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Rethinking knowledge for development: Transnational knowledge professionals and the "new" India

Smitha Radhakrishnan

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Abstract As questions of "knowledge economy" have come to the center of studies of the global political economy, the World Bank and other international organizations have begun promoting "knowledge for development" (K4D) in many postcolonial contexts over the last several years. These strategies toward broad goals of social and economic development presume a neoliberal orientation of the individual towards state and society. Using the example of contemporary urban India, this study examines the unexpected outcomes of imposing and legitimating the neoliberal political rationality that underpins K4D practices at individual and societal levels. Rather than having successfully produced a "new middle class," as touted in media representations of India's success, emphasis on K4D and a knowledge economy in India has had the effect of producing an elite with formidable economic strength, as well as the cultural dominance to re-imagine and negotiate meanings of Indianness. Here, I approach the knowledge economy as a "global assemblage" concretized and specified through the everyday practices of individuals, and aim to critique the assumptions of the knowledge economy by drawing on the articulations of contemporary Indian knowledge professionals.

Thomas Friedman (2005), presents India as a quintessential example of success in the knowledge economy. Far from being poorly paid sweatshop workers, Friedman portrays Indian knowledge workers as having cutting-edge skills and an ambitious outlook, able to compete with their counterparts in any part of the world. The book falls in line behind a spate of recent publicity concerning India's success in information technology in the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, *Business Week*, and many other high-profile publications. Most of the publicity projects an image of a "new" India, with the figure of the Indian knowledge professional at its center. Authors writing on the topic associate the success of India's knowledge workers with the progress of India overall – a new path toward broader goals of social and economic development (Baker & Kriplani, 2004; Friedman, 2004; de Jonquières, 2005; Pink, 2004).

Discourses of the knowledge economy have come to occupy a central place in international discussions of development over the last several years. With the publication of

S. Radhakrishnan (✉)
10256 Bunche Hall, UCLA Box 951497,
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1487, USA
e-mail: smitha@international.ucla.edu

the World Bank's 1999 World Development Report entitled *Knowledge for Development*, countries from every region of the developing world claim commitment to developing a knowledge economy at home as a path toward broad-based development. Across vastly dissimilar contexts, proposals to build a particular kind of "knowledge society" look remarkably similar. South Korea and Malaysia remain leaders in knowledge economy (KE) and "knowledge for development" (K4D) discussions, but they are closely followed by China, India, and Brazil. A host of smaller countries previously not on the digital radar screen trail behind these other giants in their KE proposals: Bulgaria, Romania, Uzbekistan, Ghana, Bahrain, Jordan, Rwanda, and Scotland, to name a few.[1] A "leapfrogging" argument underpins these discussions: launching into a knowledge economy promises the benefits of global economic integration without necessarily investing heavily in traditional "productive" industrial development. Exemplary countries validate leapfrogging as a development strategy: Ireland, Finland, and South Korea are repeatedly held up as role models for leapfrogging in online literature on the knowledge economy.

This study aims to examine K4D proposals in three key ways: (a) by explaining how a specific kind of knowledge came to be legitimated as the foundation of the knowledge economy, and thus exposing the presumptions that underpin knowledge for development discourses, (b) by identifying who the central actors of the knowledge economy are and understanding their position in relation to the rest of the citizenry, and (c) by demonstrating how knowledge economy discourses operate through the everyday practices and beliefs of knowledge professionals, and how these individuals fuel a new vision of the nation. I use contemporary urban India as the anchoring example, drawing from primary and secondary data to explain the specific ways in which K4D strategies become concrete in a postcolonial context.

In this examination, I argue that the broad emphasis on the development of "expertise" and "expert knowledge" within K4D discourses portrays knowledge as free-flowing and available to all, thus obscuring the relative class position of the skilled, global experts engaged in the knowledge economy and making an elite project appear broad-based and democratic. Rather than being a question of economic indicators or institutional and policy arrangements, the subjective beliefs and experiences of skilled, global experts are key to the success of K4D as a compelling development strategy. By presupposing particular kinds of advanced liberal subjects in postcolonial contexts, K4D strategies and practices help to constitute subjects centrally concerned with the practice of "freedom," as understood in advanced liberal contexts. These elite subjects are reflexive about their "freedom," particularly with regard to their ability to choose, and their mobility across national borders. Rather than promoting a broad-based strategy of development, then, K4D constitutes an elite group of subjects whose subjective beliefs, by virtue of coinciding with the (advanced liberal) logic underpinning K4D, can justify their elite position as reflecting the progress of the country as a whole; they re-articulate a vision of the nation.

The Indian knowledge economy

On June 13th 2005, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh appointed an elite National Knowledge Commission. Consisting of eight highly influential individuals from academic, business, and policy settings, the Knowledge Commission has been mandated to devise

[1] See http://www.developmentgateway.org under the heading "country evaluations" to get a sense of the number of countries discussing the knowledge economy at the level of policy.

reforms that will "transform India into a strong and vibrant knowledge economy in coming years." The Commission is premised on the idea that a focus on knowledge will allow India to "leapfrog in the race for social and economic development," and that a society with equal access to knowledge will be one that will develop most successfully and dramatically. The Commission has taken into consideration such subjects as undergraduate education in India, libraries, and e-governance. Most recently, the Commission has had to deal with the issue of numeric quotas or job reservations in the private sector, and two members of the Commission have resigned as a result of this issue (this is discussed below). The mandate of the Knowledge Commission is described in mostly abstract language about building a knowledge society. Broad global principles of efficiency, merit, and progress, however, tie the various abstractions of the Knowledge Commission into a powerful package.[2]

The establishment of an Indian Knowledge Commission comes on the heels of the remarkable growth of the knowledge economy in India over the past decade. Among development experts, India's success in information technology (IT) and IT services in recent years has become an important model for other developing countries to follow. The IT boom in India has produced a mobile, transnational, educated workforce, arising largely from policies encouraging infrastructural support for IT industries from as early as 1990. Since then, India has grown to become the world's outsourcing hub for software development and back-office services such as transcription, accounting, and call centers. As the second largest English-speaking population in the world, India offers global employers high-quality skills for a fraction of the cost of equivalent skills in the United States or Europe.

India's recent success in IT did not simply arise from specific liberalization policies, however. For decades, world-class technical training in India's elite educational institutes produced a highly qualified workforce that predominantly sought employment outside of India, especially in the United States. Indian graduates of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) have helped to found nearly every major technology company in the Silicon Valley. Their success has made the IIT-graduate-gone-abroad into a kind of "dream figure" for the Indian middle class, representing the ideal of Indian success with a global scope (Nair, 1997). In terms of a knowledge economy, however, the "brain drain" of technical talent to industrialized nations was viewed as a problem, channeling talent away from India (Khadria, 2001). With the development of a homegrown IT industry, however, "brain drain" patterns have shifted dramatically as more and more Indian professionals pursue technical work within India or engage in transnational careers that spend some time abroad before moving back to India, a phenomenon Annalee Saxenian calls "brain circulation" (Saxenian, 2000). The choice to remain in India or to move back to India is not only the result of increased opportunities in India, however. Knowledge professionals in India, in conversation with their counterparts in the diaspora, actively create a sense of belonging to a nation that is at once authentically "Indian" and global.

I argue here that K4D practices in India help to constitute a group of (trans)national elite subjects; the knowledge economy crafts a small proportion of individuals into highly mobile subjects who increasingly maintain a certain kind of tie to the Indian nation-state that keeps them from leaving, even as they promote a "global," homogenized idea of India that includes the diaspora as part of the nation itself. By demonstrating how K4D ideologies create an idea of the nation that is implicitly based on the dominance of a new professional class, I critique India's success in developing a knowledge economy, and question the potential of achieving development goals through it. Embedded in this critique is an

[2] For more details on India's Knowledge Commission, see http://www.knowledgecommission.org.

analysis of a new professional class created by globalization in a postcolonial context, and how the material and ideological effects of its dominance in everyday life is closely linked to the language of international development discourse.

Materials and methods

This study draws from a range of data sources to offer both a broad view of the knowledge economy, as well as a fine-grained, firsthand view of how abstract knowledge economy discourses come to be experienced and articulated through individuals. This choice of diverse sources reflects the theoretical approach to these issues: the knowledge economy is both a set of globally circulating discourses that shape business and policy visions as well as a location-specific configuration that is made concrete through the everyday practices of individuals.

Because the notion of a knowledge economy is both new and associated with high-tech, the most accurate and comprehensive information on the knowledge economy is accessible through the Internet. Through extensive searches of major organizations involved in defining and promoting notions of the knowledge economy and knowledge for development, I collected information on the countries and organizations centrally involved in promoting these concepts. For the purposes of this article, I draw evidence for my theoretical claims primarily from the World Bank's website, as well as from the websites of important NGOs and multilateral organizations that organize and discuss KE and K4D issues. Some of these organizations are the International Organization for Knowledge Economy and Enterprise Development (IKED), and the World Knowledge Forum (WKF). I also extensively used the Development Gateway, a search engine for development-related issues partnered with organizations around the world. The Development Gateway provides an extensive set of links to discussions of the knowledge economy and knowledge for development in a wide range of developing contexts. These websites play a key role in propagating and validating knowledge economy discourses. Websites reveal the ways in which business and state interests converge in knowledge economy policy discussions, and archive important meetings, documents, and debates that drive the global movement toward K4D.

To gain insight into the experiences of individuals engaged in the knowledge economy, I draw from interviews I conducted with IT workers in India in 2004–2005. Over the course of 7 months, I conducted interviews with 60 professional IT women in Bangalore and Mumbai, along with ethnographic work in several IT workplaces. This fieldwork was part of a larger project premised on the idea that professional IT women constitute an essential icon of the new India, falling in line behind a long line of woman-as-nation symbols of idealized femininity (Chatterjee, 1990; Sen, 2002). Although the majority of IT professionals are men, professional women, who have entered the ranks of the knowledge economy in large numbers relatively recently, have been rapidly inculcated with not only the ideologies of IT work and the knowledge economy, but also with ideas of the new nation. Only recently has it become common for middle-class women in urban India to work full-time; consequently, these women are at the helm of key ideological transitions within the Indian middle class. For these reasons, their responses provide astute and self-conscious articulations of the ideologies of a new India. Interviewees discussed the various factors that brought them into the IT industry, the attractions that make them stay, and the challenges they face in their personal and professional lives. By integrating interview data with a discussion of the evolution and operation of a broader knowledge economy, this

methodology promotes a qualitatively rich view of an industry usually approached with statistics and generalized economistic language.

The knowledge economy as an object of analysis

Discussions of the knowledge economy consistently describe it in two distinct, but complementary ways, whatever the country's context: first, it is something rapidly growing "out there" in a global, interconnected, high-tech world, presenting both unprecedented opportunities and unprecedented risks; on the other hand, the knowledge economy is a *force* to be effectively "harnessed," like an alternative to fossil fuel for an individual country. Effectively harnessing the opportunities of the knowledge economy, while managing the risks, promises developing countries a global competitive edge. Policy discussions recognize that this task is a particular challenge for countries with weak infrastructure and institutions, still trying to battle widespread poverty. There is an implicit understanding, however, that by drawing on the "knowledge" experiences of other countries and international organizations, building and sustaining a knowledge economy in developing countries will allow these countries to forge economic development without large-scale industry, and jump to the forefront of the competitive global economy. In contrast with large-scale development projects of yesteryear, it is not only large multilateral organizations like the World Bank who prescribe K4D strategies, but also small, private NGOs around the world, as well as well-funded "knowledge" conferences that draw from both private and government monies, such as the World Knowledge Forum, held annually in Seoul.

The image of knowledge as containing the key to human development, however, contains a number of misleading assumptions that obscure the complexity of power relations inherent in the knowledge economy. First, in the context of KE and K4D discussions, "knowledge" almost always refers to a specific kind of *expert* knowledge, or expertise, which forms the foundation of the knowledge economy. Despite sounding open and democratic, most individuals who have access to such expertise come from a small fraction of the population in India. Secondly, knowledge economy discourses, underpinned by a neoliberal political rationality, presume an advanced liberal relationship between the individual and the state. In this scenario, rational individuals with access to unlimited information "govern" themselves (Rose, 1999). When these presumptions are transposed onto developing contexts such as India, K4D helps to produce an elite that does not see itself as an elite, but rather as a "new" middle class that is changing the face of India through technical and moral superiority. Coinciding notions of "freedom" inherent in policy recommendations and lived out through the everyday lives and subjectivities of knowledge workers help to obscure the power relations of the project; the success of a small group of urban knowledge workers comes to be viewed as progress for the nation.

Here, I approach the knowledge economy as a global assemblage, governed by a neoliberal political rationality, and examine how this rationality creates and justifies a transnational class of professionals who are the driving force of the knowledge economy. I follow Steven Collier and Aihwa Ong's conceptualization of 'global assemblage,' analyzing the knowledge economy as an object of analysis that draws together a range of practices and apparatuses in a nominalistic manner, while having within it inherent tensions. It is "global" in the sense of having "a distinctive capacity for decontextualization and recontextualization, abstractability, and movement, across diverse social and cultural situations and spheres of life." Rather than being a "locality" in opposition to the "global," however, "assemblage" refers to a set of diverse, but related practices, which cannot be

reduced to a single set of causes or a single logic (Ong & Collier, 2005). Thus, the term "global assemblage" is at once abstract and situated, universalizing and partial, providing an alternative to the local/global binary (Collier, 2006).

Ong and Collier ground the notion of global assemblages in Nikolas Rose's concept of a neoliberal political rationality. As defined by Rose, neoliberal political rationality seeks to govern though the calculative choice of individuals, rather than through command or coercion (Rose, 1996:57). Extending a Foucaudian perspective focused on techniques and rationalities of power, Rose envisions expert knowledge as centrally tied to the practice of freedom in advanced liberal societies. Global assemblages are underpinned by a neoliberal political rationality; they operate under the presumption of a capitalist "free market" comprising expert individuals who rationally calculate their actions according to their position within the market. Ong and Collier's framework is explicitly informed by a Weberian conception of a rational individual operating similarly in all contexts, an arguably dubious supposition, especially in postcolonial contexts. Its usefulness in studying the knowledge economy, however, stems from the efficacy of neoliberal rationality in explaining the ideology of the knowledge economy and the elite individuals who constitute it.

In Ong and Collier's framework, expertise, individuality, and freedom are intimately intertwined. How do these concepts illuminate the political work of the global knowledge economy? In Rose's writings, expertise provides a solution to the conflicting imperatives for government to maintain order and morality on one had, and the need to restrict government for the sake of liberty on the other. An emphasis on such values as perpetual training and flexibilization reflect the instability of the market and the scaling back of the state, but are framed as promoting "freedom" through expanding the capacity for individual self-realization (Rose, 1999). Other scholars raise important questions about the "global" character of expert knowledge and its effects. In Manuel Castells's vision of "network society," knowledge is the primary source of productivity and growth, and this knowledge gets extended to all areas of economic activity through information processing (2000:218). Because knowledge is concentrated in humans, rather than in capital-intensive products, the possibility for vast diffusion is unprecedented in the global information society. In Anthony Giddens's treatment of a "risk society," he conceptualizes expertise as based in non-local, abstract, specialized knowledge, devoid of all local attachment, thus possessing particular kinds of *disembedding* qualities. Due to its specialized, impersonal nature, expert knowledge can be set out without any regard to context, making it highly mobile and able to cut across bureaucratic hierarchies. Moreover, because the rules of expert knowledge acquisition are impersonal, it appears "open" and "decentered" (Giddens, 1994).

While these approaches to freedom and expertise in a post-industrial framework provide theoretical tools with which to understand the principles of the knowledge economy, such theorizing lacks attention to place and history. By approaching the knowledge economy as a global assemblage, I recognize the ways in which the knowledge economy presumes an abstract set of global conditions, yet always becomes concrete within specific institutions in particular, historically-situated locales. Simultaneously, this approach draws attention to the neoliberal political rationality, derived from advanced liberal contexts, that underpins the "expertise" of the knowledge economy. The specificity of this rationality is disguised in the abstractions of K4D language. Specific "recipes" for institutional apparatuses called for in KE discourses help to constitute political subjects appropriate for those apparatuses, as I show among the IT professionals who drive the Indian knowledge economy. Thus, I closely examine the political techniques at the center of development of a knowledge economy, which manages and governs subjects in subtle but powerful ways. In this manner, I aim to expose a fine-grained view of the power relations operating within the knowledge economy.

How "knowledge" became a universal development goal

> Knowledge is like light. Weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere. Yet billions of people still live the in darkness of poverty-unnecessarily.
>
> *World Development Report: Knowledge for Development, 1998/99*

Is the "knowledge" referred to in the World Bank Report the same as the expertise that drives the knowledge economy? How might something so broadly defined have become so narrow? The specific "knowledge" or "expertise" that KE is based on emerged as dominant among other competing conceptualizations of knowledge in the development literature. Since the 1990s, "local knowledge" has been revisited as a rich source of environmental and ecological knowledge in radical critiques of development (Agrawal, 1996; Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994). In these accounts, the everyday practices and beliefs of "authentic" place-bound communities were seen as the only alternative to the disasters of institutionalized development efforts, which have conventionally devalued place-bound knowledge as irrational and pre-scientific (Nygren, 1999). Although these arguments gained traction in academic settings, these radical critiques of development never completely translated into World Bank policy packages focused on "knowledge," although these concerns did channel new energy into such themes as "community empowerment" and "social protection." Rather, as advanced liberal contexts began focusing on expertise and high-tech as the basis of a new global economy, "knowledge for development" became a narrowly defined strategy aimed at bringing technology, expertise, and infrastructure to the developing world.

In the mid-1990s, the success of New Zealand's high-tech businesses in contributing to the nation's economy led to the coining of the term "knowledge economy," referring to the use of knowledge to yield economic benefits. Around the same time, discussion of the "knowledge society" entered the mainstream, primarily in Europe and the United States. Peter Drucker's books and writings during this period launched the concept into the mainstream, and this connected with others in academia with similar ideas, such as Manuel Castells (Castells, 2000; Drucker, 1993). These authors claimed that a new global society based on information, specialized knowledge, and technology had come to maturity in the most advanced economies of the world. "Knowledge economy" as a concept coincided with these intellectual trends nicely. These debates agreed that capitalism had reached a stage in which it was not manufacturing or industry that would be the driver of national economic growth, but rather that service work, particularly high-end service work requiring specialized knowledge, such as computer software, digital, and communications technology (Castells, 2000:218). In this intellectual climate, the World Bank and the OECD convened its first annual conference surrounding questions of the "knowledge economy" in Paris. Since then, each year's forum clearly ties the knowledge economy to particular kinds of expertise: information and communications technology (ICT), business, education, science, civil society, university, think tank, and local. In different capacities, each of these aspects must be harnessed as part of the "four pillars" of the knowledge economy.[3]

[3] The "four pillars" of the knowledge economy, both in World Bank and smaller NGO writings are agreed to include broadly: education and training, informational infrastructure, economic incentive and institutional regime, and innovation systems. Reference to the "four pillars" is common in online knowledge economy literature.

Also in the late 1990s, the escalating success of countries such as India in successfully developing profitable tech-based sectors gave rise to the notion of centering a development strategy on the concept of "knowledge." Although the economic and political shifts that had formed the backdrop for discussions of a "knowledge economy" or a "knowledge society" had occurred primarily in Europe and the United States, conclusions drawn from those experiences were rapidly applied to the contexts of all World Bank client countries, largely divorced from radical critiques of development that conceptualized knowledge very differently. The World Bank devoted its 1998/99 World Development Report to the concept of "Knowledge for Development." By this time, the terms "knowledge economy" and "knowledge society" had been shorn from the contexts in which they developed; knowledge discourses and practices began to circulate and operate as a global assemblage, bringing to postcolonial contexts a set of policies and institutions that would support a neoliberal political rationality at the individual and state levels. In the World Bank's 1998/99 report, knowledge was conceptualized as intangible and available to all. When discussed in concrete policy contexts in international forums, however, "knowledge" became something specialized, abstract, and linked to high-tech industries.

Contrary to the World Bank's rhetorical visions of spreading a light and mobile knowledge over poverty, specific prescriptions towards the development of "knowledge" in K4D discourses reflect the understanding of "knowledge" developed in advanced liberal societies. The World Bank's own methodology for evaluating a country's knowledge economy weighs sixty-nine variables such that Internet connectivity and science and technology funding is given equal priority to more basic development indicators such as adult literacy.[4] Online discussions of the knowledge economy in development provide links to articles assessing the success or failure of ICT, Technology Transfer, Knowledge-based Industry, and Science and Technology for any given country. The word "knowledge," coded as open and accessible to all, has come to stand in for *expert knowledge* or *expertise* directly connected to high-tech, and distant from more equitable visions of knowledge. Competing conceptualizations of "local knowledge" for fueling development were never legitimated or institutionalized among the international development community as appropriate drivers of the new global economy.

The World Bank's K4D strategies, as well as those of other NGOs that support a "knowledge for development" agenda, tend to ignore local particularities and histories, and promote a uniform vision of "knowledge." As a result, a new set of elite subjects who embody developmental policies come into focus.

A new middle class or a "global" elite?

The highly specialized kinds of expert knowledge that comprise the global knowledge economy fuse with the development strategies of international agencies in postcolonial countries and, in turn, help to produce political subjects with specialized expertise, particularly in high-tech fields. Produced through a neoliberal political rationality that views the individual as self-disciplined, educated, enterprising, and rational, these middle-class subjects understand themselves as creative, flexible, and autonomous. In a postcolonial context such as India, the beliefs and practices of these subjects are situated in a transnational political economy of highly-paid technical work as well as a global cultural

[4] See the details of the World Bank's Knowledge Assessment Methodology (KAM) at: http://info.worldbank.org/etools/kam2005/.

economy engaged in remaking the nation, always in conversation with affluent knowledge workers in the diaspora. The massive publicity for India's tech success must be understood as the success of a relatively small segment of the workforce who have experienced dramatic social and economic mobility through the expansion of the Indian IT industry. The relative isolation of these workers, however, belies the much larger homogenizing effects that IT workers have on the nation; Indian IT workers in India and in the diaspora actively produce a unified, singular idea of India in which technical and moral superiority is justly rewarded with upward mobility.

Scholars of the middle class in India have argued convincingly that this group has become invested with the symbolic authority to make claims about the nation as a whole (Deshpande, 2003; Fernandes, 2000b). Leela Fernandes argues that the newness of India's "new middle class" stems from the new economic sector that has resegmented the Indian labor market. The previous staple jobs of the Indian middle-class (teachers, bank officials, government officials, etc.) are no longer associated with the economic and cultural capital needed for middle-class status. In their place, jobs with multinational corporations, especially in back office services and information technology across a wide range of incomes, call into being middle-class status. In Fernandes's view, this "new" (urban) middle class becomes, thus, a "central agent for the revisioning of the Indian nation in the context of globalization" (Fernandes, 2000a: 89). Satish Deshpande (2003) focuses upon ideology in analyzing India's middle class. He argues that nationalism in India was a creation of urban professionals, who were already members of the social elite. Under a post-independence socialist developmental regime that emphasized scientific and technical training, the ranks of the Indian middle class swelled, and acquired a powerful sense of moral legitimacy, emerging from the high-mindedness of social democratic ideals. The government job, then, which supported national development, became the hallmark of middle classness because of its ideological connection with the ideals driving the nation (140–150). In recent times, however, development-as-ideology has lost its resonance, and an ideology of globalization has taken its place. This means, then, "for the most influential and powerful fraction of this [middle] class ... the *nation is no longer the canvas for their dreams and aspirations*" (148).

Despite the cultural importance of this new group in setting forth a new image of India, the highly mobile and skilled "knowledge workers" who constitute the new middle class to a large extent, form proportionally what can only be understood as an elite. According to the National Association for Software and Software Companies (NASSCOM), in 2004–05, there were 1,045,000 "knowledge professionals" employed in India, which includes not only software and software services, but also IT-enabled services such as data entry and call centers (NASSCOM 2005). Although numerically large, this group amounts to *just two-tenths of 1%* of the Indian workforce. Even if NASSCOM's prediction that the number of knowledge professionals will rise to 2 million by 2008 comes true, the number remains proportionally minuscule. Aside from their formidable symbolic impact, however, the economic impact of these knowledge professionals is phenomenally larger than their numbers – software and software services compose 23% of India's total exports, while IT as a whole comprises almost 4% of India's GDP (NASSCOM 2005).

Politically speaking, knowledge workers are also isolated from the rest of India. The first reminder of this disjuncture occurred with BJP's fall from power in parliament in May 2004, which came as a shock to the world. Journalists in India criticized the "India Shining" campaign as a key factor in the BJP losing the election. In the multi-million dollar government-sponsored ad campaign, "India Shining" portrayed India as a country embarking on a new beginning with a strong economy, a global outlook, improving lifestyles, and a hopeful future. Critics and political pundits viewed this campaign as far too

optimistic and distant from the experience of most Indians. The BJP was not alone in being distant from the opinions of most of India, however. Interviews and ethnographic work revealed that most IT workers tended not to vote.[5] Those who did cast a vote voted exactly the opposite of what was to be the outcome: in Bangalore, most people in IT voted for Congress at the state level and BJP at the national level. They were wrong on both counts. Although most of these employees advocate a secular India over a Hindu India, these knowledge professionals see no conflict between the Hindu nationalist roots of the BJP and a vision for a more global India. Among those few interviewees who were able to articulate clearly their political opinions, there is a sense that the BJP, by pushing forth liberalization, was an IT and globalization-friendly regime in practice, despite their fundamentalist roots.

Ethnographic work and interviews suggest that a particular orientation to India and the globe (especially, "the West") is produced and reinforced through the all-encompassing world of IT work. Because the primary interactions of IT workers are with others working in the same industry overseas, the industry views itself as a liaison to the rest of the world. The work itself may narrow even further the scope for interaction with the remaining 99.8% of India, but this contradiction is eclipsed by the high visibility and formidable economic weight of the industry. Interviewees in Mumbai and Bangalore view themselves as being more open and broad-minded as a result of being in the industry. The disembedding nature of their knowledge allows them to conceptualize themselves as individuals who are essentially less constrained by national boundaries than their contemporaries who work in less "global" fields. More importantly, however, the IT workplace fosters a unified, singular idea of how India ought to be run, wherein individuals advance strictly according to their merit, and class, caste, and gender do not matter. Although the world of Indian knowledge workers is insulated from the rest of India, the logic of it, derived from a neoliberal political rationality, helps to produce a new, unified idea of India for a broad audience.

Interview data revealed some of the ways in which the IT industry has the tendency to isolate people with similar backgrounds and similar orientations to work while maintaining a myth of openness and globality. Bharathi, a 26-year-old technical writer in Mumbai said that in all the IT workplaces where she has worked, she encounters people who come from similar backgrounds and who share similar views and tastes.[6] Everyone speaks English, rather than a regional language, and most people dress in similar ways. Bharathi's observations were reflected in my interview data: more than two-thirds of my interviewees (41/60) grew up in urban middle-class families supported by a government job. Although such a background has long been viewed as that of the "common man" in domestic representations of post-independence India, at the most, 10–15% of the population comes from such a background, in contrast with advanced liberal contexts in which the "middle class" constitutes a numerically dominant segment of the population (Deshpande, 2003). Only seven interviewees came from rural or small town settings, and only three came from "lower middle class" backgrounds in which money was particularly tight.

Among an isolated, relatively homogenous class with economic and symbolic power beyond their numbers, what are the ideologies that drive their dominance? Why are these ideologies so powerful?

[5] Low voter turnout among the middle and upper classes in India is a well-documented phenomenon (see Deshpande, 2003).

[6] All the names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the interviews I conducted.

Neoliberal "Indian" subjects

The subjectivities of these knowledge workers so closely reflect the logics that underpin knowledge economy discourses that these individuals tend to concretize the national development agenda through their own experiences. In particular, Indian knowledge workers value the constant learning and re-learning required to stay in the IT industry, and a flexible relationship to work to support self-development. These beliefs reflect key agendas of the knowledge economy as promoted by the World Bank and other development institutions. The replacement of traditional disciplinary pedagogy with a culture of lifelong learning, including adult and tertiary education, is meant to build a society of skilled, flexible, and creative people. Similarly, innovation and entrepreneurship is central to knowledge economy discourses.[7] An emphasis on innovation and entrepreneurship, though constituted through state and international agencies, once again places the engine of progress on the individual, who must take risks, acquire new knowledge, and in so doing, drive the national and the global economy forward. These techniques of flexibilization promote a contingent relationship to the workplace and a willingness to engage in a competitive world, whatever the costs.

Indian technology workers live out the ideals of lifelong learning and perpetual training that underpin knowledge economy logics.[8] Most of the individuals I interviewed described IT as an ever-changing field for which one must constantly train and learn to keep up. Many employees are simultaneously earning an additional certification or degree in addition to doing their job such that their entire lives revolve around working or learning for work. Women who leave their jobs temporarily to have families find themselves less marketable a year or two later because they are not up-to-date on the latest technology anymore. Rather than criticizing this aspect of the field as being too demanding, however, IT workers are proud of their ability to retrain constantly to stay abreast of the industry. Although women find the sacrifices they must make to be a hindrance in terms of their own families, most are proud of their ability to overcome these challenges and stay in the industry. Oftentimes, a sense of personal identification with IT or a global sense of Indianness justifies their willingness to deal with these challenges.

Parminder is a 33-year old software engineer living and working in Mumbai and getting her MBA on the weekends. She started out as a microbiologist and very painstakingly made her way into the IT industry. Throughout her interview, Parminder emphasized how much she learns as a part of the industry. For her, the ability to learn constantly is closely related to adaptability and independence. She sees the ability to change and be independent as the most important thing to keep moving ahead in the industry:

> The only thing that one can ensure is to keep oneself upgraded and updated. Keep learning. As long as one is adaptable and equipped to handle the changes, I don't see any problem.... You resist change the moment you do not know.

Parminder is proud of her tenacity and hunger for learning, which she views as entirely responsible for her continued success in the industry.

[7] See http://web.worldbank.org/ (link to "learning" and "WBI learning programs" to find "knowledge for development").

[8] Contemporary Indian knowledge workers are not necessarily the first in India to identify with these values. Graduates of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in an earlier generation adopted these values, but had to leave India to seek out opportunities that would support that orientation. These graduates, however, were far more elite, scarce, and relatively less visible, in comparison to Indian knowledge workers today.

Indian knowledge professionals also privilege a spirit of entrepreneurship, innovation, and flexibility through a view of the self as an enterprising self. Shirin, a 25-year-old computer graphics specialist for an e-learning company in Mumbai, views the career ahead of her as one of constantly changing jobs in order to maintain a vibrant sense of self. Although she comes from a background where women seldom work outside the home, Shirin sees herself as an individual who must work in order to realize her full capacity as a person. "Change is permanent," Shirin says. "If you have to achieve something, you cannot stay in one job... it's very stagnant water." She goes on to say that to continuously seek out new jobs, she must continuously learn, and that it is only in that process of learning, gaining new skills, and expanding her horizons that she will feel she has accomplished anything. Similarly, Anu, a 34-year-old project manager with extensive experience both in India and abroad, describes her career as something that makes her happy and contributes to her growth as a person. Once the job stops giving her those things, she will stop working. Anu described to me how a flexible relationship to the workplace and the industry is key to surviving and growing within the industry. Because Anu has that relationship to the industry, she projects it onto the success of the country as a whole, where not only does she advance competitively and according to her own merit, but India does as well:

> I think the good thing about India is that we don't get hung up on things. We move on.... Like for example, we lost a lot when we went into nationalization. We could have very well sat and cried about it.... But we're still moving on, right? ... You have to. It's a global economy now.... If I lose my job in the IT industry tomorrow because China has picked up, what's the use of me cribbing? Maybe I should go grow potatoes somewhere. So, you have to have the attitude, and that isn't easy. And you have to have the guts.

For Anu, her own ability to carry out her IT job with a high level of competence and dedication while still being flexible enough to do something entirely different with her life tomorrow is a reflection of a new India. Her own willingness to "grow potatoes" if Chinese knowledge professionals take over her IT job is closely tied to India's ability to "move on," which, for now means competing in a global economy by providing a pool of Indian knowledge workers to meet global demand and improve India. Anu's viewpoint provides a stark contrast to an older popular conception of India as a culture and a place that endures all, rather than a place that moves with the times.

In these examples, we find that knowledge workers are subjectively committed to the ideals of adaptability and flexibility. Job seeking is not just an insecurity of the market or a nuisance, but rather a necessary step toward self-improvement. The necessity to retrain or change professions is not an occupational hazard, but rather a challenge that ensures self-development and a competitive edge in the market. Knowledge professionals such as Parminder, Shirin, and Anu understand their experience as knowledge workers through the lens of individual choice and freedom. They identify with the neoliberal logics underpinning the knowledge economy at a personal level, which reflect the orientation of the industry as a whole, and help to build a vision of a new India.

The ideology of a merit-based India

The ideology of a meritocracy provides the language with which to connect the development of personal expertise and the improvement of the nation. In a society historically rooted in caste, class, and regional divisions, the ostensible meritocracy of the

IT workplace provides a set of ideas about how India ought to be run. Belief in a meritocracy is pervaded not only through the institutionalized practices of the IT workplace, but also, as I show below, in the actions of IT workers and the industry. The IT industry engages in what Alvin Gouldner, when describing a "New Class" of professionals in the United States, called a "culture of critical discourse" (CCD) (Gouldner, 1979). In CCD, the purpose of speech is justification, wherein the speaker must elicit voluntary consent without appealing to her own authority or status. In IT workplaces, knowledge workers deploy CCD not only to understand their own mobility or lack thereof, but also to imagine a future India free of parochial sensibilities and corruption. Through CCD, IT workers not only live out the rationality of knowledge economy discourses, but also offer a powerful embodiment of a new India in which each advances according to their merit, and such an image resonates with a broad domestic and diasporic audience.

Parminder says that she never felt discriminated against throughout her long career in IT, even though for the first several years of her career, she experienced no upward advancement. She was working for a small firm with high turnover, and no other women employees, but she never moved up in the company or found a better paying job until almost seven years later. In retrospect, Parminder feels that she never got a better job because she was not confident enough–she appeared too sheltered and too unwilling to speak up. Still, Parminder sees this as her own shortcomings:

> I was not as independent-thinking, strong, as what I am now... I'd never been away from my parents, not even during my college. Never stayed in a hostel. Always in that protection. That shell [gestures her hands into an enclosed ball].... And somehow when I was giving my interview to the VP, he could get this out of me.

Parminder views younger workers entering the industry today as being much more independent than she was at this age, and through their high aspirations and expectations, she argues that India is improving itself. Given all of Parminder's diverse experiences in India and abroad, she remains convinced that multinational technology firms maintain a sort of human interest at the core of their organizations, where anyone who suits a particular position will be given the opportunity to move up. Most other interviewees echoed her views. In a male-dominated industry with few women in upper management, professional women consistently agreed that all workers have the same opportunity to move up the corporate hierarchy without regard to gender, caste, religion, region, or family connections.

Symbolically, the meritocracy of the IT industry is understood as opposed to the corrupt sector of government and politics. This opposition is an important way with which to understand how IT workers distance themselves from Indian politics while still feeling personally invested in contributing to a larger sense of India. For example, Kala, a 40-year-old technical writer who was a newspaper reporter for many years before entering the IT industry, abstains from voting as a protest against the corruption she has seen over the years in Indian politics, as a reporter and as a citizen. On the other hand, Kala self-consciously experiences the changes occurring amongst the Indian middle class as changing India in a broad and profound way. She says that her presence in the IT industry makes her feel that she is a part of building a new India based on a "global" perspective, for which the IT industry serves as the implicit, and at times, explicit, model.

The tension between advancement according to "merit," and advancement according to more parochial categories, such as caste, becomes apparent in the current debates over caste reservation in India's private sector. Numeric quotas for OBCs or "other backward classes" in government jobs have existed since the late 1980s, a move that sparked massive protests,

particularly among lower middle-class students of high caste. The prevalence of a quota system that considers caste in the government sector is commonly understood to account for the inefficiency and corruption of government jobs. IT and other private sector jobs, which have been spared such quotas, have thus been understood as embodying the opposite values that are implicitly "global": emphasis on merit, fair competition, and efficiency. Since 2005, however, there has been a strong movement within the national government to institute similar quotas in government funded universities, including the elite IITs, and eventually, in the private sector.

The IT industry in particular, and the knowledge economy more generally, is deeply embedded in these debates. The lack of reservations in India's private sector, and thus, the apparent blindness to parochial matters of caste, contributes importantly to the modern character of the industry in which IT employees are proud to participate. In a workplace that regards merit above all else, the introduction of caste-based quotas threatens not only the talent base of the company, as the leaders in the industry claim, but more fundamentally, the neoliberal rationality and culture of critical discourse upon which the knowledge economy is supposed to operate. As the prospect of numeric reservations looms large, the CEOs of IT companies have begun calling for more sophisticated forms of affirmative action in lieu of numeric quotas. The tension between the ideology of the knowledge economy and government-mandated hiring practices became most prevalent in the recent resignation of Pratap Bhanu Mehta from the Prime Minister's elite Knowledge Commission. In his widely-publicized resignation letter, Mehta explicitly named this tension:

> The government's recent decision... to extend quotas for OBCs in Central institutions, the palliative measures the government is contemplating to defuse the resulting agitation, and the process employed to arrive at these measures are steps in the wrong direction. They violate four cardinal principles that institutions in a knowledge-based society will have to follow: they are not based on assessment of effectiveness, they are incompatible with the freedom and diversity of institutions, they more thoroughly politicize the education process, and they inject an insidious poison that will harm the nation's long term interest (Mehta, 2006).

This set of discourses regarding the knowledge economy's deep disregard for "old" social stratifications such as caste, in favor of more modern principles such as merit and efficiency, importantly informs the ways in which knowledge professionals perceive the role of IT in shaping a new India.

Although interviewees did not explicitly comment on the opposition between Indian politics/government and IT jobs in private industry, this is an implicit tension that pervades the ideologies of work in IT. Within the everyday relations of the IT workplace, the role of gendered selves in particular, but also regional and caste identifications, is completely subordinated to the work at hand. Project work occurs in decentralized teams working in consort for an external client, and individuals within those teams advance according to experience and performance. The physical environments of these workplaces, which are virtually indistinguishable from their counterparts in the United States or elsewhere, also help to set the stage for a number of crucial homogenizing processes. Sneha, a high-powered 24-year old working in upper level marketing and global management in the corporate sector of the firm, commented upon how the value for merit in IT can erase regional affiliations and even, a sense of place:

> There are people who are coming from very conservative backgrounds, and through sheer merit, they're globetrotting. It's very apparent.... There's this guy... you can tell

> he comes from a very small town in South India and he's talking about Fall! And I'm wondering–we don't have Fall here! He says he doesn't spend enough time here to remember. I asked him which office in Mumbai he works out of, and he says he only comes to Mumbai to renew his passport.

For Sneha, the globetrotting of a young man from a small town in South India spoke to the ways in which IT offered a path to just and equitable upward mobility, which would not have otherwise been available to him. This mobility has allowed him to "surpass" his regional identifications and sensibilities.

From interviews and observations, I would not argue that the belief in the IT industry as a meritocracy is a misguided one; rather, when viewed in context, the evidence supports the idea that perhaps relative to other industries, IT may provide a relatively just path to career advancement in urban India. What is absent from these narratives of merit-based advancement is not discrimination, but rather, homogenization. Those who remain in the industry over time tend to share not only a particular set of highly valued skills, but also a language and belief system that justifies their class position and creates the illusion that anyone with the same talent and determination can achieve the same status, without regard to the fairly uniform backgrounds that most IT workers come from. The ideology of purely merit-based advancement serves to effectively mask class biases while presenting a "global" side of India that is removed from the corruption in politics and government that developing countries such as India are notorious for. Belief in the benevolent system of advancement in IT firms provides an ideological alternative to the current political system, and an ostensibly superior way to take the nation forward. This belief also supports the idea that those who remain in the IT industry are talented, moral individuals who are capable and desirable people to take the nation forward.

Belonging to a new India

The disembedding qualities of expert knowledge and pure meritocracy, however, are countered significantly through a sense of global/transnational Indianness. Knowledge professionals in urban India in conversation with their counterparts in the diaspora, actively forge a connection to an idea of India that is both "authentic" and "global."

Like many interviewees, Parminder felt that her work has actually strengthened her sense of belonging to India. After a long stint in Singapore with the opportunity for significant upward mobility and a permanent position, Parminder quit her job to return to her life in India, though it meant a deep pay cut and a step down in her standard of living. Parminder's realization of her Indianness was highlighted when she was not in India, a theme that echoed through most of the interview with workers who had spent time abroad. A sense of Indianness was shored up through work-based interactions with a global world in which India must be made intelligible to (mostly white) co-workers in the United States and the United Kingdom. This theme of living out neoliberal logics while still remaining embedded in national meanings provides an important way of understanding the nexus between the global assemblage of the knowledge economy and the individual. I develop this theme further below.

Immersion in the knowledge economy often leads to re-interpretations of traditional identifications so that they become compatible with neoliberal logics. For example, Anu, who travels frequently for business and interacts with international clients on a daily basis, extols the specialty of India lying in its deep sense of acceptance and openness towards

others. She views Hinduism, in its most open and democratic form, as the basis for this culture of openness, wherein individuals dictate their own spiritual and daily practices. People accept others, she says. She calls this sense of openness a very big freedom, something she has missed during her various stints in other countries, even while living with other Indians abroad. Similarly, Neethy, a 28-year-old engineer in Mumbai, explained that the emphasis on education and hard work in Indian middle-class families gave India a competitive edge in the global software market. In her voice, secular "Indian values," which appear timeless and authentic, fit nicely into the expectations of the knowledge economy. For knowledge professionals, Indianness as being based in a deep belief in individuality and self-improvement coincides with the idea of India as a unified democracy in which individuals like themselves live truly free lives.

Even as more and more IT workers choose to live in India, rather than settling abroad permanently, the Indian diaspora is increasingly viewed as a part of the nation itself, informing negotiations between the global and the authentic in important ways. In recent years, the upwardly mobile Indian diaspora, especially in the United States, has helped to fund the rise of Hindu nationalism (Rajagopal, 2001; van der Veer, 2004). The diaspora also provides an indispensable site of Indian cultural production and consumption as well as an embodiment of Indian success among wealthy Indian Silicon Valley entrepreneurs (Lal, 2003; Mukhi, 1998). Despite this, all except two interviewees insisted that they wished to stay in India in the long term, though most agreed that they would like to spend some time working abroad. The idea of moving between India and the West, while still being part of the nation is informed importantly by the thousands of diasporic Indians who have recently returned to India to work in IT. Their reasoning for returning to India provides a template for how to be "authentic" and "global" at once. For example, Chaitali, an outspoken project manager for a top semiconductor and wireless technology firm in Bangalore, just moved from San Jose, California, where she had a lucrative and stimulating career spanning seven years and three positions. For Chaitali, living and working in India means that she can have the "best of both worlds": a standard of living commensurate with a global upper middle class, along with the cultural grounding in a set of morals and values for her child that she feels is only available in India. If things do not work out, though, she tells me that she always has her US green card to fall back upon.

In these ways, the apparently disembedding effects of expertise are effectively countered through individual and collective strategies that re-imagine the Indian nation as a global one. In this transnational vision of Indianness, diasporic and national subjects alike contribute to a simultaneously authentic and global vision of India that re-interprets traditional identifications through a lens that privileges the individual and values self-improvement.

The new "global" India and the promise of IT

If there are relatively so few knowledge professionals who are so isolated from the rest, then, is it not obvious to the bulk of India's citizenry that the project of becoming a "knowledge society" has only further divided an already highly stratified nation? What explains the continued appeal of knowledge economy-friendly policies and the national admiration for IT workers?

A small group of interviewees were able to articulate clearly a broader sense of the impacts that knowledge economy policies and practices are having on India as a whole. Several were able to recognize that IT was widening the gap between the rich and the poor,

driving up the cost of housing, and generally making it less and less feasible for people who are not knowledge professionals to make a living in high-tech capitals like Bangalore. Some viewed it as the job of the government to rectify the problem through educational interventions that would give disadvantaged sections of the population a high-tech education. None wondered why the poor do not just revolt against IT as the perpetration of economic injustice. Upanya, a young manager for a large Indian multinational firm in Bangalore narrated a revealing anecdote that begins to explain how the promise of IT is understood and perpetuated. She missed the company bus one day and was forced to take the public bus back home. She happened to strike up a conversation with the bus driver. When he found out that she worked in computers, the bus driver asked how much money she made. After a moment of awkwardness, Upanya lied and told him that they made 20 thousand rupees a month, actually less than half her monthly salary. The mid-forties bus driver was stunned. "Twenty thousand rupees?" he asked. "God willing, my son will someday make that much money. I will put him into computer training." In a vision of success hauntingly similar to the American dream, this anecdote suggests that India's common person has accepted the figure of the financially secure software worker as an Indian ideal to live up to.

The ideas hinted at in Upanya's bus driver anecdote are indicative of larger trends that are not readily apparent from interview data alone. Raka Ray and Mary Katzenstein have noted a dramatic shift away from anti-poverty politics and a Nehruvian (socialist) frame as the twin pressures of Hindu nationalism and neo-liberal globalization have become increasingly strong since the mid-1980s. Social movements and NGOs have turned away from the state for support, focusing instead on various kinds of self-help approaches–problems of poverty and malnourishment remain on political agendas only to place some sort of check on free market forces (Ray & Katzenstein, 2005). This observation suggests that trends towards individualization are widespread and that Hindu nationalism and globalization together contribute to such trends. Satish Deshpande offers a supporting view, though from a different perspective. Deshpande emphasizes how the role of India's middle class has changed from a Nehruvian era, shifting away from the developmental state as the center of its hegemony to become more differentiated. As the middle classes have become more differentiated, Deshpande suggests that the elite segment of the middle class has become the producer of ideologies, while the majority become consumers (Deshpande, 2003). To understand the dominance of knowledge professionals, then, is to understand them as producers of individualistic ideologies, which are then consumed by the majority. As an anti-poverty social agenda becomes politically untenable, and the developmental state is no longer a viable framework within which to aspire, an individualistic ideology of globality that preserves Indian cultural values becomes an increasingly enticing ideology for majority consumption.

Conclusion: Knowledge for development or knowledge for the development of an elite?

Knowledge economy logics and discourses continue to have salience in India through the promise of IT as a means to a better lifestyle for the entire country. As this article shows, however, the specialized knowledge driving the knowledge economy is based on a narrow definition of knowledge that has been adopted from advanced liberal contexts, marginalizing critiques of development that conceptualized knowledge in ways that emphasized locality and context. In the case of India, the ascent of K4D discourses in the

international arena coincided with the development of a strong homegrown IT industry, deeply embedded in a global economy. Here, I have demonstrated that the principles underpinning knowledge for development and knowledge economy discourses help to constitute subjects who live out neoliberal logics in their own lives, and in a postcolonial context such as India, these subjects help to imagine a new nation through ideologies of individual development, merit-based advancement, and a transnational sense of the Indian nation. Subjects working in the IT industry absorb the logic of the knowledge economy and craft identities that are flexible, autonomous, creative, and enterprising, while maintaining a sense of self that remains tied to India.

When situated in a larger socio-political context, the ideologies of IT work and the knowledge economy reflect the interests of those in a new transnational middle class who are simultaneously isolated from the rest of the citizenry and influential at a symbolic and ideological level. As the IT workplace helps to make mostly middle-class Indians more affluent and mobile, the possibilities for the IT industry fueling broad-based change to address such basic issues as widespread poverty and weak infrastructure appear limited. At the same time, the widespread symbolic and ideological impact of the success of IT and the knowledge economy is powerful. Although most of the Indian workforce might not relate to the everyday work of the global IT industry, the idea of a rewards structure in which each advances according to their own merit, without regard to gender, caste, or regional affiliations, resonates with a broad audience. The opposition between such a just system and the corrupt mayhem of party politics and government jobs has become embedded into key national debates in India, such as those around job reservations in the private sector. Although the democratic appeal of a completely merit-based system cannot be denied, in the context of India, such a system presents the danger of overlooking histories of oppression among low-caste communities and acute differences in the existing opportunity structure. So long as those engaged in the knowledge economy are blinded by the belief that their success reflects the progress of the nation as a whole, and that their class positions are not privileged, the possibility for sparking true social and economic change greatly diminishes. This unexpected outcome serves to critique not only the knowledge economy in India, but also of knowledge for development discourses more broadly, which prescribe a specific set of policies without regard to local history or context.

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Smitha Radhakrishnan is currently a postdoctoral fellow at UCLA's International Institute and is Assistant Professor at Wellesley College beginning Fall 2007. Her work employs multi-sited ethnography to study the cultural politics of globalization, merging conventional approaches to development and political economy with a transnational feminist perspective. She is currently working on a book manuscript entitled, *"Global Indians" and Knowledge Economy: Gender and the Making of a Middle-Class Nation*.