

Chapter 3

Pathways to U.S. Higher Education: Capital, Citizenship, and Indian Women MBA Students

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Abstract Using in-depth interviews with 20 Indian women pursuing MBA degrees from U.S. universities, this article asks the following questions: Why do Indian women choose to study in the United States and what enables them to do so? What pathways do these women take to studying in the United States? Analysis reveals that Indian women choose to pursue an MBA as a way to advance their career, make a career change, or assert their autonomy. They choose to study in the United States because of the availability of financial aid, the presence of family and friend networks, and the belief that studying in the United States would enable the cultivation of cosmopolitan capital in the form of knowledge about global business trends and access to colleagues and alumni from across the globe. They intend to use cosmopolitan capital to exercise flexible citizenship. To facilitate their studies in the United States, women use inherited and cultivated forms of economic, cultural, and social capital. Given the uneven distribution of economic, cultural, and social capital, this article demonstrates how access to flexible citizenship remains the purview of the relatively affluent members of India's middle, upper middle, and upper classes.

In the early 1990s, India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi initiated a series of economic reforms to liberalize India's economy. The results of these policies included increased wealth to India's emerging middle classes, as well as the increased availability of educational loans. With more lucrative jobs and access to funding available, middle-class parents can now afford to explore educational options previously financially unattainable. For many, this means sending their sons and daughters to the United States for higher education.

A plurality of Indian students who choose to study abroad do so in the United States. As of 2014, the United States housed 46% of Indian students studying abroad, with most pursuing STEM or business degrees (Asian Development Bank Institute 2014; IIE 2014). This trend may be attributed to several factors including

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the United States' reputation for producing the most scientific and social scientific research papers, the openness and flexibility of its universities, and its provision of superior scholarships and salaries (Marginson 2008). Despite the overwhelming popularity of U.S. institutions, not all Indian students have access to them. For example, steep differentials exist between the access Indian women and men have to these institutions. While approximately 100,000 Indian nationals choose to study in the United States each year, women represent only 30% of this number (Pandey 2014). This situation begs the following questions: Why do Indian women choose to study in the United States and what enables them to do so? What pathways do these women take to studying in the United States?

I focus my analysis on the specific case of women earning MBA degrees. I make this decision for several reasons. Leela Fernandes (2000) argues that the acquisition of an MBA represents one strategy India's middle class engages in to negotiate the uncertainty of the country's liberalized labor market. Arguably, MBA holders benefit from the access these degrees provide to national as well as transnational labor markets because of the reputation of U.S. MBA programs for inculcating global competencies within their students (Brocklehurst et al. 2007; Sklair 2001). Perhaps because of the increased value of MBAs in national and transnational labor markets, business programs are the most popular degree choice outside of STEM fields for Indian nationals (IIE 2014). For these reasons, I choose to focus this article on the pathway Indian women take to earning their MBA from a U.S. university.

Literature Review

Gender, Educational Access, and Capital

Women's pathways to the United States begin when they enroll in school in India. Parents can choose among schools that offer state, national, or international board examinations. They can also choose their school's medium of instruction, such as English, Hindi, or another Indic language, as well as whether to enroll their child in a public or private school. These different schooling options exist in a hierarchy (LaDousa 2014). In the case of the women I interviewed, they all attended private, English-medium schools that offer national board examinations. Their parents' preferences for enrolling their daughters in these schools may be due to the belief that they provide better access to middle-class jobs due to the better educational outcomes provided by private schools (Desai et al. 2010; Kingdon 2007; LaDousa 2014).

Despite the benefits of attending an English-medium private school, all students do not have equal access to these schools. The writers of India's Human Development Report found that on average, boys are more likely to be enrolled in private schools than girls (Desai et al. 2010). The gender differential in access to advantageous educational options occurs for several reasons. Sunita Bose (2012) finds that in households where the mom exhibits higher levels of son preference, daughters are more likely to receive less education than sons. Meanwhile, Fariza Afridi (2010)

finds that daughters whose moms have greater amounts of autonomy and higher levels of education are more likely to attend school for just as many years as their brothers. In addition, women face the prevailing social attitude that any investment in their education will eventually benefit their husbands' household and not their natal home (Mukhopadhyay 1994). Therefore, parents may be uninclined to invest as heavily in their daughters' education knowing that they may not accrue direct benefits from it. The women I interviewed represent the exception, and studying the pathways of these women to the United States may explain the social and cultural barriers preventing more women from doing so.

In this article, I argue that the cultivation and deployment of advantageous forms of economic, cultural, and social capital enable the women I spoke with to study in the United States. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defines economic capital as a person's assets or income and cultural capital as long-lasting dispositions and educational qualifications. Meanwhile, scholars define social capital as the actual or potential benefits that accrue from being part of a group (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Dumais 2002). I use these definitions of economic, cultural, and social capital in my analysis.

As will be discussed in the findings section of my article, the women I interviewed relied on their parents' economic, cultural, and social capital to reap their own forms of capital for their educational and professional advancement. For the women I interviewed, their parents utilized their economic capital to pay the hefty tuition fees at their daughters' K-12 institutions. Parents used cultural capital in the form of English-language skills to complete the admissions' application to enroll their child at their respective school and they utilized their social capital in the form of information about a school's reputation when deciding where to educate their children. Therefore, students' ability to earn economic, cultural, and social capital depends upon their parents' level of each form of capital, respectively.

Cosmopolitan Capital, Education Abroad, and Flexible Citizenship

Attending an elite K-12 institution represents an important first step on the pathway to a U.S.-based MBA program. Attending an elite K-12 school in India provides students with the peer groups, English-language skills, and helpful instructors that facilitate their access to a college or university in the United States (Dickey 2012; Ong 1999).

The Indian women I spoke with chose to earn their degrees in the United States, because studying in this country provides them with "global exposure." The term "global exposure" may be understood as a form of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism has varying definitions. In regard to this article's findings, I conceptualize cosmopolitanism as an engagement with ideas and people from different cultural and social backgrounds that foster transnational connectedness (Appiah 2006; Gunesch 2004; Roudometof 2005; Strand 2010).

Cosmopolitanism may become a form of capital insofar as it confers professional and other advantages upon those who embody its values. In his article on parents

and their choice of education stream for their children, Don Weenink (2008) discusses cosmopolitan capital as a form of social and cultural capital that describes a propensity to engage in globalizing social arenas, as well as bodily and mental predispositions and competencies. Students can earn this form of capital by living abroad, maintaining geographically dispersed groups of friends or relatives, and possessing a near-native mastery of English and one other foreign language.

In this article, I argue that the desire to cultivate cosmopolitan capital motivates Indian women to enroll at a U.S. university where they expect to engage with a diverse set of people and academic subject matter. The competencies they gain by studying in the United States will prepare them to work in a global environment that may help them gain *entrée* into national and international labor markets (Igarashi and Saito 2014; Prieur and Savage 2013). This in-turn broadens the geography over which they can seek employment, giving them the confidence to live and work virtually anywhere, a phenomenon Aihwa Ong (1999) conceptualizes as flexible citizenship.

Various scholars have contributed to our understanding of flexible citizenship. Johanna Waters (2009) states that flexible citizenship describes the result of the accumulation of advantageous cultural capital that students may convert into economic capital through their ability to respond with flexibility to changing national, social, and cultural contexts. Building off of this idea, Catherine Studemeyer (2015) defines flexible citizenship as the end result of a strategy of collecting various types of capital that leads to the acquisition of different forms of citizenship—including legal citizenship. She argues that people engage in capital accumulation as a means to acquire different forms of citizenship to mitigate uncertainty for oneself and one's family, as well as to better position themselves to take advantage of opportunities for personal and professional advancement. Therefore, people seek to acquire flexible citizenship as a way to minimize loss and increase opportunity in a globalizing world.

Education plays an important role in students' ability to exercise flexible citizenship. In a later publication, Ong (2006) describes how well-educated parents use international educational options to shape a complex scholastic career for their children. For children who live in countries such as India, having access to U.S.-based educational options may be especially important to their ability to exercise flexible citizenship. In her original conceptualization of the term, Ong (1999) argues that the desired economic and cultural attributes that facilitate mobility originate in the United States and Europe. These attributes include proper social behavior, academic interests, and knowledge of the "correct" foreign language—oftentimes English.

This requires those who live outside the United States and Europe to exercise geographic flexibility in cultivating the capital needed to facilitate flexible citizenship. Vanessa Fong (2011) describes this situation in her study of Chinese youth who go abroad for higher education. She argues that with the ideological support of their country and the monetary support of their families, these students seek out study abroad opportunities in an effort to gain developed world citizenship. They do this by learning developed countries' languages, working in developed countries' organizations, and migrating to developed countries for study abroad

opportunities so that they may cultivate social, cultural, economic, and sometimes legal citizenship in an effort to gain flexible citizenship. They believe that by gaining flexible citizenship, they may take advantage of professional opportunities anywhere in the world.

To reiterate, previous scholarship on flexible citizenship demonstrates how individuals use it as a tool to increase personal and professional advantages. Acquiring flexible citizenship typically requires obtaining important forms of economic, cultural, and social capital. Because of the inequities in the distribution of capital, this leads to inequities in who may be able to ultimately obtain flexible citizenship. Therefore, building upon studies of capital and flexible citizenship, this article examines how students use inherited and cultivated economic, cultural, and social capital to gain cosmopolitan capital, in an effort to exercise flexible citizenship.

In summary, earning a degree from a U.S. university facilitates Indian women's accumulation of cosmopolitan capital. They may use this capital to exercise flexible citizenship. The cultivation of cosmopolitan capital ultimately depends upon students' access to private, English-medium primary and secondary schools, which further depends on their parents' social, cultural, and economic capital. Because students come from families with varying levels of these different types of capital, this provides the basis for uneven access to cosmopolitan capital (Igarashi & Saito 2014). Therefore, the acquisition of cosmopolitan capital through higher education in the United States and the subsequent ability to exercise flexible citizenship serve as a marker of distinction for Indian women from relatively privileged backgrounds.

The following section discusses how I recruited participants and analyzed interview transcripts to construct my argument.

Data and Methods

For this project, I conducted 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Indian women MBA students at private universities across the United States. Initially, I located interviewees through my social networks and through on-campus events geared toward international students. I then used snowball sampling to find additional participants. Conducting semi-structured interviews provided me with an appropriate degree of control over the interview topic, while granting my participants breadth in their response (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Each interview lasted approximately 60–120 min and took place in respondents' homes, university buildings, cafes, as well as over the phone when a respondent lived more than a two-h drive from my residence. This enabled me to increase the geographic reach of my study in a cost-effective manner (Rubin and Rubin 2012). If a woman expressed an interest in talking with me more about her experience with coming to the United States or if in the process of interviewing I wanted to discuss how they came to the United States in more detail, I asked for a follow-up interview. I requested follow-up interviews with four of my respondents, and they all agreed to speak with me again. The follow-up interviews lasted between 30 and 75 min.

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. I initially used two broad codes to categorize my data: motivations for leaving India and motivations for moving to the United States. I then conducted a more detailed analysis of the data to attend to nuances in why my interviewees chose to travel thousands of miles to pursue graduate education in the United States and the cultural factors, such as class, gendered expectations, and religious beliefs that shaped their pathway to this country.

I provided interviewees with electronic copies of their transcripts if they requested one. To maintain the confidentiality of all of the women involved in this project, I have given them a pseudonym and do not reveal where I conducted my research or the names of the universities the students attended.

Research Participants

The women I interviewed for this project come from various parts of India including Gujarat, Delhi, Bangalore, West Bengal, and Mumbai. In addition, with the exception of one self-defined lower-middle-class woman, all the women interviewed for this project described themselves as coming from either a middle-, upper middle-, or upper-class background, with at least one parent holding a college degree.

There are important differences between how middle-, upper middle-, and upper-class women defined membership to their respective socioeconomic class. For example, Nila comes from an upper middle-class family. Her father owns his own jewelry business and her mother works for Indian Oil Corporation. When describing how she defines her class status, she says that because “the colony that we live in is kind of posh” she sees her family as being part of the upper middle class. Meanwhile, Anuya comes from a Mumbai-based upper middle-class family. Both her parents have college degrees. Her father owns a business that sells spare automobile parts on the wholesale and retail markets. Her mother is a housewife. Anuya states that her Mumbai-based family’s upper middle-class status centers on the fact that they “can afford luxuries sometimes.” She elaborates by saying, “Like we have like a TV at home, we have cars, we have a good apartment of our own, and we can do outings like a few times in a year.”

The ability to afford luxuries marks the difference between upper middle-class women and those who describe themselves as *only* middle class. Sara is one middle-class woman I spoke with. Her father works as a diplomat and her mother works as a personal assistant in the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation in India. In describing why her family’s class status falls between the upper middle and lower middle classes, Sara says “[We own] none of those fancy cars or anything but we still have a decent home and you know we have a car, which my dad was able to get finally a few years ago.” She sees her class background as different from the upper middle class which she describes by saying the following, “The more rich part of the middle class, they can afford fancier cars, nicer apartments, and big complexes. Basic things like having a swimming pool in your complex, you know those

things make a huge difference. To be able to afford places like that to live in—that’s for the upper middle class.”

Shefali, a middle-class student pursuing an MBA at a university in the Midwest echoes this idea of the middle class being able to afford the basics, but not necessarily luxuries when she describes her family. Her family belongs to Visakhapatnam, where her mother works as an assistant manager in a government bank and her father has employment as a science teacher. In discussing why she considers her family middle class she says, “Because although four members of our family are earning, but still the expenditure is so much that we pretty much go hand to mouth. Like you know paycheck to paycheck, that’s how we live.”

The ability to afford luxuries serves as an important marker for those from an upper-class background relative to those from the upper middle and middle classes. For example, in describing her family’s class background, Akira says, “I come from a well-to-do family. I mean financially you know we are well-to-do. So we’ve always got what we’ve wanted. You know every year we would go out for trips; we would go out to different countries and stuff for vacation.” In elaborating on her class background she states, “I mean the business that we are into we are the second largest textile company in [a northwestern state in India]. And my last name, people know us there.” Due to her family’s prominence in her natal state in India and their ability to *easily* afford luxuries, Akira describes her family as upper-class.

Another woman, Neelam, comes from an upper-class South Indian family. Her father worked as one of the highest ranked officials in India’s Federal Telecommunications Department before retiring and prior to retirement her mother worked as a senior accountant. Neelam discusses her parents by saying, “They have a lot of money but they don’t spend it. So, for example, my parents could afford to fly first class at least six to ten times a year from India to the United States, but they will still fly economy.” She attributes her family’s affluence to her father’s professional background. She says, “Well my dad is now a businessman but he wasn’t before. He’s a billionaire. Well no, actually I should say a multimillionaire. And he’s got political connections.” Therefore, the women from the upper-class backgrounds come from affluent families that enable them to easily afford luxuries—if they choose to spend their money in that way. This differentiates them from the middle-class women who see themselves as being able to only afford the basics and upper middle-class women who enjoy carefully chosen luxuries.

Findings

Cultivating Capital and K-12 Schools

With the exception of one lower middle-class woman, the MBA students interviewed for this project self-identify as coming from either a middle-, upper middle-, or upper-class background. Because of their relatively affluent backgrounds, their parents could afford to send them to some of the best primary and secondary schools in

their areas such as the National Public School and Bishop Cotton Girls' High School in Bangalore, as well as Delhi Public School in the nation's capital. This section discusses the social background of my interviewees in terms of their parents' professions, their socioeconomic class, and their early schooling experiences.

Because of the hierarchy of schools that place preference on English-medium, private schools, most of the participants remarked that their parents sent them to some of the best, English-medium schools in the area. In discussing public schools, Neelam says, "Nobody ever chooses to go a public school. Even if people are lower middle class, they won't choose to go to public schools just because they know that's just time wasted. Teachers don't come in and they don't teach." Because of the better facilities and instruction parents believe private schools provide, all of my interviewees discussed attending a good private school during the early years of their education.

Families utilize their cultural capital in enrolling their children in private, English-medium K-12 schools. Neelam remarks, "If my parents didn't know English, then they probably wouldn't be able to fill out an application form to go to a private school. There are people who don't know English, and so unfortunately they get screened out because they don't know English and they don't know how to fill out a form for their kids." Therefore, cultural capital in the form of English-language skills serves as a necessary prerequisite for parents being able to enroll their children in English-medium private schools.

Parents also rely on social capital in the form of information they gather about a school's reputation to decide where to educate their daughters. In describing where she attended high school Keya, a student from Delhi, states, "Oh yea, so the school that my mom, that my parents had really wanted me to join was Mother's International—the one that I later joined." I followed up by asking her what made this school different from the one she attended prior, and she states, "So Mother's International is again as I've said it has a history; it's been there for a very long time. The quality of students that come to get educated is high. It's famous for [having] a lot of kids of ambassadors—at least it used to be when I was growing up." So the school's reputation played a role in her parents' opinions of it as a place where they would like to educate their daughter.

While enrolled in these K-12 schools, students cultivate their own social and cultural capital. They earn social capital in the form of peer and teacher networks that may help them overcome academic hurdles. Nila, a former sound engineer from Delhi, describes one teacher who noticed that she was intelligent but incredibly quiet and encouraged her to speak more in class. Due to her teacher's efforts, she says, "I think I improved a lot due [to] that. I started talking *a bit* in class." Friends also helped Nila in school. After fourth standard (grade), Nila's grades began to slip but then began to improve when she entered eighth grade. She attributes this improvement in part to one friend. She remarks, "So there was this one friend I was really really close to so she used to teach me at times. During the homeroom periods and all, she used to sit with me and teach me. She was really good at studies and she had been a topper throughout, so she used to help me."

While students earn social capital through the relationships they establish with their teachers and peers, they also earn cultural capital in school. This may be in the form of developing important language skills such as learning English. In describing her experience at a missionary school in Jamshedpur, Avanti states, “And we had missionaries coming in from all parts of the world and they gave us [a] very good education. Discipline. Pronouncing our Vs and Ws, which does not come naturally if you do not know English. I’m nostalgic about my school—I could go on and on.”

Cultural capital also comes through the cultivation of dispositions toward academic subjects (Bourdieu 1986). Typically at the end of tenth grade, students must decide which academic track to pursue. The academic tracks exist as part of a hierarchy. Lavani describes the hierarchy in this way, “This is like a general thing. The duds go to arts. They usually take arts. And people from the business family, they go into commerce, and if you’re considered intelligent, then you will go in for science.” Thus, when making the choice as to what to study for 11th and 12th grade, students face an academic hierarchy that places the most value on science, the least value on arts, with commerce falling somewhere in the middle.

The decision as to what track to take is not made individually but in conjunction with or sometimes strictly determined by elder family members. The women interviewed describe being pressured into studying science during high school because of the prestige attached to the discipline; however, they eventually realize that ultimately this is not the best field for them. When enrolling in the science track, Neelam recalls, “I was forced to choose science just because my father, he also taught pre-university college students math, physics, and chemistry. My parents just got the form and said well we put in science PCMB, which means physics, chemistry—sorry PCME, which is physics, chemistry, math and economics. So, uh I basically just filled out my name and signed the form—that’s about what I did.”

Akira, an upper-class woman from a well-known family in the textiles industry, expresses a similar sentiment. She recalls, “My mom wanted me to become a doctor and at that age you have no idea. You just do what your parents ask you to. So my mom wanted my sister to be a doctor, but she definitely was not a doctor from any angle so even *she* did her MBA. So it was I who had to fill her hopes. So I took science.” Akira chose to enroll in biology, but upon receiving her exam scores she remarks, “I didn’t score [well] at all. So then I switched to management.” Because her older sister did not successfully fulfill her mother’s dreams of becoming a doctor, Akira chose to take up the science track with a biology concentration in hopes of making her mother’s dreams come true; however, because of receiving poor exam scores, she too would leave her mother’s dreams unfulfilled by pursuing an MBA herself.

Some women did not face explicit pressure from their family members to pursue the science track in high school; rather, it was assumed that that is what they would study. For example, in describing her family, Kavita, a married woman studying for her MBA while working in Silicon Valley, states that “I think it’s a very engineering-focused family for good or bad, but it didn’t even occur to me that *hey I don’t have to take engineering. I don’t have to take*. It just was assumed. Yea, it was a very big assumption.” Understandably, due to explicit or implicit pressure they face from

their families, most interviewees pursued the science track, a few chose to pursue commerce, and only one person I interviewed chose arts for 11th and 12th grade.

The belief that pursuing science in school will lead to pursuing science coursework in college and a career in a related field may drive some students to pursue the science track. According to Rani, a 26-year old from West Bengal, when I asked her about the connection between high school academics, college courses, and careers, she said, “So you can say that you have to make the decision in 11th standard. That is when you choose your stream. You can take science, commerce, or humanities. So that is to prepare you for all the entrance examinations. India has entrance examinations for all these fields—for doctor and engineer and everything. So in a way you decide then.” In other words, pursuing a specific stream in high school prepares students to take entrance examinations in fields that will prepare them to enroll in coursework geared toward a specific profession.

Aside from preparing women for a career, pursuing the science track may also enable them to more easily secure a good husband. In describing why she feels parents push their daughters to pursue the science educational track, Neelam says, “So a lot of guys you were going to get married to depended on how much education you had received and where you had received it from. Of course things are changing now, but that’s the general idea.” Neelam’s experience identifies a link between her educational aspirations and marriage options. She describes this in terms not unique to her, but indicative of a general trend whereby parents believe that their daughters may secure “better” husbands by being more highly educated and pursuing the science track, which has relatively more prestige attached to it than arts or commerce.

Why MBA?

Upon graduation from high school, my respondents enrolled in an Indian college—many pursuing an engineering curriculum. Here they learned the skills necessary to enter the workforce and pursue a lucrative career in India’s IT sector. After completing their undergraduate coursework, only two of my respondents chose to begin their MBA in the United States directly after college. For the vast majority, they began working in companies such as Infosys, Ericsson, and Ernst & Young before deciding to pursue their MBA. Their decision to change career tracks and to undertake management studies came about as a means for them to contribute to the growth of a family business, to advance professionally, or for the purpose of their overall well-being and the opportunity to pursue something of personal interest.

In the case of Nila, she chose to leave her engineering job at Sony Ericsson to pursue an MBA with the intent of later working in her family’s business. Nila left her job with Sony Ericsson to pursue an MBA in part because of problems she experienced with the type of work she was expected to do and intra-office conflicts. She recalls, “Even though it was Ericsson, but we used to work for Ericsson UK. Ericsson UK used to take all the brain work and we used to get all the clerical work I would

say. So I didn't like that experience much. And also, in the company there was a lot of politics and—not company I would say—in my team there was a lot of ass-licking and all those things.”

After spending some time in the workforce, Nila realized she did not like her company, and upon talking with a coworker, she found out that she had few good professional options available to her if she chose to transfer. Having worked part-time in her dad's jewelry business while at Ericsson, she recalls “And then like when I started participating a bit more in the business, he [her father] was like I can see that you can be a good businesswoman. I mean he knows what it takes to be a good businessman, so he said that he can see that I can be a good business person so it's a good choice; go for an MBA.” Nila enrolled in a business school in New York State and chose to focus her studies on marketing because her father “doesn't really invest in marketing at all” and therefore contribute to her family's company.

When describing why she chose to leave her job and start an MBA, Pramila says she came to the realization that “I want to be in more, in a much higher position, higher manager position and for that I needed some qualifications. I can continue working there and eventually I'll reach the position in like 10 years, but I wanted to reach it like faster—only an MBA can do that so I decided I should continue my education.” So for her earning, an MBA served as a way to fast-track her career. Sara, who enrolled in an MBA school in Indiana, echoes these sentiments. She recalls, “I think I knew that I would eventually [earn an MBA] because to get out of the IT development sort of trend, I really needed the MBA because in India they value degrees more than they do transferrable skills. So it's very difficult to move into those sorts of management positions unless you have an MBA.” For Sara, enrolling in an MBA program became a way for her to move away from a career path that she was not passionate about and into a highly respected management role.

Meanwhile, Neelam, an MBA student from Bangalore, chose to pursue an MBA for personal reasons. She spoke with her parents about her desire to pursue an MBA. She recalls asking them, “And help me get either a Master of Science in Organizational Behavior and Development or an MBA with an Organizational Behavior and Development focus. So my parents were very understanding because they had seen me physically suffer from accepting the ‘rules of the house.’” The rules of the house included pursuing the science track in high school and engineering in her undergraduate and graduate studies—she had earned a Master's in civil engineering from a university in Maryland prior to starting her MBA. For Neelam, doing an MBA did not concern professional advancement or the desire to help a family business. Completing this degree became more a means for her to assert her autonomy.

Why the United States?

After choosing to pursue higher education, my interviewees made the decision to study in the United States amid options to pursue graduate work in Singapore, Australia, Western Europe, Canada, and India. They ultimately made the decision to

study in the United States due to the availability of financial aid, the presence of family and friend networks, and the belief that the United States would provide them with the global exposure necessary to earn cosmopolitan capital (Igarashi & Saito 2014; Prieur and Savage 2013; Weenink 2008).

Students' ability to earn cosmopolitan capital vis-à-vis U.S. universities depends upon the cultural, social, and economic capital at their disposal. For example, Lavani remarks how learning English in her K-12 school helped her in the United States. She says, "Because everybody here speaks English and only understands English. The accent I understand, yes, is totally different, and there are times when people don't understand what you're saying but know it's English."

Having social networks comprised of family and friends in the United States also facilitates Indian women's ability to study in this country. A good number of Lavani's family members studied in the United States previously. She says, "So most of my mother's side—most of the children—they have too gone to the U.S., been to the U.S. to do their Master's. That's another reason why it influenced my—not *my* decision—but how it just got my parents thinking about sending me abroad." In the case of Yasmine, a 30-year old woman from a small town in Karnataka, she says that a colleague encouraged her to enroll in her present MBA program. In convincing her to enter this specific program, she recalls him stating that "The emphasis on finance, economics, and accounting was quite high, which was something that I like because I wanted to be in the industry—in finance. The other aspect was more to do with the environment at school. I did not want to be in like a 900-student school, cutthroat—that was not my style." Ultimately, what he said about the school made her feel that she "would probably be in a school which is more like me." The presence of a firm social network in the United States represents a valuable form of social capital because it enables women and their families to feel comfortable with the idea of studying in the United States and also helps them make the decision as to where to study.

In addition to using family and friends to decide where to study for an MBA, some respondents also discussed using school rankings, the Internet, and education counselors to help them make their decision. For example, when discussing how she determined to which school she would apply, Rani states that "You've heard of most of the good schools—even in India. So that's how you select. And you look at rankings and you look at different discussions on Internet forums. And that is how I applied." In the case of Akira, she used two counselors to help her decide where she should enroll for graduate school. Therefore, students utilize social capital in the form of information they find online and through college counselors, along with family and friends based in the United States to help them decide where to complete their MBA.

And last, students depend on their family's economic capital to provide them with the means to fund their education abroad. Many of the students I spoke to used loans to finance their education. In describing the process of her getting the loan necessary to secure a visa, Yasmine states, "They're crazily expensive and you need to have a security against your loan. Security in terms of probably a property or—gold is big in India—so gold would do, but even some insurance policy. Like if my

dad has an insurance policy, which is about to mature, then that's accepted as collateral." Therefore, without having the collateral necessary to serve as a security against the loan in the event that she was unable to pay it back, Yasmine would have been unable to secure the money she needed to get a visa to study in the United States. While many of my interviewees relied on some sort of loan to cover the cost of studying in the United States, several did not. Those who come from relatively affluent families can rely on the direct support of their parents to cover the cost of their education.

Some respondents also spoke about using their savings from their lucrative jobs at IT firms to help pay for their U.S.-based degree. Significantly, these jobs remain the purview of the relatively privileged. For example, Shalini recalls her experience applying for her job at Infosys. She states, "So they have certain requirements that you should have gotten this much percentage in every semester of your engineering and these subjects you should have done really well. You should have studied in an English-medium school; you should be able to converse in English. And then once they select you for the process, there are two rounds of exams: aptitude and verbal. So aptitude is where you just do general math and things like that but they are all mostly high school math. The verbal is also very high school English kind of a thing. And once you clear those two, then you have a final-round interview where you talk to HR one-on-one and then you're given an offer." Clearly, Shalini's attendance at an English-medium school and her good marks throughout high school and college contributed to her being able to work in one of India's leading technology companies. This then provided her with the economic capital to afford her U.S. MBA.

Students depend on their economic, cultural, and social capital to earn cosmopolitan capital, which they believe will help them professionally in the future. They earn this type of capital through the global exposure they receive through their curriculum and their classmates. In discussing her experiences at her MBA program, Keya, a woman from a Delhi-based Punjabi family, says, "I think I've learned a lot of things here already—a lot of intangible stuff. Technical stuff—okay everybody learns about it—but intangibly I've learned a lot about prioritizing and time management and how to deal with people. And different people, from different cultures and geographical backgrounds." She sees her ability to interact with a variety of people as important to her MBA education. The opportunity for global exposure extends to the curriculum as well. In remarking about what makes a U.S. MBA program different from an India-based program, Lavani states that "So their study is very, I mean it's not global. It's not very global—if I can say it that way. But here [in the U.S.], we are getting to [know] things about you know companies in Switzerland and in U.S., in UK. So it's global, yea."

Students then use their cosmopolitan capital as a means to earn flexible citizenship. They believe that studying in the United States will provide them with the ability to live and work among a wide variety of people, granting them the confidence to live and work anywhere they choose. Pramila believes that her school's "alumni is like the strongest." She continues by saying, "So, personally I would form a very strong network of people—friends, basically. I'm looking forward to

that. I hope that takes me to different places.” Making a similar point, Neelam remarks, “I feel that home is where you are now so if there is an opportunity back home [and] if that’s the only opportunity that I was given, then I’ll take it. If there’s another opportunity across the world, then I’ll go there.” Anuya, a woman from Mumbai currently studying at an MBA program in New York, clearly connects her attainment of a U.S. MBA and the geographic mobility this would afford her. She says, “Earning an MBA is like my key to get into the world kind of thing. Because doing an MBA here [in the U.S.] will get me what I want in terms of my visa, in terms of getting to know networking.” She understands the value of her degree to be greater than just the education it provides her with. It also provides her with the opportunity to gain the mobility she desires and make professional connections with those who as she says can help her, “get what I want.” These women see the opportunity to study in the United States as not only a means to acquire cosmopolitan capital but also as the pathway to them living anywhere in the world.

In summary, students utilize their family’s economic, cultural, and social capital in each of the educational decisions they make on their pathway to a U.S. MBA program. Their parents’ capital provides them with access to private, English-medium K-12 schools. Their attendance at these schools inculcates a specific orientation to learning that preferences science relative to commerce and arts, as well as English-language skills, while also providing them with access to teachers and peers that will help them along the way. After graduating from their respective high schools and colleges and then entering the workforce, a majority of the women I interviewed realized that they were not pursuing the career path they wanted. They felt that an MBA would provide them with the means to switch careers and contribute to a family business or put them on a pathway to management positions. For others, pursuing an MBA meant the ability to assert their own desires in their professional life and represents more of a personal statement than strictly a professional decision.

In making the decision to pursue an MBA, students continue to rely on economic, cultural, and social capital. They utilize their parents’ affluence, their knowledge of English, and their friend and family bases in the United States to help them gain entrée to U.S.-based education opportunities. One of the motivations for attending a U.S.-based MBA program is the belief that by doing so they will gain global exposure, which they can utilize as cosmopolitan capital, which will help them gain the ability to live and work wherever they choose, a phenomenon conceptualized as flexible citizenship.

Gender Imbalance in the Pathway to Studying in the United States

While my analysis demonstrates the importance of capital to Indian women being able to pursue advanced degrees in the United States, it does not discuss why there exists a large gender imbalance between the number of men and women who study

in this country. While my interviewees are those who managed to overcome the hurdles, I did discuss with some of them why women do not come to the United States with as high a frequency as their male counterparts. The responses I received indicate that social norms, parents' fears about their daughters traveling a long distance from them, and expectations that women's primary role revolves around their family responsibilities prevent some families from being willing to invest in their daughters' education overseas.

I asked Yasmine about the challenges women face when studying in the United States. She responded with, "It's more [an] accepted standard that after 25 you have to get married and you have to put your career on [the] backburner. And it's like completely normal to expect of the women to stop working if she wants to have a baby and things like that." Because there exists an expectation that women focus their energies more strictly upon their families after having a baby and getting married, parents may be less inclined to invest in sending their daughters abroad.

Receiving an education in the United States may present challenges to women and their families who are looking for a good marriage partner. The common logic goes like this: women should be educated enough to find a good husband but should not be too educated so that it becomes difficult to find one (Mukhopadhyay 1994; Ullrich 1994). Neelam clearly articulates this idea when she says, "The other idea for girls to do either engineering or medicine is they wanted their girls to get a good husband." There exists this idea that a woman's education should be used so that she can secure a good husband, not strictly so she can secure a good career. And for some of my interviewees who have a relatively high level of education, they do face difficulties finding a good husband. When talking about her parents' search for a good marriage partner, Shefali, a student at a private Midwestern university says, "One of the criteria that I have is they should be as educated as me so I think that not many people are meeting that criteria. Or, I dunno—not yet." In other words, due to her requirements in a husband and her relatively high level of education, her parents face difficulties in finding an appropriate match. Because having a high level of education may provide challenges for a woman seeking a good marriage partner, some parents may be uninclined to send their daughters overseas for their education, thus limiting the women able to study abroad in the United States.

The social beliefs that dictate that women should be married by a specific age and focus on their families after marriage and child birth operate in conjunction with religious beliefs. When probing Isvari, a 25-year old Hindu woman from Mumbai, about why her parents felt that she should be married by 26, she said, "I think the way they look at a human being's life is like how it's divided into four stages: the first one being where you enjoy childhood; the second one being where you take higher education, you excel in it, you do your best in it, and then you start earning; the third where you look at your family life or you look at the pleasures of family life; and then finally, an age where you're done with all of that and you've achieved everything that you wanted to and then you sort of settle down and probably do something more leisurely or more creative. But essentially the four stages are still relevant today I would say."

Nineteen (19) of the 20 women I interviewed come from a Hindu family that may hold similar beliefs about how one should live their life. This push toward entering the third stage of “family life” may explain why some women feel social and familial pressure to complete their education by a specific age and abandon their career ambitions after marriage and childbirth.

Aside from social views about the purpose of women’s education being an impediment to their studying in the United States, some discussed their parents’ concerns with them traveling so far. In the case of Shilpa, she knew that “as long as it’s for work or for official reasons and somebody else is taking responsibility of sending you and taking care of you while you’re in a different country, they were okay with it. So I knew my parents would say yes to me traveling for work. So that’s why I decided to pursue computer science engineering.” Knowing that her parents have serious reservations about her going abroad, Shilpa pursued a college major that led to her job at Infosys. In discussing why she chose to work for Infosys, she states, “One of the conditions they had was you should learn driving and you should also have a passport. So I knew that I will get my passport and I will be able to travel outside so I just decided to go work for Infosys.” Thus, women who are able must use strategic maneuvers to bypass their parents’ concerns about them going abroad; however, as mentioned before, the type of people who have access to jobs at companies like Infosys are primarily those from relatively privileged backgrounds. For women without the knowledge or skillsets to pursue other avenues to going to the United States, they would find themselves left with only domestic education options.

Despite the significant barriers that prevent women from studying in the United States, the presence of these women in this country signifies changing attitudes toward the role and capabilities of Indian women. Notably, several of my interviewees discussed the importance of their moms in helping them envision opportunities for themselves outside of the normative role of mother and wife. One example comes from Yasmine. She recalls, “But [when I was a kid] my mom always used to read out these stories of women who have done very well in their life like people who have been in leadership positions and how they were successful and things like that.” Ayesha states that she received similar support from her mom. Despite her mom being a housewife, she says that “Like for my mother like it was important that all of us do our degrees. All of us have like a work experience. My mom told me never be a housewife. Always be working. She taught me to take care of my family and be independent.” Therefore, the women I interviewed are here in part because of the inspiration they received from their moms to not only be good wives and mothers but to also be motivated to get an education and pursue a career.

Discussion

With this project, I aimed to better understand the vast gender differential in who studies in the United States. This article highlights how middle-, upper middle-, and upper-class women utilize their advantageous family backgrounds to cultivate

valuable forms of economic, cultural, and social capital that put them on the path to studying in the United States. In doing so, it highlights the social and cultural context within which women maneuver to defy cultural norms that dictate that they should focus their energy more so on becoming good mothers and wives. It also demonstrates how women from relatively privileged backgrounds may be more adept at doing so because they come from families who have the requisite forms of economic, cultural, and social capital that enable their daughters to accumulate advantageous capital of their own, which they can then use to launch an educational career in the United States. This finding echoes a sentiment by some researchers that while women do face barriers due to their gender, social class rather than gender serves as a better determinant of access to quality educational options within the subcontinent (Desai et al. 2010). My research builds upon this finding, demonstrating how those early educational privileges provide the foundation for greater educational advantages later in life, especially for those women with the option of studying in the United States for higher education.

Women use their inherited and cultivated economic, cultural, and social capital to pursue an MBA from a U.S. university. They choose to pursue an MBA as a way to advance their career, make a career change, or assert autonomy. They choose to study in the United States because of the availability of financial aid, the presence of family and friend networks, and the belief that studying in the United States would enable the cultivation of cosmopolitan capital in the form of knowledge about global business trends and access to colleagues and alumni from around the world. They intend to use cosmopolitan capital to exercise flexible citizenship—described as the ability to live and work anywhere in the world.

Conclusion

The women interviewed for this article talk about their experiences with international education migration in the midst of India's rising affluence and burgeoning middle class. Thus, their experiences may provide additional insight into the transnationalization of the field of higher education for Indian nationals from various educational backgrounds. For that reason, the continued investigation of Indians' education migration pathways to the United States has importance.

The women interviewed for this article come from predominantly middle- or upper-class, upper-caste, educated, Hindu families. Their very particular background affects how they came to pursue their MBA at a U.S. university. Therefore, the pathways I describe in this article cannot be generalized to the broader population. Future research should investigate how Indian men, women, undergraduate and graduate students, as well as those from varying caste, class, religious, and academic backgrounds come to the United States for their advanced degree and why they choose to do so. Additionally, future research should more thoroughly investigate the role parents and K-12 schools play in preparing students to study in the United States, examine how race impacts Indian students' experiences at U.S. universities, and investigate the motivations behind Indian nationals' choice to immigrate to the

United States, return to India, or move elsewhere. Such research will provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Indian educational migration pathways to the United States.

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