would
certainly never have occurred to the Indian to think like a fast bowler, and it would be
beyond imagining that he would decide to meet fire with fire. Sreesanth’s ability to hit
the ball over Nel’s head for a six represented for me all that India has become. In that action there is courage, there is assertiveness, there is confidence, and there is hope.

It does not matter that India lost the next test in Durban. Nor does it matter that the entire series was thrown away in the third test in Cape Town, because this is not about cricket anymore. This is about a state of mind that is slowly changing the Indian state. What Sreesanth made clear that day in Johannesburg was an attitude that has transformed the younger generation into a breed apart from its parents. It is the attitude of an India that holds its nerves and flexes its muscles, an India whose self-confidence is rooted in the sober certificate of self-knowledge. “I am a fast bowler,” said Sreesanth. “Come on, I am not afraid of you.”

The attitude is in place. The confidence is exhaled from the tailpipes of rickshaws, struck under iron pots, carried in commuter briefcases, and eaten from the carts of vendors of street food. That confidence has found its way through train stations, through airports, over seas, past foreign people, into the air around the souls of Indians across the world. With that confidence comes the conviction that a return to Indian is not only nostalgically ideal, but also economically logical. It is a conviction that permeates the Indian diaspora in the United States and creates a new form of the narrative of return for them.

If this narrative of “when I return…” for the recent “brain-drain” diaspora, most often served as a point of nostalgic remembrance, for comfort and ease, it also helped support the construction of Indian diasporic identity in the United States. In attempting to straddle a border, whether it took months or, for some, a lifetime, a relationship with the United States was negotiated, while still maintaining a grip on India. This complex process of situating oneself in another nation stimulated a search for new
meanings and definitions that bestowed sense and clarity on an altered life. As Meena Alexander writes in her book *Fault Lines*, “In America you have to explain yourself, constantly. ‘Who are you? Where are you from? What do you do?”158 One comes up with answers. She and many others did. But now, as the narrative of a return shifts from the old nostalgic myth of improbability or impossibility to the new story of economic possibility and probability, identities among those who feel they may or must act on the new narrative must again be adjusted. But the new narrative is not quite fixed. It is a precarious place that India holds. Its new image, as established by the media, has resulted in a changed place for India within the public psyche. As the public begins to believe the hype about the possibilities for return, the temptation for Indians in the United States grows stronger, despite some of the realities of which these same Indians are aware.

In the beginning of February, 2007, reports began to surface of softness in the Indian economy. The cover of *The Economist* showed a cartoon of a tiger with a burning tail. The article reported that despite the figures and hype (much of which I have reported), the current pace of expansion and projected growth may not be sustainable.159 Although business processing, information technology, telecoms and manufacturing have increased over the past ten years, the Indian economy is still primarily agricultural. Large parts of the country are cut off from the benefits of free trade, the public sector fails to deliver needed services, and restrictive labor laws and red tape continue to frustrate businesses. According to the article, ninety-seven per cent of retail sales are made in tiny mom-and-pop stores. Where there is growth, such as in the major cities like Mumbai, infrastructure is severely under strain. A recent article in the *New York Times*

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159 “India on fire,” *Economist*, Feb 1st. 2007
highlighted the Mumbai situation in the greater context of an overheating economy.\textsuperscript{160} In particular, it mentions how, on an industrialized peninsula where food is brought in over long distances by truckers whose costs have increased with the increase of world oil prices, signs of supply shortages are readily evident, and construction on infrastructure seems sparse in relation to need.

Because India’s ruling coalition includes Communist parties hostile to open markets, economic reform has been slow. Special economic zones, long talked about, remain prospective policy. A fully convertible rupee remains a distant prospect. Yet even without significant reform, India’s economy has performed well, buoyed by speculation and risk trading. Demand for everything from housing to beer is outpacing supply, in part because white-collar salaries are rising faster in India than anywhere else in Asia, climbing, according to Sharad Vishvanath of Hewitt Associates, 13.7 percent on average over the last year.\textsuperscript{161} But if we are to assume that opportunity and capital will keep the educated class in India, and draw back the overseas educated class, then a future dilemma is developing. Without the continued growth of jobs and expansion of the market, India will have a hard time continuing to develop the infrastructure needed to elevate the country’s place as a global destination. Yet it is that very lack of infrastructure that is holding the economy back.

Many serious problems face India, and those problems will not be solved if Indians in India, as well as those abroad, continue to believe their own complacent myths about the country. As Edward Luce writes in his book on the Indian economy, In

\textsuperscript{160} Keith Bradsher, “India finds its Economy on the verge of overheating,” \textit{NY Times}, 10 Feb. 2007, late ed.: C1
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid
Spite of the Gods, there is no room for “Indian triumphalism.” And with this potential instability existing in India, the myths and realities surrounding the narrative of return are again subject to change. Still, given all this, the ability for Indians to return effectively and with a satisfied mind rests in their awareness of the risks inherent in a return and their internalization of what they have learned and experienced abroad. The ability to implement better infrastructure, education, and public services will continue to be a struggle for India, yet the current narrative of return has opened a new window, allowing the enlightened hybrids who are able to go beyond the simple urges and the nostalgic desires to best explain and explore the possibilities of a return.

On January 14th, 2007 I am celebrating Utrayan in Ahmedabad with Vishrut. This kite festival is the festival most anticipated by young people across Gujarat. On this day, everything closes, and everyone climbs to the highest accessible point and flies kites. The kites are simple contraptions made of tissue paper with thin wood frames, and as they rise in the sky, deft hands guide them, adjusting them minutely by loosening or tightening the string, feeling the flight of the small kite as it ascends high over the concrete homes and asphalt streets. On the flat roof of an uncle’s house, surrounded by family, all types of delicious snacks, and the loud beats of Bollywood’s most recent songs blaring from a boom-box, all eyes are on the sky. The string that tethers the kites is studded with glass, giving the spools of string neon colors that brightly match the equally brightly colored tissue of the kites. The purpose of the glazed string is to cut through a rival’s string and send the rival kite fluttering down to earth into the waiting arms of the street children who run through lanes collecting good kites they could never afford to buy. When one of our kites swoops around an opponent and cuts that kite loose, a

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mighty cry goes up from our roof, “Kaaayyyyypooo ebbe! Gayo Gayo!” We look around and search out the loser roof top to shout them down.

Vishrut Pathak is particularly loud when he wins. He is back in Ahmedabad after two years. “Two long years.” he says. Today is his last day. After enjoying himself, he and Reema will go back to his parents’ house, pack their bags and head to the airport to catch a flight to Bombay and then on to New York. In less than 48 hours, he will be buttoning up his shirt and boarding the F train headed toward mid-town Manhattan from Queens. But right now—up here on a warm, sun-baked roof—he seems in his element; sunglasses donned, he yells at everyone, poking fun all around. The skills developed from years of kite-flying have not left his fingers. He has taped up a few of these fingers so as to avoid glass cuts from the string, and those fingers win him more and more battles.

Later we go to meet up with his friends and fly more kites. His friends are all successful Amdavadis. Lawyers and bankers, they make up the elite class of young Gujaratis living in the city. Yet as talk turns to global matters, or even the economy, heads turn toward Vishrut, acknowledging his superior opinion, his “worldly” understanding. All of these guys and their wives live in large bungalows in nice parts of town. Vishrut begins telling them of his trip to the outskirts of town to look at land, and get some appraisals. The prices had blown him away. The looks on the faces of his friends are sympathetic. Later, downstairs on the outdoor wooden swing, Vishrut tells me that the price of the land was really discouraging. “These plots were twenty minutes outside of the city, yet I could work for five years here, and still not make enough to pay
for it.” He continued, “I’m better off staying in New York and buying an apartment in Queens.”

Vishrut is always going back and forth in his mind and in conversation. Benefits versus drawbacks; Ahmedabad versus Queens; India versus the U.S.; happiness versus money; comfort versus happiness… money versus family…family versus comfort…India versus…. He stumbles over real questions in the real dilemma at the center of a new narrative about returning to India as part of a “reverse Brain-Drain.”

The Pathaks feel they are in a precarious position. They have extensively researched the possibilities of a return, and are drawing a number of blanks. Instead, what they have reached is the difficult understanding that an easy return to India is a myth, and that their identity as Indians in the United States can longer be formed around such myth. In the coming months or years, they will make a move into a more securely fixed identity either in the United States as successful professionals, or in India as returnees who made their choice and will struggle to do the best they can.

As Vishrut sat next to me on that wooden swing in his home city of Ahmedabad he was quiet. Perhaps he was thinking how when they return to the U.S., he and Reema will begin to move in a new direction of assimilation. Perhaps he was thinking how, in the future when he sits on his couch in Queens and watches cricket on TV., his thoughts of India will not be so nostalgic for a life in India. He will be nostalgic for family, for food, for smells, for sounds. But it will be nostalgia without myths, without could-have-been’s, without regrets for an alternate world. Perhaps he is thinking of the difficulties of seeing the United States as something more than a temporary place of residence, more than a means to an ultimate end in India. Yet the elements of the current narrative of

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return are fast moving, variable, and even explosive. India’s ability to quickly grow or quickly slow down reflects this. The same may be true for Vishrut; despite his bleak prospects for a return to India, and despite his enlightened understanding about their implications, he might be offered a great job there. His fortunes are subject to change, subject to the same variability that can turn a hopeless murmur about the ridiculous price of land into a triumphant shout about the victory of a kite.

Whatever thoughts he may have been pondering, Vishrut was quiet as we rocked together on the creaking swing. The light faded to a dark blue, the last remnants of orange disappeared in the polluted haze, and a smile crossed his face as he watched a kite, cut loose, drift down from the sky and come to rest quietly near our feet.
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