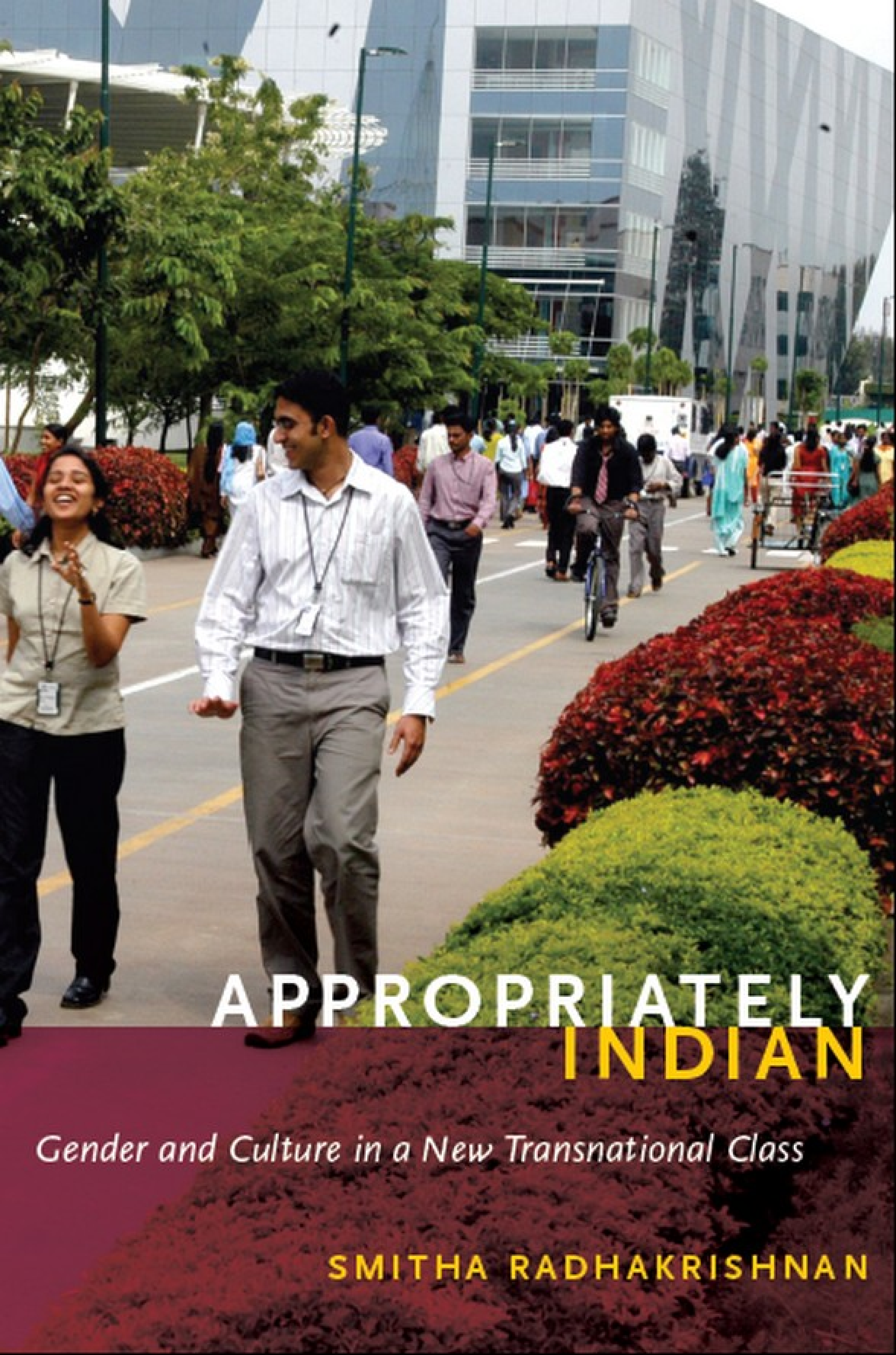

APPROPRIATELY INDIAN

Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class

SMITHA RADHAKRISHNAN

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GENDER AND CULTURE IN A NEW TRANSNATIONAL CLASS

Smitha Radhakrishnan

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For Avva, who first inspired me to write

about the everyday life that surrounds me.

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As with all long-term projects, this book has stacked up a series of intellectual and monetary debts along its way. The fact that this book draws from research conducted on three continents in five different cities expands the network of indebtedness even further.

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My family in many ways sets the context for this book, as our story of migration, change, and gendered "balance" helped to set up what eventually became the framing intellectual questions of this book. I am grateful to my mother, Sharada, for her ability to restore my faith in myself when the going got rocky, my grandparents, M. K. and Vatsala Karunanithy, for opening the door for future generations, and my brother, Prasant, for laughter, wit, and unbelievably reliable compassion. Finally, I thank my partner in life and love, Ganesh Ramachandran, who has been my tireless supporter from the earliest stages of this project, and whose quiet admiration and critical eye have kept me strong, clear, and focused.

INTRODUCTION

ON BACKGROUND

The cover of the popular Silicon Valley magazine *Wired* of February 2004 features a headshot of a beautiful copper-skinned woman bedecked in jewels. With her palm concealing the lower half of her face, she gazes out at the reader from heavily lined eyes. The palm is covered in the traditional Indian decoration known as *mehndi*, usually seen in the abstract designs and floral patterns that adorn the hands of Indian brides and Bollywood starlets. "The New Face of the Silicon Age," declares the headline. At a closer look, the viewer sees that the *mehndi* designs are not what he might expect—the *mehndi* is software code. The caption reads, "Kiss your cubicle good-bye. Tech jobs are fleeing to India faster than ever. You got a problem with that?" (figure 1). The corresponding story inside the magazine introduces the "real" woman the glamorous model on the cover was meant to refer to: Aparna Jairam, a thirty-three-year-old project manager in Mumbai described in the following passage by the journalist Daniel H. Pink: "Her long black hair is clasped with a barrette. Her dark eyes are deep-set and unusually calm. She has the air of the smartest girl in class—not the one always raising her hand and shouting out answers, but the one who sits in back, taking it all in and responding only when called upon, yet delivering answers that make the whole class turn around and listen." Pink goes on to cite Jairam's practical, yet authentic reading of the ancient Hindu text, the Gita,[1] and Jairam's sharp, composed responses to American counterparts accusing her of stealing their jobs. A photograph of Jairam shows her just as Pink describes her, with simple jewelry and a small black *bindi* (figure 2).

This issue of *Wired* came out just as I was beginning the research for this project. As I was already interested in the particular role of female information technology (IT) professionals in the

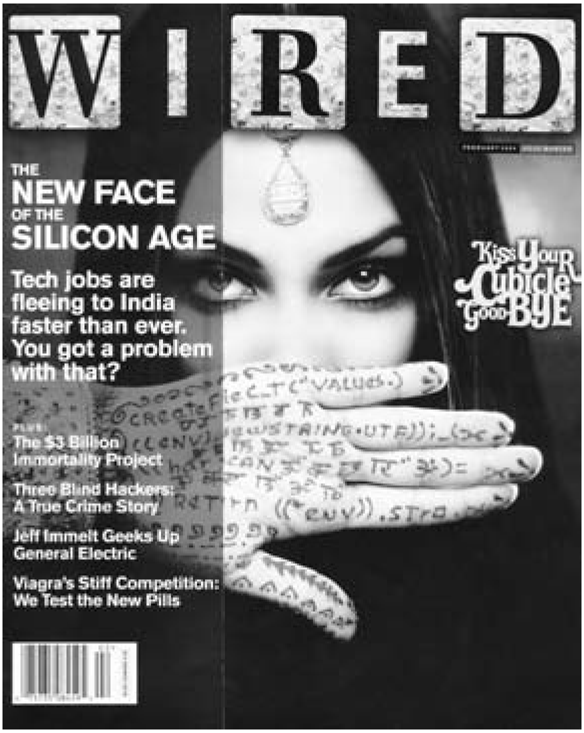

WIRED
THE NEW FACE OF THE SILICON AGE
Tech jobs are fleeing to India faster than ever. You got a problem with that?
Kiss Your Cubicle Good-BYE
PLUS:
The $3 Billion Immortality Project
Three Blind Hackers: A True Crime Story
Jeff Immelt Geeks Up General Electric
Viagra's Stiff Competition: We Test the New Pills

FIGURE 1 The new face of the silicon age.

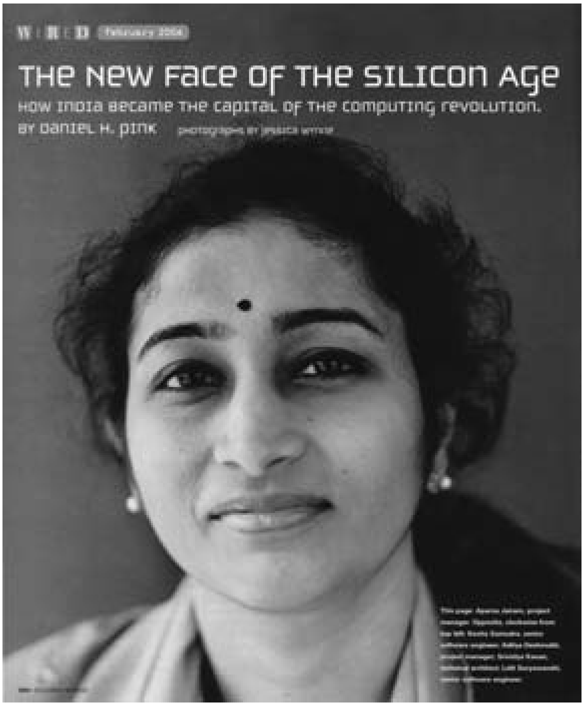
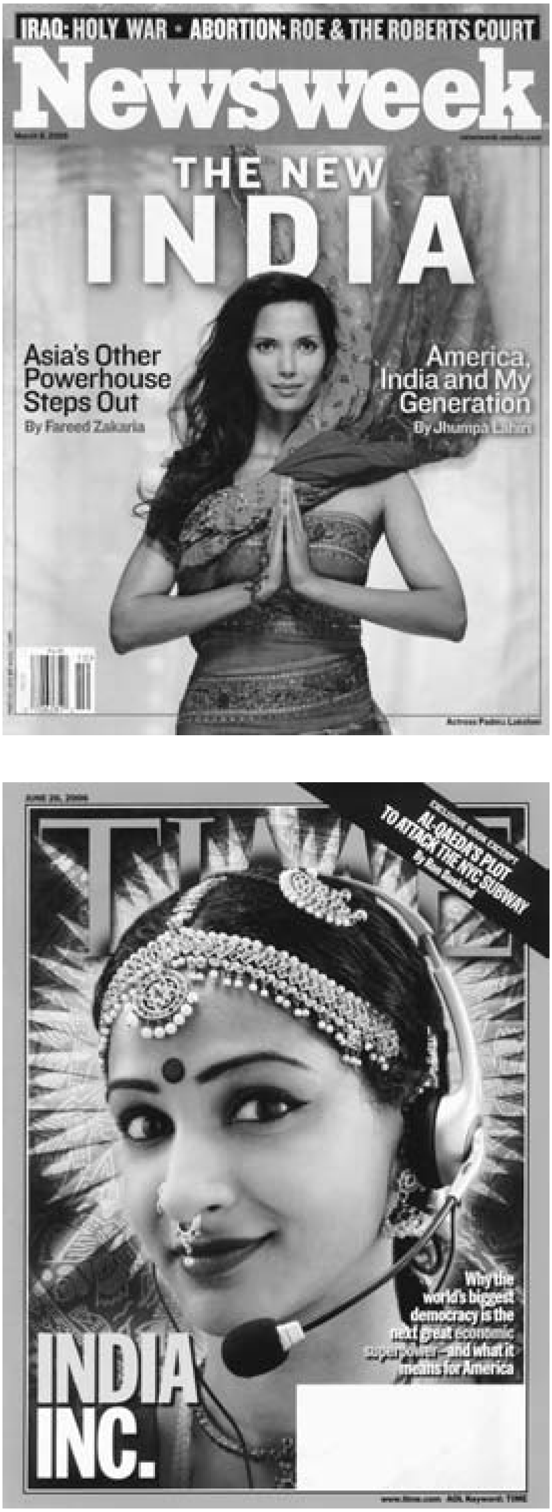

WIRED February 2004
THE NEW FACE OF THE SILICON AGE
HOW INDIA BECAME THE CAPITAL OF THE COMPUTING REVOLUTION.
BY DANIEL H. PINK

FIGURE 2 *Wired* magazine offers a face for Indian IT.

rapid societal changes that have been occurring in India since the 1990s, the depictions of these women in this magazine caught my attention. The representation on the cover was of something much more than the professional women themselves—it was about a new, sexy, unstoppable India that could seduce the white male tech worker reading the magazine, but could also take his job. And yet, with the hand covering her face in an improvised veil, the model on the cover remains demure and plays out Orientalist fantasies. But Jairam's photo and description convey another message, perhaps complementary to the cover. Jairam tells Americans that India is no longer a backward country of oppressed women, but a country where smart, competent women work hard and succeed in the global economy. This issue of *Wired* was one of many magazines and articles in recent years that portray a new India to the West through feminine imagery (Friedman 2004; Myers 2006; Zakaria 2006). As these articles go online and circulate in soft and hard copies, they create a hall of mirrors in which professionals in India perceive their reflected glory (figures 3a and 3b).

This book is about the culture of India's IT professionals—a culture that powerfully reconciles the "global" and the "Indian" with one another to create a simplified, influential notion of a new Indian culture that is compatible with the economic and geographic mobility of the global economy. Drawing on over 130 in-depth interviews and ethnographic research conducted with Indian IT professionals in Mumbai, Bangalore, Silicon Valley, and South Africa, this book aims to examine the specific practices, attitudes, and beliefs that foster and give rise to a sociocultural formation that I call India's "new" transnational class. The culture of this class is full of ostensible contradictions: it embraces individuality, development, and change but holds fast to specific ideas of tradition and family; it encourages women to be "empowered" but places specific limitations on such empowerment; it claims inclusivity by thinking of itself as "middle class" yet the boundaries in terms of who enters into its fold are remarkably limited. Not all IT professionals live their lives in ways that subscribe exactly to these very precise demands, yet these sensibilities comprise the dominant expectation of what it means to be properly "Indian" among a class of people for whom that identification defines their place in a global cultural and political landscape.

Through a process I call *cultural streamlining*, IT professionals transform diverse practices constituting "Indian culture" into *appropriate dif-*


IRAQ: HOLY WAR • ABORTION: ROE & THE ROBERTS COURT
Newsweek
THE NEW INDIA
Asia's Other Powerhouse Steps Out
By Fareed Zakaria
America, India and My Generation
By Jhumpa Lahiri
TIME
AL-QAEDA'S PLOT TO ATTACK THE NYC SUBWAY
Why the world's biggest democracy is the next great economic superpower—and what it means for America
INDIA INC.

FIGURES 3A AND 3B
A feminized "global" India.

ference—a generic, transferable set of "Indian" cultural norms that are palatable to Western cosmopolitan culture. Cultural streamlining and the production of appropriate difference allow Indian IT professionals at the frontlines of the global economy to assert their symbolic position at the helm of a "new" India. The principles that sustain and drive cultural streamlining and the boundaries of appropriate difference are embedded in the everyday experience of the IT industry and the knowledge economy. From the workplace, these principles move into the private sphere of the home through individual IT professionals who are themselves already embedded in gendered, religious, national, and class histories. In the sphere of the home and the family, conceptions of "Indian culture" are reworked, upheld, and rendered authentic and appealing to national and international audiences, including others who identify as "Indian" living in India and abroad. This book traces these specific cultural processes as they move from the realm of the public to that of the private.

The economic and social transformations of the 1990s and beyond have fueled new kinds of job opportunities for an educated, English-speaking group of mostly urban Indians. In the 1960s and 1970s, the sons of such urban educated families fueled the skilled migration of engineers to the United States. While many of the new jobs initially created in India were at the absolute bottom of the international IT value chain, this position has shifted as IT talent and skills in India have become more sophisticated. Talented urban Indians with the appropriate technical training can today enter the IT industry and realistically hope to advance far enough in their firms to travel far and wide. Regardless of whether or not these technologists actually travel the world or migrate abroad, the ethos of mobility and achievement in India's IT industry forms the basis of a class culture that reshapes meanings of Indianness to fit the conditions of globalization.

Background as Keyword

On a humid monsoon afternoon in July, I am interviewing Shubha in a crowded, suburban Mumbai coffee shop. Shubha,[2] a twenty-four-year-old IT professional who has been working for a large Indian multinational corporation for the past three years, is one among the tens of thousands of Indian women who have entered the lucrative field of Indian IT in recent years. She has lived in the United States for work, has broken conventions of caste and community to marry a man of her choosing, and is moving up the corporate ladder at a steady clip. I ask her if she finds herself to be very different from women who work at the State Bank of India. Government bank jobs have conventionally been considered good jobs for women in urban India, yet few women in the IT industry would ever consider a career in the nationalized banking sector. Her response highlights the importance of "background," a multifaceted term that gets to the heart of cultural continuity and change in India's transnational class of professionals:

> SHUBHA: Well, it's difference in education definitely. They [the bank workers] probably don't have any major qualifications backing them. We [IT workers] go to school, college, play sports, that makes a lot of difference. Many of them probably can't make a straight sentence in English. So, it's education to some extent and to some extent background also.
>
> SR: What do you mean, background?
>
> SHUBHA: The kind of family that they come from. Meaning, they come from lower middle-class families, probably. So, the entire outlook—not outlook, but—well, the way they talk and the way they interact is different. I mean, the background that I come from is also so different from most of the other people in [my firm] . . . Many of them are from families where their fathers are also in similar kinds of jobs. Like, I have a friend, her father's working in the Middle East somewhere. So probably, her income helps the family in some way. She'll buy a washing machine for her parents. Maybe it's not a responsibility but definitely . . . if she buys something for the family, it probably helps. For me, that's just not the case.

Shubha comes from a wealthy family, a family that never intended for her to work at all. Her income makes no difference to her parents whatsoever. From Shubha's elite position, she is acutely aware of "background," a term that characterizes class, caste, education, family ties, and even the responsibility and behavior of daughters. Bank workers and IT professionals might all consider themselves to be "middle class," but for Shubha the distinctions between them seem to be obvious. Through the idea of "background," Shubha is able to distinguish easily why she is different from the women she perceives to be working at the bank (although she does not know such women personally and might be mischaracterizing them) and, more importantly, between herself and her peers at her own workplace. In its deceiving neutrality, "background" demarcates a place for everyone in society—not only does it tell Shubha where people come from, but where they might be going. Because Shubha pursued a career in engineering rather than the more luxurious life her parents envisioned for her, Shubha's own background did not dictate her future. Yet, the mismatch between her adult life and the life she was raised to live makes her all the more aware of the importance of background.

In the parlance of middle-class India, the term "background" comes up in conversation almost daily. In professional contexts, a question about one's background can be a question about educational achievement. In a family conversation about a prospective bride, a question about background refers to a combination of class and caste position. Especially in the latter context, the designations, specifications, and nuances that distinguish one position from another are myriad and are never easily addressed by a simple set of categories. Perhaps the most ambiguous and ill defined of these categories is the claim to be of a "middle-class" background. For example, a "middle-class" background in Bangalore, a large metropolis, might viably include hairdressers, IT professionals, and rickshaw drivers, depending on whom you might ask. In a rural area, a landowner with large land holdings may consider himself to be middle class as well. Moreover, in both of these settings, being a middle-class Brahmin (the highest caste) contains different meanings than being a middle-class Gowda (a lower caste, categorized in the state category Other Backward Classes, or OBCs), differences that the identification "middle class" alone fails to capture. As a result, many analysts of India's middle class refer to them as a plural group—India's middle *classes* (Fernandes and Heller 2006; Rajagopal 2001b; Ray and Baviskar 2010).

To stay with the example of choosing a potential bride, finding out about her "background" not only means coming to know all of these nuances, but also coming to understand what her family is like. Did her mother stay at home or did she work? How committed is the bride's mother to her family? Did the bride's parents educate her? If so, in a private or government school? What kind of a house did the bride grow up in? In what part of town? What sorts of appliances does she have at home? What religion do they practice at home and to which gods do they pray? How do they celebrate festivals?

The very specificity of "background," and its striking contrast with the neutrality that the term implies at first gloss, is exactly what makes the term so useful for thinking about the culture of India's IT professionals, both at home and abroad. Almost all of the IT professionals I interviewed claimed to come from "an ordinary middle-class background," but this claim is necessarily suspect because of all that it conceals. In everyday language, whether with regard to a potential spouse or a potential job candidate, people often refer to the idea of looking for a "certain background," a notion that is purposely vague and relative to whoever might be invoking it. Yet, IT professionals almost always come from a *certain* background—an overwhelmingly homogenous, elite background that nonetheless makes a compelling claim to universality and relativity.

Studies have shown that IT professionals are overwhelmingly urban and upper caste, mostly from families in which the fathers worked at government jobs (Krishna and Brihmadesam 2006; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). In terms of the labor market, IT professionals comprise a small, elite class segment. For all its hype, India's IT industry employs about two million workers—a drop in the bucket (about 0.4 percent) of a vast workforce of 480 million strong. Moreover, the category of the middle class, a category meant to describe the majority "middle" in Western societies, is inherently misleading in the Indian context. Even by the most generous of measures, India's middle class comprises only 10–15 percent of the population (Deshpande 2003). With even the most minimal of contextualization, then, we find that Indian IT professionals do not fit easily into prevailing sociological conceptions of "middle class." Rather, in their position at the frontlines of the global economy, they comprise an elite group that *identifies* with India's middle class while also occupying the economic and symbolic cutting edge of the country.

Claims to middle-classness also overlook entrenched caste divisions that have historically segregated India's educational system, as well as public life more generally. Class and caste have a complex relationship, and this relationship varies greatly among different regions of the country. In general, however, the highest castes, though not always wealthy, are associated with a culture that places a high value on education, while lower castes are more alienated from the still extremely segregated system of education in India.[3] While it has become increasingly possible for families of lower caste to acquire wealth, the deeply rooted tradition for education among the highest castes might be a kind of advantage that is more difficult to acquire. This is a disparity that the government-mandated policy of reservations, India's version of affirmative action, seeks to rectify, but these policies have been hotly contested and continue to be a political flashpoint to this day.[4]

But there is yet another layer to the "certain background" of IT professionals, one that works in concert with class and caste positioning: this is the background provided by a good woman and a good family in the private sphere. Even as the definitions of these cultural standards shift in the context of a rapidly changing social and economic milieu, the importance of culture in the feminized sphere of the domestic remains critical.

Gendering "Background"

When I conducted my interviews with professional women in India in 2004–5, I took along the issue of *Wired* described above. In almost every interview, I asked interviewees what they thought of the article, which prominently featured the faces of men and women working in the industry (figures 2 and 4). Many had seen the article before. Most of the women I spoke to felt proud of the representation and believed that the magazine offered a positive image of India and of themselves. Malini, a project leader in Bangalore, was impressed with what she saw to be its correctness:

> It's very accurate. That's one thing I notice. This is the way all women in IT look. More or less. All three pictures—you can really see three different stages of a woman, right? The *kajol* is very accentuated here, the lipstick is more accentuated here, and you can even see her *bindi* matching her dress here. There's more polish here. It's fairly accurate. And, I think there's a problem with this image. Maybe that's my view, but I feel the image is too Indian. You have to be more global. Shed the *bindi*, cut your hair. Maybe.

Malini's observations of the "stages" draw attention to subtle distinctions that would be invisible to the outsider's eye. For Malini, the extra *kajol*, or eyeliner, is a sign of a more traditional way of dressing, the lipstick, a more modern, polished version, and the matching *bindi* a similar sign of "polish." Immediately, though, Malini wishes that these signs of Indian womanhood were less striking, more "global." Yet Malini

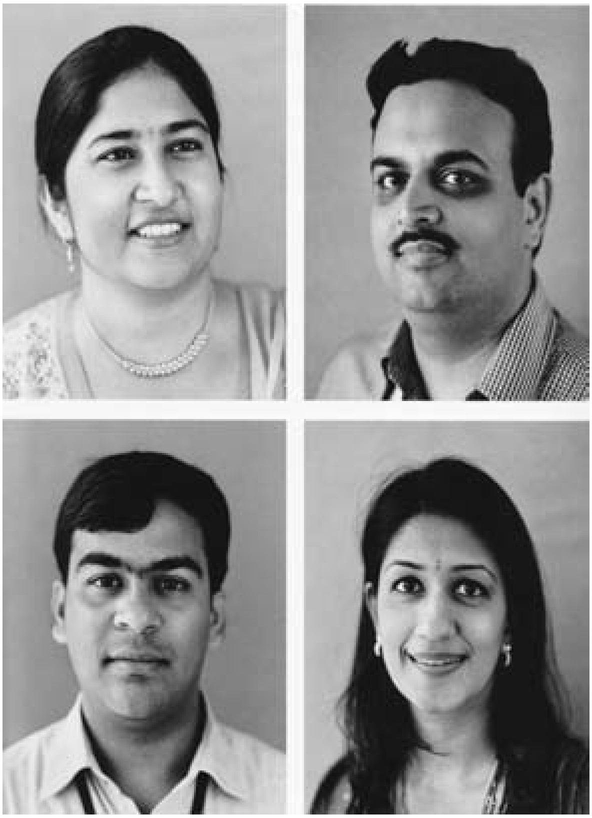


FIGURE 4 *Wired* magazine offers more faces of Indian IT.

is unique in this wish. Most of the women I spoke to were proud of the particular version of Indian femininity portrayed in the magazine, as it seemed to adjudicate between the "Indian" and the "global" in a way that resonated with them. This resonance suggests that professional women play an important symbolic role in defining exactly what those boundaries are and how they may be appropriately transcended, bringing Indian middle-class femininity to the center of the cultural innovations of IT professionals. More specifically, the unique symbolic position of professional IT women allows them to legitimize the success of the elite class of knowledge professionals through their navigations of "global" and authentically "Indian" culture. This power enables them to help set the terms for cultural streamlining and the production of appropriate difference. As professional Indian women enact, reinforce, and reinvent a new, respectable femininity, they also legitimate a vision of India and Indian culture that reflects the successes of the transnational professional class.

"Background" refers not only to overt class markers, but also to the gendered character of the domestic sphere, which is implicitly linked to class standing. Good family backgrounds are composed of heterosexual families in which middle-class women make appropriate decisions for their husbands and children—decisions that were enacted self-consciously and enthusiastically by most of the women I interviewed in all three countries. Indeed, good families lie at the heart of a reinvented transnational Indian culture, and it is the repeated naming of this value, which my informants always contrasted with the deterioration of Western families, that comprises one of the key methods through which tensions between the "global" and the "Indian" are reconciled with one another. It is invariably middle-class Indian women who feel responsible for this reconciliation. The navigations that professional IT women in particular make in "balancing" values of the "global" as well as resonant notions of "Indianness" and family help to imagine, stabilize, and consolidate a new kind of Indian culture for a broad transnational audience.

So, who exactly are the women who become IT professionals? In which social norms are they complicit, and which social norms do they violate, transform, or create? Unlike women in the United States, young Indian women from urban families, especially upper-caste ones, encourage their daughters to study science and math.[5] Although these subjects remain dominated by men at the college level, the availability of IT jobs, combined with the widely accepted perception that these jobs are some of the only "good" professional jobs for women, has attracted more and more women to engineering and computer science degrees (Parikh and Sukhatme 2004). Most of the women I interviewed had job offers by the time they had graduated from college. Indeed, incoming cohorts of new recruits to large IT firms have an almost one to one ratio of women to men, although over time that ratio deteriorates rapidly, leveling off at about one to two in the industry overall (Suriya 2003). In contrast to a previous generation of middle-class women, the young women who enter IT today have a sense that they wish to achieve financial independence prior to getting married. Yet, the issue of marriage continues to loom large for IT women. As I will show in subsequent chapters, many women opt to marry men of their choosing rather than adhering to the conventional arranged-marriage system that most of their parents went through. Sometimes, women decide not to marry at all, although this is still rare. A large proportion of women, however, work for a few years, get married through the conventional arranged-marriage system, and then leave their IT jobs altogether. The status they have acquired in working in the IT sector makes them more desirable in marriage markets, where urban men express interest in having educated, working wives, even if the wives are required to give up or cut back on that work when they marry.[6]

Thus, although IT work does open up a wide range of options for women, it does not completely eliminate conventional expectations that their families might have of them.[7] Still, their earning power, as well as the high status of their work, seems to give them a significant say in their own life trajectories. This decision-making power is reflected in later ages of marriage and childbearing among these women compared to the previous generation, and the increased frequency of "love marriages" (as opposed to "arranged marriages"). The expectation to work or not to work also varies greatly according to exactly those specificities and nuances of background I have outlined above. For some families, a daughter, daughter-in-law, or wife working in the IT industry for life would be a source of great pride, while for others a woman working outside the house at all would be unacceptable. These differences arise from caste, class, and gender conventions specific to each family. Even within the narrow group I am studying, there is great diversity in these practices. In this sense, the particular form of femininity that women enact in the home and at work is shaped precisely by the constraints of the "background" from which they come, even as they create and reshape the contours of a broad notion of "Indian culture" for a new generation.

An "Indian" Background

At the heart of the cultural terrain that Indian IT professionals navigate is the idea of belonging to India—"Indianness"—and, by association, the idea of India and "Indian culture" more generally. What is at stake to say that this privileged group is remaking Indianness? And how is this particular effort to remake and streamline what it means to belong to India significant in relation to other attempts to fix ideas of Indianness that have been widespread since the early nationalist period of the late nineteenth century? Can it possibly mean similar things to make a claim to "being Indian" or "having an Indian background" in cultural milieus as different as India, the United States, and South Africa?

The questions of defining the idea of what India is as a cultural entity, and what it means to belong to this entity, have been salient since the colonial period, first to outsiders interested in the region, and later to the elite nationalists who rallied together in the anti-colonial nationalist movement. While there exist numerous accounts of the origins and development of Indian nationalism and the difficulties of defining a unified India, scholars agree that the issue has never been resolved with any degree of certainty or finality (Chatterjee 1986; Khilnani 2004). Indeed, the persistence of a multiplicity of ideas of India and Indianness, paired with the shifting role of the Indian state as an arbiter of those meanings, has left open the possibility of renegotiating those meanings even further in the contemporary context.

Since India's independence from British rule in 1947, perhaps the most important tension in defining the culture of India has persisted between ideas of India that place the values of secularism, modernity, and equality at the forefront on the one hand, and those that emphasize religion (specifically, Hinduism) on the other. The dominant voices of Western-educated elites sought to create a secular state that included all religions, and it was these elites who forged the new state. Alongside this dominant movement, however, were also the voices of Hindu nationalists who opposed Gandhi's teachings of non-violence in favor of a militant, masculinist model of the new nation. Hindu nationalists defined themselves exclusively by what they determined to be "Hindu values" and culture, a distinct take on Gandhi's more inclusive interpretation of Hinduism and Indianness. Although Hindu nationalist voices had become organized in the nineteenth century in the context of the larger nationalist movement, they were marginalized as the European-influenced ideas of the anti-colonial Indian National Congress, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, took center stage. Their marginalization, however, did not erase their continued presence on the Indian political landscape (Corbridge and Hariss 2000; Malik and Singh 1990).

The economic and political philosophies of Nehru, the nation's first prime minister, emphasized a secular state and an economy driven by state-sponsored investment—a set of preoccupations that dominated Indian politics for decades. Still, the hegemony of Nehru's idea of India was always shaky. A moment of economic and political crisis, building up