

A Reversal of the Tide in India: Tech Workers Flow Home to More Success

S. Mitra Kalita

February 28, 2006

The Washington Post

MADRAS, India -- In 1997, Dutt Kalluri left India to work for a Canadian software company, hoping the overseas experience would do his résumé good. A year later, he was promoted to head U.S. operations from Rockville. But as he returned to India for business and to visit his elderly mother, he marveled at the changes sweeping his homeland: new stores, more cars, enthusiasm for technology.

In 2001, not wanting to miss out on this transformation, Kalluri gave up a six-figure salary and the family's townhouse in Gaithersburg for a job here with an Indian conglomerate. His wife, Uma, gave up her daily syndicated dose of "Seinfeld." Daughter Lakshmi said goodbye to her Montessori preschool classmates.

These return migrations have become increasingly common; Indian expatriates such as the Kalluris are finding that, at times, the best way to move up is to move back.

They bought a beachfront house here, arranging the contents from their former home just as they were in Gaithersburg. But other transitions were not as simple.

They do not drive anymore; chauffeurs do that. Dutt Kalluri is one of the few executives arriving at meetings on time; his colleagues follow "IST" -- Indian Standard Time, which is to say, late. A wistful Uma Kalluri longs to make Folgers coffee instead of a sugar-and-spice-laden South Indian java and is adjusting to living with her mother-in-law.

Yet the Kalluris brush off the cultural disconnects, saying they have simply followed opportunity to the United States and back. "If you want to be in the latest trends, you have to be in India," said Dutt Kalluri, who heads data warehousing and business intelligence at the information-technology division of Larsen & Toubro Ltd., India's largest construction and engineering company. "Technology development happens in India. Technology consumption happens in the U.S."

President Bush travels to India this week with an ambitious agenda that includes boosting U.S.-Indian commercial ties. Such ties have strengthened in recent years, as Indian workers have migrated back and

forth between the two nations. Largely over the past five decades, that migration has been outward as millions of Indians left their homeland to seek riches abroad, from the United Arab Emirates to the United Kingdom to the United States. They earned graduate degrees, launched careers in medicine and engineering, or took jobs as gas-station attendants and hotel clerks. They sent money back to their villages and delighted relatives with gifts such as Nike sneakers and Pringles potato chips during visits home. But since 1991, as foreign firms have poured billions of dollars into a more open and deregulated Indian economy, some expatriates have found the best thing they can give back is themselves.

"In the IT industry, there's significant value for people coming back," said Prakash Grama, an Indian native turned U.S. citizen who now lives in Bangalore and runs an association linking returning Indians with volunteer work. "And here you are not just accepted into society, you're recognized at the top."

Other countries are experiencing mass returns as well. The 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown spurred some of China's most entrepreneurial minds to flee, but with a thriving and more open Chinese economy, they are going back. Immigrants from Africa and Latin America, too, are starting businesses that allow them to divide their time between multiple homes and countries.

Here, members of India's diaspora are known as NRIs, or non-resident Indians. They are a revered lot, presumed to be successful due to their international experience. Those who return to India -- known as returned NRIs, or RNRI -- tend to fill jobs on the higher rungs of the corporate ladder. They are the country's new elite, living in gated communities, networking in golf clubs, celebrating holidays such as Halloween and Thanksgiving -- transplanting their foreign lives in Indian soil.

Tens of thousands of India's best and brightest have made these multiple migrations, helping businesses on both sides of the ocean navigate East and West and providing a big boost to India's development.

The cultural impact on their nation is visible and visceral. The New Delhi suburb of Noida boasts a collection of luxury homes known as an "NRI Colony." Meanwhile, returning stay-at-home spouses confess they miss the freedom and distance of America, far from the prying eyes of in-laws and nosy neighbors.

"I learned how to drive there . . . a minivan," Uma Kalluri said proudly about her three years in Gaithersburg. "Outings, shopping. There I could go and do it all myself. Here, I have a driver."

She knows that sounds luxurious, but between the driver, other servants, her 75-year-old mother-in-law, and extended family in her home, Uma Kalluri is rarely alone. "In India, it's just how it is," she said.

Asked about living with his mother, Dutt Kalluri's business-speak does not miss a beat. She "adds a lot of value to the household," he said, because the children speak fluent Tamil and have ready access to the family history.

In India, his employer is a household name, a conglomerate that makes everything from cement to software. His office is located in this thriving coastal city, also known as Chennai. Companies here seek managers with U.S. experience such as Dutt Kalluri to connect American customers with Indian workforces. In a tech sector relying on cheap labor, these hires are often the priciest. Dutt Kalluri would not elaborate on his compensation except to say it was in the "top 5 percent of Indians."

His management approach strives to be American, he said. "I want a systematic approach to anything we do," he said. "It's like the new blood mixing with the old blood. We are the change agents."

Beyond his official job description, Kalluri's tasks range from emphasizing the importance of time management and punctuality to making sure the Indians do not mispronounce Rockville (it sometimes comes out ROKE-vill-ee) or San Jose (San JOE-zee). Indians tend to overpromise, Kalluri said, and he tries to get a new generation of young software engineers to be honest with clients, committing only to what they truly can deliver.

"Working in India and working in the U.S. is entirely different," said Kalluri. "I used to get a little ticked off by the commitment system."

Besides new workplace dynamics, Indian families find themselves adjusting to other facets of life.

With their husbands at work and children at school, RNRI women devise activities to stay busy. On a recent morning at the DLF Golf and Country Club in the New Delhi suburb of Gurgaon, women filled the gym to capacity by 9 a.m. They were there to exercise, but another attraction had lured them: Oprah.

Women cluster around the gym's lone television to watch every morning, then resume jogging, walking or biking -- and dissecting the show.

"Almost 98 percent of the people here are NRIs," the gym's trainer Surinder Sharma said. "I didn't ever see the U.S. but from what I know, this is what it's like."

"This" could be considered a paradise. He gestured at a bastion of manicured lawns, swimming pools and fountains, trimmed bushes that rise and fall like the humps on a camel's back. There are caddies, guards and masseuses.

After her workout, Nazneen Modak collapsed into a wicker chair on the veranda. It sounds odd, she said, but returning to India has made her feel even more American.

"It is a very Westernized life here," said Modak, who was born and raised in Bombay, then lived in New York, New Jersey and Hong Kong. She moved back to India six years ago because her husband transferred to General Electric Co.'s India office. "If you have money, you can live quite comfortably."

That can pose a challenge to raising well-adjusted, grounded children, she said. Her three boys have been instructed to call the driver and the cook "uncle" and to treat them like elder relatives, Modak said.

The RNRI Association estimates that between 30,000 and 40,000 expatriates have returned to Bangalore, India's largest technology hub, in the last decade alone. Their boomerang migration exists alongside two seemingly opposite trends: a rapidly Westernizing India and an ethnically diversifying United States where immigrants form tight networks to retain cultural ties.

In the United States, "we used to go the temple every week for a half day on Sundays. We drove 60 miles," Grama, president of the RNRI Association, said laughing. "Here, it's right across the street and I haven't gone there for six months." Religion in India is "in the air, so I just pick it up," said Grama, who spent a decade working in the United States but returned to India in 1998 to become chief executive of Span Systems Corp., a company he co-founded.

Five years after returning to India, the Kalluri children have picked up an Indian accent when they speak English. Lakshmi, 9, lists the names of several friends and brags that she can already divide decimals -- ahead of where would have been in Montgomery County schools, her father points out.

Perhaps, Lakshmi said, but that does not outweigh what she misses most from the States: her cousin Anita. She lives in the Maryland suburb of Laurel -- and is still an NRI.