

“Back to Serve” or “Back to Consume”? The uncertainties of return among highly skilled Indian professionals in Bangalore

Despite an official rhetoric that focuses on ‘homecoming’ (Brosius 2010:82), many highly skilled Indian professionals find their return to Bangalore challenging and wrought with uncertainties. In this paper, I will discuss the relations between consumption practices, experienced uncertainties of return and expectations of giving back to the Indian nation.¹

Given India’s fast development since economic reforms in the 1990’s, the fact that many of the return migrants have lived most of their adult life abroad and originate from other states in India, the notion of “return” to Bangalore is in itself questionable. Perhaps in dealing with this kind of return migration it would be useful to emphasise the migration part of the equation as much as (or more than) the return part. For many of the return migrants in Bangalore, the return is experienced rather like a migration to a whole new and in some ways unfamiliar country and city. This forms the background for many of the experienced uncertainties of return.

Scholars who have worked on return migration have often viewed it as the logic end to a migration cycle, somewhat implying a natural resettlement in the well-known surroundings of the home country of the migrant (cf. Gmelch 1980; King 1986)². Since the highly skilled return migrants of my fieldwork have grown up in India, they are expected to be able to settle in India again quite effortlessly. The reality however is different. Some return migrants have already before the return acknowledged that the resettlement process will be challenging, and some families have calculated with one parent not working for up to 6 months after return to help the children adjust. Other families have consulted some of the many r2i (Return to India) websites where one can find

¹ This paper is based on 8 months of fieldwork in Bangalore from September 2011 to May 2012. My fieldwork data includes 35 semi-structured and open-ended interviews with highly skilled returnees in the IT, science and technology fields. Some of the interviews had two participants (husband and wife) and thus a total of 41 people were interviewed. Further, I have conducted 6 interviews of contextual relevance e.g. with a founder of an NGO, a recruiter who handles many returnees etc. Three of these interviews were telephone interviews. I have also done 29 follow-up visits and meetings with 18 of the interviewees and their families as well as conducted participant observation at 14 meetings in expat associations etc. Of the return migrants, 5 had been gone less than 5 years, 12 had been gone between 5-10 years, and 24 of them has been gone between 11-19 years. All except two of the return migrants had returned between the years 2002-2011.

² The concept of return migration has been defined as a process where migrants after a significant period abroad return to their homeland to settle there, and the aim of the concept was originally to critique the migration theories which approached migration as a one-way movement, e.g. from rural to urban settings or from developing to developed countries (Gmelch 1980; King 1986). Later, theories of transnationalism have become an important framework in which to understand processes of return migration as part of continuous migration cycles and transnational social fields.

complete checklists for returning as well as get tips on practicalities like which movers to hire and read lessons learnt from people who have already returned.³

During my fieldwork in Bangalore, I have found that dealing with the experienced uncertainties of return lead to specific patterns and practices of consumption among the return migrants. These include for example gated community housing, international and/or private schools for the children, hired help, and membership of upscale clubs and associations of expats. I will thus argue that the return migrants consume a certain lifestyle, or as one of my informants, Wamika⁴, describes it: “When most of us expats are coming here [to India] we are trying to emulate the life we had abroad.”⁵ I will come back to discuss the various aspects of consumption of a certain lifestyle in detail, but first let’s meet Nitin and Wamika (from the above quote) and their two children, Ramkumar and Rohini, who have moved to Bangalore from the US in May 2010.

Nitin and Wamika both have degrees in computer programming from India. Nitin grew up in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh and migrated to the US in February of 1995 after having worked some years in Mumbai where his only brother lives. After getting married in 1994 in what they describe as a traditional arranged marriage, Wamika joined Nitin in the US in August of 1995 and found work there after a while. While Nitin had lived in Boston and North Carolina they settled together in Atlanta, Georgia and eventually bought a house there. Both of their children, Ramkumar and Rohini who are now 11 and 9 years old are born in the US, and they talk fondly about their childhood in Atlanta, where the school bus to take them to the local public school came exactly on the minute every day and where they could enjoy outdoor life. In 2001, Nitin and Wamika got green cards, and in 2007 they changed their citizenship and became naturalised US citizens. In 2008, Nitin’s father became very ill, and in 2009 Wamika’s father had a stroke. This triggered a need for Nitin and Wamika to return to India to be closer to their ailing and elderly parents. They would have preferred to settle in Hyderabad, which they consider their home city, but since Wamika had a job offer in Bangalore that settled the decision for them. Their return to India was finalised in May 2010. Given the downturn in the US economy and the crisis on the housing market, Nitin and Wamika have not been able to sell their house in Atlanta, so they have rented it out. Although this solution secures them from losing money on the house every month, they still have to pay off the mortgage and

³ See for example <http://www.garamchai.com/Return2India.htm#ForumsonR2I>, <http://r2i.jitll.com/> and <http://www.saroscorner.com/>

⁴ All names of informants are pseudonyms.

⁵ Personal conversation on December 4, 2011.

deal with the responsibilities of being landlords. In Bangalore, they have rented a house in a gated community on a 2 year lease. They chose the place because one of Wamika's school friends lives in the same compound and vouched for its safety and standard. They complain that the house doesn't have a proper garden but they are happy that there is a lake nearby where they can take the children for bicycling trips and walk their two dogs who they after much bureaucracy managed to bring over from the US as well. When asked, Nitin and Wamika say that they don't know whether they will stay in India. The children are not really happy here, and both Nitin and Wamika are quite vocal about things that they don't like and find frustrating in India: From the bureaucracy and bribing to the difficulty of finding and keeping dependable staff, to the impossibility of the traffic. When they lived in the US, both Ramkumar and Rohini learned to speak Telegu (Nitin and Wamika's mother tongue) but after returning to India they have both stopped speaking the language. Ramkumar and Rohini claim that none of the other children in the compound speak Telegu and that English is the children's common language. Ramkumar and Rohini have made a lot of new friends in the compound, where the children play outside or swim in the big swimming pool. Yet, still when I on a visit to their house tell them that I am going home to Denmark for Christmas, Ramkumar immediately reacts by saying "I also want to go home for Christmas". Nitin answers him with a strained voice, "But you are home for Christmas [here]", to which the daughter Rohini replies "no daddy, not this fake home. We want to go to the real home in the US."⁶

India, like many other countries, does not record the re-entry of its nationals and the numbers of highly skilled return migrants to India are therefore estimates only⁷. The numbers vary from 40,000 to 60,000 people to have returned in recent years (Khadria 2004; Radhakrishnan 2011), to that 10,000 to 20,000 people to have returned annually since 2000 (Varrel 2011:305). Bangalore is the favoured destination for highly skilled Indian return migrants, among other things due to job opportunities and the presence of many top-end companies and tech parks, and the availability of international style schools, housing and malls. By looking at consumption patterns and practices among return migrants, we can begin to grasp the uncertainties of return that they are experiencing

⁶ Personal conversation on December 4, 2011.

⁷ Statistics of foreigners entering India is collected by Bureau of Immigration in form of an annual publication titled "Immigration Control & Measures in India" for restricted use by the Government Departments in India. The only statistics that are readily accessible to the public are the numbers of tourists entering India. Alternatively, the numbers of foreigners entering India can be found in the census of India carried out once every decade, however the migration tables from the 2011 census have not been released yet.

and to understand how consumption choices can be the antidote. I will now take a closer look at two of these consumption choices of return migrants; gated communities, and hired help.

Gated communities: A “soft landing”

The anthropologist Christiane Brosius has examined the growing presence of gated communities in India and their influence on the public sphere. Brosius states that the housing and lifestyle advertisements of gated communities reflect a “desire for seclusion – even social purity – indicating clearly demarcated borders between an ‘inside’ world, allegedly filled with order and peace, and an external world, allegedly infused with dirt and disorder” (Brosius 2010:65). According to Brosius, many of the inhabitants and potential buyers of housing in gated communities are looking for “the good life” which includes 24-hour security, amenities like a clubhouse and swimming pool and guarantees of water and electricity. In the slogan of one housing advertisement for a new gated compound, life in a gated community is described like “living abroad in India”, which despite its apparent contrast is actually covering the experience of living in a gated community well, as Brosius underlines that “the new urban spaces are quasi-colonies, islands or planets of a different kind, only partially connected with the physical environment that lies between them” (Brosius 2010:69).

One of my informants, Tara, explained her family’s decision to move into a gated community upon return to India as a matter of creating a “soft landing”, especially for their children. Tara said that in the gated community where they rented a house they could “fit right in” and they hardly noticed the transition from their US housing to living in India because they settled in that gated community⁸. Because of the safe environment, Tara would let her children out to play on their own for hours without being worried about them. The children would find new playmates immediately, and according to Tara this made the settlement a lot easier since they would talk less about missing their old friends. Another informant, Tasneem, living in the same gated community, said that for her family the choice of buying a house in a gated community was about the facilities of the compound and the construction quality of the house. Another and very important feature for her was that living in the gated community she felt that they have an advantage in attracting quality staff because for the maids, drivers and others she believes that there is a certain attraction in working in a gated community. Tasneem assumed that the attraction was both due to the higher salaries⁹ and also that

⁸ Personal conversation on April 28, 2012.

⁹ Returnees and expats are generally rumored to be paying higher salaries than Indians, and several of my informants confirmed that they paid their staff wages that were slightly above what they called “the going price”.

the staff would be able to enjoy the ambiance of the place with its manicured lawns and gardens, perfectly paved roads and clean, fresh air – which she summed up as “it’s better than working in a polluted area in the city”¹⁰. Tasneem also confessed another thing that she particularly like about the gated community where they lived, namely the fact that it was not “overly social” and she explained that their neighbours like them understood and valued privacy and so they would only have short conversations or interactions with neighbours on the road in in front of their houses. There was no forced sociality but one could tap into a social life in the compound for example in the clubhouse when one wanted to, yet it was not mandatory or expected in any way. Tasneem and her husband Salman were familiar and comfortable with this kind of interaction with neighbours from the US and they appreciated it being the same in their gated community in India.

Gated communities create borders between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have not’s’ of social space in India which is signaled in the prices. One informant Chandan estimates that the 4 bedroom house they have been renting in a gated community about 15 km north of the city center of Bangalore would cost about \$500,000 to buy, whereas a 5-bedroom house in the same compound would be at least 1,5 times that amount. Because of the price range, gated communities exude exclusive lifestyles that signal that you have ‘made it’ – a lifestyle that is only accessible to a minority of Indians – and part of the exclusiveness is that it brings feelings of safety and seclusion. Consuming gated community housing is thus a way for return migrants to beat the feelings of uncertainty of return by buying into security and guaranteed supplies, as well as a way to somewhat control their surroundings by tapping into of a community of what they consider likeminded people while the ‘external and other’ India is gated off.

Hired help: “Living the good life in India”

One thing that almost everyone I interviewed mentioned as a major benefit of moving to India was their ability to afford hired help. Similar to the choice of living in a gated community, I argue that hiring help is also about consuming a certain lifestyle, as well as about ‘outsourcing’ – and thus yourself avoiding – some of the direct interaction with Indian realities e.g. driving in traffic.

A few of my informants had employed a cleaning lady to come once a week while they lived abroad, but after returning to India, most of the return migrants had hired help to come on a daily basis.

¹⁰ Interview on November 5, 2011.

Most had one or two maids and a driver, while others also had a gardener and a cook. After having been used to doing the household work themselves when they lived abroad, many informants considered hiring help somewhat of a luxury, and as something that was intended to save them time that would then be freed to spend on family and social life. Yet, many informants found that the time gained by not having to do household work was being consumed by long commutes in heavy traffic to and from work. Additionally, many of my informants complained that managing staff brought them extra and unexpected stress. Some associated this with the fact that they had spent most of their adult life abroad and they had thus not gained the training in managing staff in India like their parents had. Also, a few felt that they were being played by their maids who knew how to exploit the weaknesses of a somewhat softer and inexperienced employer.

Clearly frustrated, Wamika tells me the story of how she found out that the first maid they had employed after returning was not trustworthy. Wamika says that she one day saw the maid taking things from their house and Wamika then had to ask her to put them back. After that, she did not dare to leave the maid alone in their house, and so Wamika felt she had to find another maid. After finding a replacement, Wamika fired their first maid, and as a gesture of niceness, she gave her two weeks' notice with pay. In those two weeks the maid was then expected to come and work as usual. Wamika also reminded the maid to repay some money that she had previously asked for as a loan. Coming to work the next day, the maid asks for an advance of her salary with the reason that this month is Eid. Wamika gives her the advance but again reminds the maid to repay the loan. The following day, the maid comes back to inform Wamika that she quits and won't be coming anymore. She has never repaid the loan or the advance. Wamika feels really angry at being "cheated that way" after having tried to treat the maid nicely. Now, Wamika feels that it is a burden to find and keep good maids, and she has also started to find it difficult to always have someone in the house with them. For Wamika, hiring help has gone from being a luxury to being a strain.

Tasneem is also feeling the weight of managing staff. A maid that Tasneem finally felt she had trained to do the work as she wanted it to be done suddenly disappeared without notice. Frustrated, Tasneem had to find a new maid. However, after a few months the disappeared maid came back saying she had just wanted to spend a few months at her native village. Tasneem rehired her but also gave her a lecture about the necessity of giving notice. Tasneem tells me that she felt the maid was ridiculing her for overreacting as Tasneem could easily find a new maid. However, as Tasneem relays to me, it is not only about finding a maid, but more importantly about teaching them about hygiene

and training them to clean the way she wants it to be done. To exemplify, Tasneem's husband Salman further explains that they have actually had to teach the maid not to use dirty water to wash the floors and not to use the same cloth for cleaning in the kitchen and the bathroom. Salman is appalled at the maids not knowing what he considers such basic things. For Tasneem and Salman, the constant insecurity about whether the maid will show up somewhat deflates the purpose of having hired help. And the changing of maids thus brings instability to a household that has been trying to diminish such uncertainties. Finding that in the case of hired help, money does not automatically buy them loyalty and thus a way out of the uncertainties of return to India, many of the return migrants become frustrated and feels somewhat helpless about the way things work in India. As Wamika expresses it: "The US has spoiled us with regard to what to expect from life: Customer service, reasonable traffic and so on. We are not used to the unstructured way of Indian life. We had a predictable life in the US. Here we can have a maid that doesn't turn up and this makes the schedule of my whole day go". What Wamika is addressing is that one of the causes of much uncertainty for the return migrants is the much more unstructured way of life in India where appointments and timings are flexible and ever-changing. This poses certain challenges for planning and structuring an everyday life, especially so if you are not used to manoeuvring in and mastering this kind of social setting. What both Wamika and Tasneem are frustrated about is the helplessness they feel when agreements are not met, resulting in an unexpected and unwanted situation for them and the uncertainty of when and how they can find new staff. Both Wamika and Tasneem had beforehand acknowledged that such situations were likely to occur in India, but they had both sought to eliminate that everyday source of uncertainty by paying their staff extra and by being what they consider kind employers e.g. giving loans, days off, tutoring their staff's children and paying for their school fees etc. I will argue that hiring help is an example of how consumption to eliminate uncertainties of return can actually backfire to create even more uncertainty – for example worries about whether the hired help will show up. Yet, since hiring help is maybe not fulfilling the purpose of eliminating uncertainties we can ask ourselves whether it can then be used by the return migrants in other reasoning as to its purpose? I suggest that the hiring of staff can indeed serve to satisfy another purpose for the return migrants – namely to conceptualise how they are meeting the expectations of being back to serve India. In this case serving can be translated to consuming. Thus, I propose that the return migrants' consumption and their achieved comforts through consumption can simultaneously double as a way to meet the expectations that return migrants are coming back to serve India and to give back to society.

Images of return migrants

India's history of return migrants does not start with the highly skilled professional return migrants of the 1990's and 2000's but go much further back to also include some of the nation's founding fathers for example Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Both Gandhi and Nehru had left India to seek higher education and work experience only to eventually come back and participate in the freedom struggle (Varrel 2011:303). The geographer Aurélie Varrel argues that as a consequence of these famous return migrants, the issue of return to India has taken a strong symbolic dimension as far as skilled migrants are concerned, and that in recent years the media interest has overexposed the phenomenon of return migration by making it a 'hot topic'. Varrel claims that the 'back to serve India' rhetoric is an illusion and a misunderstanding of the whole meaning of return migration which has been created and furthered by the media, including in Bollywood movies like *Swades*¹¹ (Varrel 2011:305-306). However, the rhetoric of serving India is also mirrored in the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs¹² who among other things work actively to attract remittances, investments and skills of NRI's to India. Thus, I would say that the rhetoric has moved beyond the media sphere and has penetrated the official rhetoric of the government of India to the point where the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh officially extended "an invitation to all Indian Americans and NRI's to return home to India in one capacity or the other" during a visit to the US in 2009¹³.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the association for Returned NRI's in Bangalore (the RNRI association) which was established by returning professionals in 1992 actually has had "Back to Serve" as their motto since the association's establishment. This motto as well as the name "RNRI", which was novel in the early 1990's, was coined by one of the founders of the association¹⁴. The RNRI associations' website makes a mention of other return migrants, as the text reads: "India achieved political freedom under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawarharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and others. They were all NRIs who came "back to serve" and to lead the country to freedom. Our members are proud to be back in India and strongly believe in the motto 'Back to serve'"¹⁵. Furthermore, all pages of the associations' website feature on top drawings of Gandhi and Nehru

¹¹ *Swades* is a Bollywood movie from 2004 about a successful NASA scientist who returns to India in search of his family roots. He ends up giving up his US life to settle in India where he has fallen in love and is helping local development projects. The movie stars Shah Rukh Khan, one of Bollywood's leading actors.

¹² The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs was established in 2004, and according to its website it "seeks to connect the Indian Diaspora community with its motherland", see <http://moia.gov.in/services.aspx?mainid=6>.

¹³ See "PM invites Indians worldwide to return home" at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/pm-invites-indians-worldwide-to-return-home/546485/0>

¹⁴ Interview on December 9, 2011.

¹⁵ See <http://www.rnri.org>

posted next to a photograph of a lighted Vidhana Soudha, the seat of Karnataka's state legislature, in Bangalore. Symbolically, a strong link is thus created between return migrants and the power and responsibility for shaping and developing India. Consequently, I would argue that it is important to recognise that return migrants – or at least some return migrants – also do adhere to the idea of them coming back to serve India, and thus it cannot be dismissed as purely media rhetoric.

Various ways of giving back

In interviews, I have asked the return migrants whether they feel that giving back is a relevant notion for them and further how they in that case interpret giving back. I have discovered that in the eyes of the return migrants giving back to India can take a wide variety of shapes and forms which I will now discuss in detail.

The return migrants' interpretations of giving back ranged from the more traditional forms of donating money to charities and/or getting involved in local NGO work, for example with hospitals, schools for underprivileged children, and citizens' movements. However, several of my informants mentioned that they had also been donating to charities when they lived abroad and by then they were giving money both to local charities as well as sending money back to charities in India. After moving to India, many of the return migrants actually felt that they could give less because their salaries had decreased (from dollars to rupees) while their living expenses had gone up for example because they have to pay a lot of money for schooling in India. Perhaps influenced by this experienced demise in giving power, the return migrants coined alternative understandings and ways of giving back. One of the alternative understandings of how to give back to India was to do it through setting good examples for their employees and for fellow Indians. This could among others be to exemplify how to be or become a successful entrepreneur, how to be mindful about the environment and resources by using public transportation, recycling trash, using water sparingly and so forth. Some of the interviewees also mentioned that they felt that they were giving back by bringing knowledge, innovation, ideas, structure and exposure to India and that they with those skills were helping to create new jobs. A few had taken steps to implement their skills in helping to solve societal challenges, for example one had helped design and set up a traffic management system for the police in Bangalore. Others were passing on their knowledge through their work or as mentors in private associations. Yet, it seemed to be a minority of the return migrants who had taken concrete action to actively share the skillset that they had brought back to India.

One specific explanation of what giving back means dominated the variety of answers that I got, and it involved the – at least to me – surprising notion that giving back happens through consumption, more specifically consumption in terms of hiring staff and investing in real estate in India. In this light, giving back is thus to consume and keep the economic wheels in India turning. Tasneem tells me that she estimates that about 6000-7000 people are employed as maids, cooks, guards, gardeners and other functions in the gated community where she lives with her family, and although not all residents of the compound are return migrants, Tasneem guesses that about 40% of the inhabitants are¹⁶. A considerable number of staff employed in that gated community thus work for return migrants. Tasneem says that she can connect the dots to see that she and her family gives back to India by hiring people – who will then have more spending power because of their earnings – and by investing in property thus also bringing money into the Indian society. Based on these examples one could thus say that giving back primarily starts at home for the return migrants – at least for now. Several of my informants expressed the desire to get more involved in charity work or perhaps starting up an NGO, but they simultaneously said that this would demand more time than they currently had on their hands, and therefore they wanted to postpone such engagement until a moment where their family was more comfortably and stably settled in India. Currently, they felt like all their time and effort was spent running a household in India. In this connection, a time perspective may be relevant. The return migrants expressing these wishes have been back between three and eight years, and one could wonder whether a longer settlement in India would generate more time and energy for NGO and charity work? It is indeed telling that the two return migrants I have interviewed who have been back for more than 20 years are both very involved in charities and in NGO work.

In her book about IT professionals in Bangalore, the sociologist Smitha Radhakrishnan notes the changes in notions of giving back and serving the nation and writes: “In the earlier Nehruvian model of Indian nation building, the “old” middle class was made up of government workers who served the nation by working for it. In a globalized model of the Indian nation, the middle class engages in a global economy of work and consumption, serving the nation by, ironically enough, directing itself away from it” (Radhakrishnan 2011:42). What Radhakrishnan calls the global economy of work and consumption has influenced some changes in the mindset of the Indian middle-class, the class to

¹⁶ According to the informants who are living there, this particular gated community consists of app. 160 houses and 200 apartments.

which the return migrants associate themselves. These changes are so notable that scholars have started arguing for the formation of a “new” Indian middle class – or classes – of which IT professionals play a significant role (Fernandes 2006; Upadhy 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Several scholars have associated the “new” Indian middle classes with significant changes with regards to consumption, for example that where capitalism was previously identified with lack of patriotism, now members of the “new” Indian middle classes display a culture of consumption and they consider themselves as motors of the current national revitalization, both in terms of economy and moral values (cf. Fernandes 2006). Brosius quotes the anthropologist William Mazzarella who is defining this as a shift of concepts from ‘the duty of progress’ to ‘progress through the pleasure of consumption’ (Brosius 2010:11).

In terms of the return migrants in Bangalore, I conclude that they are consuming not only things (housing in gated communities) and people (hired help) but in doing so they are also consuming feelings of safety to counter the uncertainties of return to India and fulfilment in meeting the expectations to give back. I thus propose that the rhetoric of being “Back to Serve” can now translate in or double as to being “Back to Consume”.

However, in situations when consumption cannot fully help to counter the uncertainties of return to India, it may instead be the very future in India that becomes uncertain. Wamika and Nitin are currently wondering about whether to re-migrate to the US. As Wamika says, “unless you appreciate India for what it is – the hustle and bustle – then I would not recommend others to move back,” and she goes on, “we made an emotional decision [both their fathers’ were ill] - but we have faced so many challenges and put-downs here that being close to our families are not enough [to outweigh that]”. Their fathers’ are now doing better and Nitin and Wamika somewhat regret their emotional decision to come back. Wamika also believes that their two children will have a better future in the US because in her mind their chances of getting a good education are higher there. “I cannot earn enough to put my kids through a good education if I earn in rupees. The dollar gets you so much further.” Wamika and Nitin feel torn between staying back in India where their elderly parents reside and going to the US with their children, but as Wamika reasons, “we don’t want to be the parents settled in another continent like our own parents have been. So we [Nitin and Wamika] are also going back to the US... In my heart I hope that we will be back there in 5 years or less”¹⁷.

¹⁷ Personal conversations on December 4, 2011; January 11, February 2, and May 13, 2012.

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