

# Teaching Indian Culture as Organizational Subalterns' Means of Resistance

(Jasmin Mahadevan)

## Abstract

From postcolonial perspective, management and organizational knowledge (MOK) is seen as being dominated by western thought. Postcolonial theory focuses on the deconstruction of imbalances of power and knowledge between colonizers and colonized by those ruled. Yet it is subject to debate whether not only local elites but also marginalized actors, so called subalterns, can challenge dominant discourse. Referring to organizational fieldwork in an Indo-German high-tech corporation, this paper argues firstly that highly qualified employees at offshore sites can be organizational subalterns *and* modern local elites at the same time. Secondly, it is argued that they possess the ability to perform multiple cultural discourses of resistance in hybrid third spaces. Thirdly, it is shown that the reification of traditional national culture can be such a subaltern strategy of subversion. For MOK, this means that local cultures are neither a proof for local traditionalism nor for factual culture. Rather, they prove the agency of modern organizational subalterns who use traditional national culture as counter-resource.

## Key words

Postcolonialism, Subaltern, Knowledge-Transfer, Culture, Agency, Power, India, Germany, Engineering, Offshoring

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### **Positioning**

The transfer of management and organizational knowledge (MOK) has received widespread attention in management and organization studies (e.g. Adler, 2002; Alvarez, 1998; Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1998; Bartlett, Ghoshal and Birkinshaw, 2004; Mir and Mir, 2009; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). Postcolonial theory focuses on the 'view back' on dominant discourses (e.g. McLeod, 2000; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2009<sup>3</sup>). It stresses the plurality of discourses that emerge when one system (e.g. a western one) is applied to another (e.g. an eastern one) in an asymmetrical relationship of power and looks back at the rulers from the perspective of those ruled (Chaturvedi, 2000). Postcolonial thought wants to deconstruct dominant discourses, e.g. the discourse of the 'East' as seen through the eyes of the 'West' (based on Said, 1978) and as such is related to postmodernist deconstruction of dominant discourse (Alvesson and Deetz, 2006).

Numerous works have been published on history, fields and key concepts of postcolonial thought (Gandhi, 1998; Goldberg and Quayson, 2002; Lewis and Mills, 2003; Loomba, 1998; McLeod, 2007; Mongia, 1996; Prasad, 2003; Williams and Chrisman, 1994; Young, 2001). Postcolonial theory has come to question transfer of MOK (Banerjee and Prasad, 2008). Applying this thought to specific contexts, Gopal, Willis and Gopal (2003) have shown that today's multinational companies that offshore knowledge but still try to maintain control can be viewed as a quasi-colonial system. The specific postcolonial foundations of this article are:

As Foucault (Foucault and Gordon, 1980) has argued, power and inequalities of power are fundamentally based on knowledge; they are performed discursively. I view discourses as "systems of thought that are contingent upon and inform material practices (...) practically through particular power techniques" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2006: 266). Those ruled then have agency (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1991), i.e. interpretative power, to either change, subvert or stabilize the system. Therefore, being colonized, i.e. ruled through foreign systems of power, can be conceptualized as an "enabling concept" (based on Chaturvedi, 2000). MOK can be reinterpreted through the Foucauldian lens (Barratt, 2008). Providing an ethnographic example, Garsten (2004) has shown that knowledge transfer to offshore sites at Apple Corporation bears indeed the post-colonial opportunity for offshore-site employees to subvert the system.

Secondly, viewed through Ricoeur (1992), the construction of the colonized 'Other' as opposite category is identity-work of the collective self and constructs the colonizing 'We'. Inside (emic) and outside (etic) perspectives on these categories will always differ (ibid.). In the process of identity-work, culture has to be negotiated and re-negotiated. As the organizational examples given by Barinaga (2007), Cohen and El-Sawad (2007), and Ybema and Byun (2009) show, national culture can indeed be a discursive resource of such a kind. Dichotomies in MOK can be deconstructed through this view.

Thirdly, according to Bhabha (1994), knowledge transfer from 'West' to 'East' results in what he calls "mimicry": Through learning dominant discourse, those ruled whom he calls "mimic men" familiarize themselves with the unknown and will eventually reach equal knowledge. The sense which they make out of dominant discourse will be their own. As Appadurai (1995) has shown through the example of the appropriation of English cricket by Indian elites, native elites that are – and have been – indeed "playing with modernity" (ibid.), give cultural symbols, rituals of artefacts a different meaning in the process and ultimately self-decolonize. Furthermore, Bhabha (1990) rejects simple colonizers / colonized dichotomies and conceptualizes the location of the encounter as a "third space" where "translation and negotiation" takes place (Bhabha 1990: 38). As Frenckel and Shenhav (2006) and Frenckel (2008) have argued, MOK and knowledge transfer in multi-national cooperation can be reinterpreted as a Bhabhaian third space populated by local managers with hybrid identities who can choose between multiple cultural strategies.

Fourthly, it has to be considered whether even marginalized actors, so called subalterns, have agency and voice (Spivak, 1988). Subaltern, meaning 'being of inferior rank' is a term based on Gramsci (1971). Bhabha (1994: 59) defines subalterns as being

“subjected to the influence or hegemony of another social group, not possessing one’s own hegemonic position”. The task to give subalterns a voice and to rewrite dominant discourse has been predominantly undertaken by Spivak (1999), Chakrabarty (2000) and Guha (2002). Subalternity is not limited to ethnicity but can also encompass gender, age or any other category that is voiceless in theory and practice (Beverley, 1999). MOK, too, has excluded certain topics and actors, such as slavery and those enslaved (Cooke, 2003).

By now, scholars of management and organizations have documented the lives of the organizational subalterns, such as waitresses (Paules, 1991), low-wage workers (Ehrenreich, 2001), Filipina maids in Hong Kong (Constable, 1997), domestic servants in Apartheid South Africa (Cock, 1989) and Arab workers in Israel (Drori, 2000). These occupations are bound together by their low-skilled and low-wage character and their absolute difference to the ruling class; from a Bhabhaian perspective they are therefore a rather reified construction of the marginalized other. Based on Spivak’s (1988) critique, academics who conduct research on them might only speak *for* subalterns but not let them speak themselves, which from subaltern perspective would be another manifestation of dominant discourse.

This paper argues that concepts of organizational subalternity need to take local hybridity and multiple cultural discourses into account. Therefore, in quasi-colonial organizational systems of knowledge-transfer, local elites might be organizational subalterns. Viewed from this perspective, Foucauldian views on power, Bhabhian perspectives on local elites and third space hybridity, and concepts of subalternity do not contradict each other but rather supplement each other in providing a fuller understanding of how headquarter strategy is interpreted locally in contexts of knowledge-transfer.

Culture is often viewed as a root metaphor for understanding organizational discourse (overview in Smircich, 1983; details in Flores-Pereira, Davel and Cavedon, 2006; critical and postmodern perspective in Alvesson and Deetz, 2006). Often, national culture is conceptualized as a ‘given’ (Primecz, Romani and Sackmann, 2009), especially so for so called traditional fields. For example, with regard to transfer of MOK, failure to implement headquarter strategy at offshore sites is often explained with traditionalist culture of local managers or employees who simply does not understand better (Frenckel, 2008). This view on those ruled as being inferior and fully limited by local culture is a classic neo-colonial topos (Said, 1993; Banerjee and Linstead, 2004). This view often results in calls to “take up the white man’s burden” (Kipling, 1899), i.e. to bring modernity to the unenlightened through the colonial project (Cooke, 2004). In contrast to this essentialist view on local modernity, this paper argues that organizational subalterns – who at the same time might be elites of local modernity – have strategic power over cultural discourses available. Ultimately, this means that they might even utilize the reified discourse on local culture to regain voice.

The organizational field to which the above mentioned perspective is to be applied, is the Indian offshore site of the German company ChipTech. The purpose of this article is to acknowledge from a postcolonial perspective that culture is not a ‘given’ but a discursive resource for organizational subalterns. In this sense, reification of local culture might neither be an essentialist construction by western theories of MOK nor a factual given but rather a counter-strategy of resistance used by marginalized actors to regain voice. This means: Through constructing what postcolonial studies intend to deconstruct, subalterns construct their own agency. This is relevant MOK from the East and/or South; theories of MOK should take it into account.

This article is structured as the following: In the previous section, I have discussed postcolonial theory and subaltern studies. Next, I present the field of a ChipTech India and its highly qualified Indian employees who are dominated by German headquarter. The field’s relationship with the ethnographic researcher will be made clear as well. Then, I elaborate upon how these highly qualified Indian employees view themselves as representatives of local modernity and are constructed as modern elites by local public discourse. I will furthermore show that they are well aware of their organizational dependency and choose their organizational counterstrategies accordingly. Next, I present episodes from the field, showing that these highly qualified Indian employees teach traditional Indian culture when in interaction with their German colleagues.

It is my argument that these local organizational actors who possess hybrid identities use culture strategically. If they are faced with organizational subalternity and have no means of organizational resistance, they utilize discourses outside the organization, in this case a reified discourse of Indian national culture, to claim cultural superiority, thereby overcoming organizational subalternity and regaining voice. I defend the idea that the reification of traditional national culture is a counterstrategy of resistance employed by organizational subalterns. I propose MOK and transfer of MOK be reread under this aspect.

## ***Ethnographic fieldwork***

### *Details to the field*

During time of ethnographic fieldwork (2004 to 2006), ChipTech had approximately 8,000 employees in Germany and 35,000 worldwide. The main field of study is an internal Research & Development (R&D) unit of ChipTech, to be called Unit in this article. In 2005, Unit consisted of approximately 450 members at the German central headquarter (approximately 250 members), a site in France (approximately 60 members) and a new site in India (approximately 140 members at peak). The German site will be called "Big-City" in this paper. The location of the Indian site, Bangalore, can be safely revealed as there are not many alternative locations.

Unit was further divided into several departments (led by department managers). Departments were sub-divided into groups (led by group managers). In summary, the managerial levels as Unit were (top-down): Unit management (at the German site), site management (at the French and Indian site), department management and group management. Technical experts were further classified into project-leader and plain engineer.

The task for all three sites was to develop a complex and interdependent technological system that was to be used by internal customers all over the globe for improvement of microchip design. Viewed from a social science perspective, Unit employees can be classified as highly-skilled community of practice (based on Bourdieu, 1977) that focuses on mastering technology in a distributed system.

During time of research, the Indian site was in its formation phase. First members had been employed in 2002 and had been sent to initial training to the German site. Indian managers who had previously been working in the U.S.A. or for US-American companies were chosen as site managers. When research started in 2004, the Indian site consisted of approximately 85 Indian software and hardware engineers. The aim was to hire up to 140 engineers at the Indian site. This was accomplished at the end of 2005.

Most Unit employees in India were between 25 and 35 years of age, compared to a median age of about 45 at the German site. Managers were the only ones in their late-30s and mid-40s. About one fifth of the Indian employees were women, compared to nine percent at the German site. One out of six Indian managers was female, compared to only male managers at the German site. Compared to their German counterparts, Indian engineers were thus younger with a higher percentage of female engineers and managers. However, the role of female Indian employees is not the focus of this article; therefore, this aspect is not to be dealt with any further (for details on Indian women engineers, see Mukhopadhyay, 1994; Parikh and Sukhatme, 2004).

The ramp-up of the Indian site was a top-management demand on Unit management in Germany and France (who can be classified middle management). At the German and at the French site, Unit was not allowed to employ more employees; the only chance was to employ them in India.

How to organize and structure employment and knowledge-transfer to India was left to Unit (i.e. middle) management. In that sense, ChipTech practice followed Jackall's (1988) assessment that top management very often leaves implementation and specification of strategy to middle management who then have to navigate the risks of change. Consecutively, the unit manager left this decision to his department managers, and department managers left the decision to their group managers, the lowest level of

management. In the end, all groups chose to further sub-divide work-packages which lead to further structural differentiation into 'global' and 'Indian site' positions. Yet, from postcolonial perspective, two issues remained:

Firstly, despite delegation of work-packages, management responsibility was not delegated: The now *global* group leader was located at the German site with an Indian group manager as subordinate at the Indian site. Likewise, the now *global* project-leader was located at the German site, with an Indian project-leader as subordinate at the Indian site. It is important to note that line management responsibility for global groups was exclusively located at the German site, with the now *global* department managers. In India, even though department head positions were created, they did not have line management responsibility. Likewise, the Indian site manager did not have line management responsibility which remained with the global unit manager in Germany. Ownership on technical projects and on specific technologies remained at the German / French site as well. Ownership can be understood as an engineer's organizationally institutionalized technical expertise. As Metiu (2006) has stated, it is of paramount importance in distributed engineering groups that separate ownership exists in order to mediate headquarter fear brought about by knowledge-transfer to the offshoring site. On the other hand, a lack of ownership at the offshoring site might result in underperformance due to lack of context knowledge and related learning (ibid.)

This means that the whole Indian organization was dependent on the German organization both from managerial and technological perspective. This is a classic postcolonial scenario of knowledge transfer and dependency at the offshore site which in itself might bear the possibility for subversion.

In summary, forced organizational change from above led to the creation of an organization in India that was fully dependent on the German site. From German perspective, knowledge-transfer was forced but essential for accomplishing Unit objectives. The main reason was the restriction to further employment in Germany or France. From the perspective of Unit management at the German site, the main challenge during time of research was to manage organizational growth and change, especially at the new offshore site, yet at the same time maintain technological excellence and deliver in time. From the perspective of technical experts at the German site, the main challenge was to manage change within the technical system and transfer knowledge to new engineers while at the same time maintaining technological excellence.

### *Field-researcher relationship*

Ethnographic fieldwork based on the principles of interpretative anthropology (Van Maanen, 1998) was conducted mainly at the German site (18 months), with additional time spent at the Indian site (six weeks in May / June 2005). A longer period at the Indian site was intended but higher management at the German site feared that such a research visit might harm productivity of the Indian employees.

As the main method of interpretative anthropology, long-term participant observation, is holistic and deductive, researcher and 'data' can never be separated (Van Maanen, 2006). Hypotheses are deducted from the field and not vice versa (Van Maanen, Soerensen and Mitchell, 2007). Data collection and analysis go hand in hand; they have to be discussed with the field, and lead to deeper interpretation and focus (e.g. Weick, 1989; 1995; Whetten, 1989). To make this process visible, this section focuses on critical stages of ethnographic research such as: getting in; interaction; establishing role; data collection, interpretation and writing; and getting out.

In 2002, I developed the idea to study 'intercultural cooperation' in a company – favourably Indo-German cooperation. Through a friend's recommendation, I gained access to a ChipTech middle manager. After a first proposal via e-mail, I was invited for a first meeting. From October 2003 until April 2004, I negotiated access. I was granted a two-year full-time research contract by the company. Full-time research lasted from October 2004 until October 2006, mainly at the German site. Therefore, it is likely that I was seen as an outsider by the Indian site. During research, I was careful to contradict this impression.

Interaction with Indian employees took place during the following occasions: Firstly, all new employees of the Indian site were sent to Germany for approximately three months of initial training. Secondly, Indian managers visited the German site frequently. Thirdly, within projects, weekly telephone conferences took place. Fourthly, I visited the Indian site for six weeks in May and June 2005.

In establishing researcher identity, I could benefit from a personal resource, i.e. my own perceived dual or hybrid identity as an Indo-German researcher. From a theoretical perspective, I had to reflect upon the fact that cultural boundaries between researcher and field were blurred. Hence, I was careful not to construct neo-colonial otherness of the field only to pursue the interests of my own discipline (Palriwala, 2005).

My role, as shaped by the field, became one of "someone who knows about India / Germany". As demanded for in every action research (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; McNiff and Whitehead, 2000), I was careful to reflect upon myself.

After approximately three months, I had become well known at the German site. At the Indian site, my name was known through those Indian employees who had visited the German site. Furthermore, I had established first contacts to about 35 employees who had visited the German site. Interaction continued via e-mail and phone. Those who knew me would by now often approach me to tell new stories, send me e-mails with information on what they considered to be 'culture' or phone me with questions. I interpreted this behavior as a proof of trust (Bate, 1997).

After a four months, I had identified key actors in cross-site work who were then formally recognized by management. The strategy to mirror back first results and therefore to influence the field was a conscious strategy from my part. Its purpose was to convince organizational gatekeepers of the usefulness of the research project and to establish myself firmly in the organization. While doing so, I took care to follow ethical guidelines of anthropological research (e.g. Bate, 1997). Having established a cross-site forum, I then started focus group sessions with key actors at the German site. Actors from other sites were integrated in person when present or via net-meeting and included in e-mail distribution. For me, these focus group sessions were another opportunity for interaction, analysis, and interpretation.

During research, I treated the German and the Indian site as conjoint fields, as it is common in multi-sited ethnography (e.g. Hine, 2007). Therefore, the actual ethnographic period for the Indian site was longer than the mere six weeks of presence there might suggest. Prior to visiting the Indian site for six weeks, I had talked to all Indian managers and project-leaders at the German site. At the Indian site, I was introduced by the site manager during a staff meeting. It was announced that I would "talk to people about working together with the German site". Over the period of six weeks, I conducted interviews with employees, most of whom already knew me. Topics focused on organizational roles and responsibilities and engineering. Besides that, I had the opportunity to observe organizational life at ChipTech India and interact informally. As members of my father's extended family live in Bangalore, I furthermore had immediate access to daily life.

Most conversations and interactions at all sites were informal and therefore not recorded. They were written down as memory protocols several times a day or in the evenings at the latest. Throughout the fieldwork, I kept a field diary that was reread and commented in weekly intervals. During meetings, too, I usually kept my notes to a minimum to not influence interaction. Once a week, I typed the handwritten notes of the field diary into a word document, ordered according to topics and supplemented with additional e-mails, corporate information, screenshots and photographs. Every month, I printed the typed word document. At the end of two years of fieldwork, I had compiled 24 field books, each of them consisting of 200-350 pages. Following the reflexive turn (based on Clifford and Marcus, 1986), I mirrored my interpretations back to the field which led to yet another interpretative cycle. Full-time ethnographic research ended in October 2006. Thereafter, I no longer had access to the company.

## **Postcolonial perspectives on the field**

### *Public discourse*

The view ChipTech employees in India have on themselves and others can only be understood when seen in context. The Times of India (ToI), Bangalore edition, April, 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005 to Sunday, June, 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005, provides ample examples for public discourse on what ToI calls "IT-capital Bangalore", IT being the abbreviation for "Information Technology".

The Bangalore edition of the Times of India is one of the five "Metro" editions of this newspaper (Bangalore, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai). Not only the cities themselves but also their inhabitants and their lifestyle are being called "metros". Individuals are categorized into the multi-local category "metro", e.g. through phrases such as "says metro xy" – without any further explanation on *which* city this Metro actually lives in (ToI, April, 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 15). It is assumed that metros are "techies" as well, i.e. individuals who are employed in computer-related jobs. Both terms are used as synonyms (ToI, April 17<sup>th</sup>, - ToI, June, 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005).

According to ToI, Bangalore metros / techies originate from all over India, English being their lingua franca on the job (ToI, May, 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005: 12). On the one hand, ToI portrays them as a hard-working and very much sought after corporate elite (e.g. ToI, May, 19<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 1). On the other hand techies / metros are described as style-conscious juppies (ToI, May, 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 1) who like to party (ToI, May, 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 3) and to spend money (ToI, May, 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 1), for example on bungee-jumping in the city (ToI, May, 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005: 12). Advertisements, too, focus on both aspects of metro / techie life (ToI, April, 17<sup>th</sup>, - ToI, June, 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005).

Out of 30 to 40 pages, the ToI dedicates eight to ten pages to job opportunities alone. Very often, these advertisements are combined with the invitation to a 'walk-in interview'. During such an event, companies advertise themselves in a hotel suite; applicants walk-in without an appointment. According to ToI, sometimes more than 1000 applicants are being channeled through such an event on a single day (ToI, May, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005: 3).

Twice weekly, the special interest pages of "Times Property" and "Education Times" are included. "Times Property" promotes apartments that are being build everywhere in the vicinity of the city's technological centres (ToI, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 12). The newspaper concludes: "It's raining money in real estate" (ToI, May, 9<sup>th</sup>: 13). The "Education Times" focuses on how to get into IT. According to ToI (ToI, Education Times, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 4) "it's easier to get into Oxford than into the IITs [Indian Institutes of Technology, *the author*]". According to ToI, an increasing amount of rejected applicants commits suicide (ToI, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 7).

Even after having completed a degree, these so called "freshers" have to fight hard for securing a job in Bangalore (ToI, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 4). According to ToI, this pressure has consequences (ToI, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 1): "IT lifestyles are causing young techies to show premature signs of ageing". ToI summarizes (ToI, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 1):

„Bangalore may not be the right place for youngsters who didn't get picked up during campus recruitments. It is much tougher for them here than in cities like Pune, Chennai or Hyderabad.”

Bangalore is portrayed as a changing environment. ToI (May, 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 2) comments: "This is not a debate that is going to go away. The question is not whether we need to change but what we need to change to?" Regarding negative aspects of change, ToI focuses on traffic-jams (see e.g. May, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005: 2; May, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005: 1, 3; May, 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 1; May, 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 3; May, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 1); environmental pollution (see e.g. May, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005: 2) and crime (see e.g. ToI, May, 1<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 1; May, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005: 1, 3; May, 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 3).

As the root cause for all change the so called "IT-boom" is given. Due to IT, for example, population density had increased from 2,408 per square kilometers in 1991 to 10,710 per square kilometers in 2005 (ToI, May, 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005: 2). To put this data into personal perspective: My father's eldest brother's family lives in a four room house in the city district of Domlur. In 1991, Domlur was located at the outskirts of pleasant, lush, green Bangalore, the military then being the sole major employer. In 2005, it took at least 45 minutes by car through newly-build city districts to reach the municipal border from there.

Without IT, so the essence of public discourse and personal experience, Bangalore would not be what it is today, techies / metros just being the personification of this change. As the previous quote from Tol shows, the positive outcome of this IT-project is assumed to be still unclear.

### *Hybrid middle-men*

Regarding their background, Indian employees can be categorized into two groups: Firstly, those who have never worked outside India and secondly, those who used to work in the U.S.A., earned themselves U.S. citizenship and "NRI-status", i.e. "non-residential Indian status", overseas and went back to India afterwards. NRIs could only be found on management level, mainly senior management (above group level). All but two out of ten male managers had gone to the U.S.A. for a Master's degree after having completed their Bachelor's degree in India, and had come back to India with NRI-status. On average, group managers and engineers were 10 to 15 years younger than senior management.

This means that the younger generation started their work-life under different labour market conditions. Prior to market liberalization in 1991, highly-qualified Indians had to leave the country for job opportunities. Since 1991, the possibility of foreign direct investment in India has created ample job opportunities within the country. A senior manager, himself an NRI, said during an interview:

"Suddenly, there are job opportunities in India itself for the first time. People do not have to leave the country anymore: The big companies and the jobs are right in front of their doorsteps. Even without having been to the U.S., you might become someone."

Another senior manager, also an NRI, said during lunch:

"In India today, we have the first generation of engineers who remain within the country. I was ahead of them because I had the luxury that my father himself was already a civil engineer. At those times, the best students from the best universities go to the U.S. I was 48<sup>th</sup> at state level, thus I went to the U.S. [with a scholarship, *the author*].

But nowadays, that starts to change: the opportunity is in India. If I look at my former colleagues who stayed in India, what they have achieved when I was gone: It is incredible. India today is great at [high-tech work, *the author*] – who would have ever thought of that ten years ago?"

In India, returners are much sought after, which might be exactly the reason for them to come back. As the head of Human Resources at ChipTech India told me during a formal interview:

"If you come back to India with US-experience, companies will pay you whatever it takes. At ChipTech, we pay NRIs double, and this is not unusual in the industry. Especially foreign companies in India specifically ask for managers with U.S.-experience. It is assumed that an NRI will overcome the difference between headquarter management and Indian employees."

As this quote shows, NRIs have come to symbolize the new Indian manager who can bridge 'Western' headquarter and 'Indian' site requirements and who will be paid double for this ability to translate strategy made by foreign management to Indian employees.

The Indian site manager of ChipTech, aged 45, can serve as an example for this new class of hybrid and translating middle-men and their living style. He had done his Master's degree in the U.S.A., gotten married to an Indian and had worked in the U.S.A. for twenty years. For site management at ChipTech, he came back to India in November 2004. Now, he

lives with his wife and two sons in Palm Meadows, a gated community in Bangalore that has been built specifically for local top management NRIs and foreign expatriates.

In 2005, the rent for an average house in Palm Meadows amounted to 60,000 – 90,000 Indian Rupees. Indian group managers, project-leaders and engineers could not afford this rent; all of them lived in one of the new apartment buildings that are featured in the “Property Times”; the most hip district among the young engineers at this time was Koramangala. Yet, all senior ChipTech managers lived in Palm Meadows. The ChipTech guesthouse for high level visitors from other sites was located there, too. The cook there earned 4,000 Rupees per month. The alternative guesthouse for lower level visitors was located in a flat in an apartment building near the ChipTech office.

Despite the clear hierarchy even among the new elite, all these living estates can be considered far above average living conditions in Bangalore. To give some comparisons: The office entry clerk lived in a one-room house near the airport. The company driver who was assigned to me lived in a three-room flat with two other colleagues.

Palm Meadows with its approximately 400 houses is separated from the rest of Bangalore through a concrete wall of three meters height topped with barbed wire. Lush green trees block the view on the wall from the inside. To enter Palm Meadows, the visitor has to stop at the entry gate where an Indian guard wearing a uniform asks for the purpose of visit. Only if a satisfied answer is provided, one is allowed to pass. Inhabitant’s cars are recognized by the guard and waved through.

As soon as the visitor has passed a gate, they might feel transferred to suburban California: White mansions with lush green front gardens; huge SUVs parked in front of them; roller-skating kids wearing Tommy Hilfiger; middle-aged women walking golden retrievers. Even the streets are different here: broad, well-maintained, without any litter, lined with palm trees of the exact same height and width and pedestrian side-walks on either side. There is an eerie notion to all this perfection. As one German ChipTech employee commented: “The stems of these palm trees look as if they had been tongue-polished by Nepalese eunuchs.”

Palm Meadows features an evening club for gentlemen and various tea-time events for ladies, a spa, a gym, tennis courts and a swimming pool. It has a supermarket of its own. Here, visitors tend to forget that they are in India. Or, as ChipTech employees from the German headquarter used to say when they intended to leave the compound: “Let’s go to India again”. The Indian site manager says:

“Personally, I would not have minded to live in Bangalore itself. But for my sons, it would have been difficult. They are American. It is hard enough for them to get accustomed (...), so I tried to make it as easy as possible for them.”

For hybrid middle-men, Palm Meadows serves as an environment in-between that is not considered to be part of Bangalore or India by its inhabitants.

### *Organizational subalternity*

The following quotes can serve as examples of how Bangalore employees construct themselves and their collective Other at the German site. As an engineer told me over coffee:

„The pressure in India is enormous: Everybody wants to get into a good engineering school, and when you are in it, everybody talks about the good high-tech-companies, and when you have found a job, everybody expects you to rise up the ladder. (...) And they are not used to work globally.”

As these statements show, Bangalore employees construct themselves as having a superior attitude due to higher motivation. It can be also seen that their motivation is not self-chosen: They perceive themselves as under pressure to rise up the ladder against

competition. Yet, how do they view Big-City? A common saying in Bangalore was: “The German industry is not cutting-edge anymore.” An engineer told me over lunch:

“Most of us here in Bangalore, we were with American companies, there you have a very competitive spirit (...). What I see in Big-City is: They are not beating the bar anymore, it is 100 percent cooperation. They look backwards at the good old days, and Big-City-people refer to them mainly in nostalgia.”

Despite this self-categorization as more competitive and internationally-oriented than their German counterparts, Bangalore employees have to make sense out of the fact that they are dominated by Big-City knowledge. An Indian manager says:

“They [the German headquarter, *the author*] only give us the basic, boring stuff. They don't want to lose their [technological, *the author*] ownership.”

Herewith, managers acknowledge a common dilemma of high-tech-Bangalore: On the one hand, there are job opportunities and qualified employees; on the other hand, most foreign companies transfer standard work to India. Therefore, working for ChipTech India is a mixed achievement: On the one hand, it means to have become part of the new metro / techie elite. Yet, on the other hand, it means to be regarded as one of its low-level members when compared to opportunities outside India and returning NRIs.

Knowledge transfer from the German site was forced upon TU by higher management. Therefore, a common saying at ChipTech in Germany during this time was: “First, I train the Indians; then I lose my job.” This fear of training one's new successor was expressed by a representative of the workers' councils during an all-hands meeting in Big-City as the following: “If you look around the campus, you have the impression that we have become a training camp for Asian employees.” Another common saying in Big-City was: “First, we train the Indians, and then they quit.” The Bangalore perspective on this was as the following (to quote a group manager):

“[In Germany, companies like] ChipTech [are] already on a saturation level, so not rewarding people would create no burn. People would not leave – in India they will. I also observed when I was in Germany in 2003 that the country was just recovering from recession (...). I assume, Big-City-people won't find another job even if they want to quit because the company treats them badly. In India, a company cannot afford to treat engineers badly.”

When combined, the previous statements can be interpreted as references to a classic postcolonial scenario: The fear of losing power through transfer of knowledge. Besides that, the power of those colonized is acknowledged, too: Due to ample job opportunities in Bangalore, they have the power to quit. Indeed, according to ChipTech HR data, 12 percent did so in 2005, which HR deemed to be average for IT-Bangalore.

Yet, what happens if the Indian employee stays? The statement of an Indian engineer, aged 28, having worked at ChipTech for 18 months, can serve as an example. During an interview, he reflected upon a failure in the current project:

“See, if they do not transfer knowledge, there is nothing I can do [to prevent such a mistake to happen, *the author*]. Big-City people have to *enable* me – if I do not have this background information, I cannot think into the right direction.”

Back in Big-City, I asked the German global project-leader (GPL, aged 53, with 21 years of corporate history, some questions about the project. He told me: “First, he [the Indian engineer, *the author*] has to prove himself; then, he will get more.” The Indian engineer had said about the demands of his GPL:

“Whatever I do, it will be wrong. If I merely implement his specification, I will be a stupid computer-wallah who does not think on his own. If I try to improve his specification, I will be a pushy know-it-all who endangers Big-City-people.”

Two phrases are of importance here: Firstly, in Indian English, a wallah is a person who does something with something, mostly low-skilled labour, for example washing clothes (dhobi-wallah), delivering food (dabba-wallah) et cetera. A computer-wallah is thus a self-degrading term for a highly-qualified computer engineer. It was used at the Indian site whenever engineers referred to inequalities of ownership in technical work. I interpreted the usage of this term as an attempt to integrate the perceived difference between collective self-categorization from the inside (emic view) and collective categorization from outside (etic view).

Secondly, from technological perspective, implementation follows specification; yet, very often it is only during implementation that flaws in the specification, i.e. the description of how to implement, are found. To find flaws, is an essential part of R&D engineering work (Mahadevan, 2009). Therefore, the specification – implementation process in R&D always requires a feedback-loop, and it is commonly understood that that the specification – implementation relationship can never be one-way even though it is formally planned as such. This means: If the German engineer does not grant the Indian engineer this right to feedback, the Indian engineer can never prove himself technically. Rather, he will be reduced to a mere executer (‘computer-wallah’) who cannot be perceived as an equally qualified R&D engineer who rethinks the specification.

Most Bangalore employees seemed to be well aware of the fear and resistance that they might create. During my stay in Bangalore, I was asked by virtually every employee: “So, how big is the fear in Big-City?” Yet, which strategy do they choose based on this interpretation? During an interview, an Indian group manager reflected upon the last year of working together with Big-City as the following:

“For eight months, we were doing pretty basic stuff, even though we could have done more, just to not make them [the German site, *the author*] afraid of us.”

Another group manager who followed the same strategy told me of the consequences over lunch: “Basically, I had a riot on my hands, because my engineers wanted more.” Even the Indian site manager, who should have ‘full site-ownership’, told me during a one-to-one meeting:

“You have to be careful with Big-City. As long as we are dependent on them, we cannot win. To get ownership, we have to appease them first. Yet at the same time I have to think about my people: What happens in times of crisis? Those who don’t have ownership don’t have expertise. Those who don’t have expertise are replaceable. Those who are replaceable will be laid-off first.”

In summary, all Bangalore employees whom I talked to described similar situations of holding back despite being able to do more. What could be the reason? As the previous statement shows, the German site had the power to withhold knowledge, herewith impacting the Indian site’s ability to perform well. The Indian site had to find ownership, i.e. build up knowledge / technical expertise, to gain organizational power / ownership, yet could not pressure the German site for more. This means: Despite being a local elite Bangalore high-tech employees are organizational subalterns who depend on the German site for knowledge. Therefore, they are silenced in organizational discourse. Even senior management with NRI-status acknowledges this.

### ***Teaching Indian culture as means of resistance***

As it is common in ethnographic research, theory was deducted from the field and not vice versa. Therefore, this article is the reversed representation of the actual research process.

This means that during research this chapter actually was the starting point for deduction but in this article serves to provide examples for the theoretical framework and perspective which has been presented on the following pages.

When I arrived at the Indian site in May 2005, the standard question asked by everyone during informal contact was “first time in India?” I then made the – in retrospect – mistake to answer with “No” and then talk about my own childhood in India. Frankly, due to the fact that I bear an Indian name, I was surprised to even be asked this question, as from my perspective, it should have been pretty obvious that I am no newcomer to India.

As it turned out, my “No” silenced the communication in almost every case. Only a few interaction partners would then ask: “First time in Bangalore?” I would then answer: “No, my father’s eldest brother’s family lives in Bangalore”, and continue with stories of previous visits. My understanding was that this would enable me to get into the field. Yet, again, communication ended. During lunch, some interaction partners might then continue to ask: “First time you eat Indian food?” I would then answer: “No” and try to talk about Indian cuisine. Again, I only managed to silence the communication.

To me, this seemed absurd. Nevertheless, as it was my ethnographic duty, I sometimes answered “Yes, first time” to uncover hidden rules. In these cases, I was then surprised how easy further communication seemed to flow: My interaction partners now explained Indian history, religion, culture and cuisine to me, and from there communication just went on. I wondered: How and why can it be important that I construct myself as knowing nothing about India at all in order to link socially?

Further observation confirmed: For all first-time visitors from the French and German site, the same rule applied: “First time in India?” was the standard first question. After the expected “Yes”, Bangalore employees would then talk about what I would like to call ‘Indian culture’. Standard topics were: Religion, history, cuisine and historic / religious sites to be visited in the vicinity.

Furthermore, there seemed to be a common way of presenting these topics. Often, I heard sentences such as “Indian culture is the oldest in the world”, “Sanskrit is older than Latin”, “Hinduism is older than Christianity”, “Indian philosophy is older than European philosophy”, “Mathematics has developed in India”. To me, this seemed as if the Indian counterparts were comparing Indian culture to German culture to their own advantage: India, it seemed, was superior in all these aspects. Their German counterparts seemed indeed fascinated by ancient Indian culture and did not seem to mind being lectured on these aspects. When the topic came to ‘Indian culture’ as presented above, hierarchy at work seemed to be reversed.

I then remembered a powerpoint presentation that had been sent to me by an Indian group manager a few months ago and looked at it again. This group manager is perceived of being very accommodating at the German site. The presentation he had sent me was titled: “India, a glorious civilization” and had covered numerous Indian achievements.

I now decided to approach the manager at his desk. I said: “This presentation you sent to me about Indian culture: I want to learn more.” He invited me to sit down and said: “You know I am very interested in culture. I always like to explain Indian culture to foreigners.” We talk a little bit, then he says “I have to show you something”, and shows an Indian wedding card on his computer screen. The following dialogue takes place:

Manager: „The colour always has to be *haldi* [kurkuma, a spice of dark yellow colour, *the author*] because it is a very auspicious spice in India, used for ceremonies. (...) And this is, how the invitation looks like (...).”

Researcher: “Yes, I know, when I got married last year, I also sent this kind of invitation to my father’s brothers and sisters.”

Manager: “So you know about our customs?”

Researcher: "What do you expect? My father is Tamil Brahmin, coming from Trichy."

Manager: [*annoyed*]: "You should not claim to be Indian. Your perspective is 100 percent different."

Researcher: [*annoyed*]: "Then, maybe we should end our discussion."

Obviously, the researcher has violated an important culture rule again, having claimed to know about Indian culture. The manager has lost an opportunity to what I would like to call 'teach Indian culture'. As first contact rules have shown, this seems to be important.

Yet, I wondered, what is meant by 'different perspective'? Is it having German culture? Or is it being a representative from the German headquarter? Who is the respective other? Germans or Big-City people?

By now, I had started to pay close attention to episodes of 'teaching Indian culture'. When do they take place? What is their purpose? Judged by the silence and resistance that rule violation caused, they seem to be more than simple a small-talk rule. Yet, why exactly is it so important to teach Indian culture? Is tradition and Hinduism *really* that important at ChipTech India? This assumption is contradicted by the fact that Bangalore engineers and managers construct themselves as an uprising, modern elite that is more competitive and global than their German counterparts and that techies / metros are constructed as modern local elite by public discourse. Therefore, Bangalore employees might not even believe in the importance of Indian culture and history for they live their personal live differently and have a different place in Indian public discourse. It might be a mere play (based on Goffman, 1959) in organizational power games based on organizational role rather than personal belief.

I then noted that Indian employees would raise the topic of 'Indian culture as superior' not only in private conversations but also in project meetings and teleconferences I was allowed to attend. In one teleconference between a German global project-leader (GPL), an Indian project-leader (PL) and five Indian engineers, the German GPL stated after a long monologue:

German GPL: "I am completely dissatisfied with your group's work."

Indian PL: "Maybe next time, we should integrate puja into the project-plan."

German GPL: "What is puja?"

Indian PL: "You know, Indian culture is very old. Therefore, it is tradition to (...)",

Then, the Indian PL explained the Hindu ritual of prayer, called *puja*. After the teleconference, I asked the Indian PL: "What about *puja* in project-planning?" He looked at me and said, rather curtly: "What about it? Nothing. What does prayer have to do with engineering?" Therefore, it seemed very clear to me that the Indian PL did not really believe in the importance of puja in engineering but rather used this concept as a last means of resistance.

The more I observed interaction of such kind, the clearer it seemed to me that 'Indian culture' was used strategically by Indian employees as the only viable way of resistance during a conflict in project work (see example above). As seen in the example above, 'teaching Indian culture usually took place towards superiors.

Yet, not everyone followed this pattern. When asked about their work, those whom I did not observe to 'teach Indian culture' usually described their work as "I have a large ownership" or "I have sufficient ownership" or "I am in the loop". I interpreted this as a sufficient sense of agency and these Indian employees as 'enabled' in the postcolonial sense. As they had a voice in technological work and organizational structure, they did not need to resist through 'teaching Indian culture'.

## **Conclusion and outlook**

This article viewed the Indian offshoring site of the German high-tech company ChipTech from a postcolonial perspective. As has been shown, Indian employees at ChipTech India see themselves as local elites and are constructed as such by public discourse. This group is heterogeneous and divided by internal differences in power. Returning non-residential Indians are the status-highest sub-group and are viewed as hybrid middle-men between 'East' and 'West'.

Yet, despite their internal difference, all Indian employees share the fact that they struggle with organizational dependency. This dependency is firstly structural as the Indian organization is dependent on the German headquarter. Secondly, it is technological, as the Indian site implements what the German site specifies without being granted the required feedback-loop. Within this organizational context, these highly-qualified Indian techies, who have done everything that it takes to succeed in IT-Bangalore, are organizational subalterns no different from other marginalized groups.

The difference beyond the organization, however, is that they are elites in another social context (which low-skilled immigrants, low-wage labourers and other organizational subalterns are not). This gives them the resources to construct themselves as superior through discourses outside the organization, a means not available to the classic subaltern.

In the specific case of ChipTech, the highly-qualified organizational subalterns use a reified discourse of Indian national culture to lecture the German owners of power / knowledge, thereby reversing organizational hierarchy. This behavior has been called 'teaching Indian culture' in this article.

Through contextual analysis, it could be shown that these highly-qualified subalterns are no victims of 'traditional culture' but rather overemphasize Indian culture strategically: Even from their own perspective, the aspects of culture which they put forward have nothing to do with engineering. Furthermore, it seems that such a counterstrategy is only chosen when and as soon as there is no perceived organizational agency from the actor's perspective: Those who are enabled in the organization, do not need to reify national culture.

In summary, this article has defended the idea that the reification of traditional national culture is a counterstrategy of resistance employed by organizational subalterns. Its contributions for the study of MOK are the following: Firstly, organizational subalterns can be local elites at the same time. This means that the concept of subalternity might have to be enlarged. Secondly, if this is so, organizational subalterns can use discourses outside the organization to regain voice. This means that the view on transfer of MOK has to be broadened to discourses outside the organization. Thirdly, national culture can be a strategic resource of subaltern resistance. This means that there is a third interpretation of traditional national culture beyond taking it as ethnocentrist proof for local inferiority or viewing it as a neo-colonial construction of others who might possess equal MOK. To summarize this third interpretation: local others construct themselves as traditional and bound to culture to overcome subalternity. MOK and transfer of MOK have to be reread under this aspect.

The limitations of this outcome are: Firstly, due to the fact that this study is based on interpretative, qualitative research, research outcome cannot be generalized. Secondly, due to the fact that the researcher is of Indo-German origin herself, she might have been a useful means to uncover the discourse of 'teaching Indian culture' but might have overlooked other discourses due to her limited personal perspective. Thirdly, due to limited access in time and space, further development of the field could not be followed.

Therefore, further fieldwork should to be conducted to analyze how frequently the discourse of local culture serves the same, similar or completely different means. Multi-researcher teams could uncover multiple perspectives and establish inter-subjectivity. Long-term ethnographic research could clarify how such discourses of resistance develop during learning and knowledge transfer to the offshore site. Based on a solid qualitative base of such kind, quantitative research could then generate large-scale data.

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