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From Landlords to Software Engineers: Migration and Urbanization among Tamil Brahmans

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In south India's rapidly expanding information technology (IT) industry, the small, traditional elite of Tamil Brahmans is disproportionately well represented. Actually, no figures to confirm this assertion exist, but all the circumstantial evidence suggests that it is true, especially among the IT professionals and software engineers employed by the leading software and services companies in Chennai (Madras).¹ Since the nineteenth century, Tamil Brahmans have successfully entered several new fields of modern professional employment, particularly administration, law, and teaching, but also engineering, banking, and accountancy. Hence the movement into IT, despite some novel features, has clear precedents. All these professional fields require academic qualifications, mostly at a higher level, and the Brahmans' success is seemingly explained by their standards of modern education, which reflect their caste traditions of learning.²

Acknowledgments: Research was carried out in Chennai for about twelve months in total between August 2003 and February 2005, and among Vattima Brahmans in Tippiirajapuram between September 2005 and March 2006, in the United States in September 2006, and in Chennai and other Indian cities between January and April 2007. Most of the research was done by HariPriya Narasimhan, although Chris Fuller was with her for part of the time. The text of this article was written by Fuller, although we have discussed it together extensively and it represents our joint views. We thank the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council, which has supported all the research. For useful comments on earlier drafts of this article, we thank John Harriss, Johnny Parry, Tom Trautmann, and two anonymous *CSSH* readers, as well as participants at seminars in the London School of Economics and the University of Amsterdam.

¹ The city of Madras was renamed Chennai in 1996 and (like other renamed places) both names are used, according to historical context.

² The only hard data about Brahman education, as far as we know, are in the Ambasankar Commission report (Report of the Tamil Nadu Second Backward Classes Commission, Government of Tamil Nadu, Madras, 1985). In the "Chairman's Recommendation," published as a separate volume, the table of educational indices (Table D, pp. 76–86) shows that Brahmans have higher indices than all other castes for higher secondary education and above, and for higher secondary education only, and very low indices for educational drop-outs and illiterates.

Yet education alone is not a sufficient explanation. Also important is migration, as well as the Tamil Brahmins' emergence as an urban and indeed urbanized community. Although more Brahmins may still live in villages than is usually assumed, a massive rural-to-urban migration has occurred since the nineteenth century. Moreover, numerous Brahmins moved from Tamilnadu to other parts of India during the twentieth century, as well as to foreign countries in recent decades. Migration and urbanization among contemporary Tamil Brahmins, including IT professionals, therefore have a historical depth and geographical spread that this article seeks to explore.

BRAHMAN LANDLORDS: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Brahmins have always been a partially urban caste, resident in south India's old towns and cities. The majority, however, lived in the countryside. Tamilnadu is geographically divided into two main areas: the wet, paddy-cultivating zone of the river valleys and the dry zone of the plains. Brahmins were concentrated in the wet zone—especially the central valley of the River Kaveri and its delta—whereas in dry-zone villages there were normally none, apart from some poor priestly families. There are Telugu, Kannada, and Maharashtrian Deshastha Brahmin minorities in Tamilnadu, but the majority are Tamil Brahmins; apart from Adishaivas and other small priestly subcastes, most Tamil Brahmins belong to the larger Smarta or Aiyar group, or the smaller Sri Vaishnava or Aiyangar one. In the early twentieth century, Brahmins made up approximately 2.5 percent of the Tamil country's population (Radhakrishnan 1989: 507). This is equivalent to about 1.5 million out of Tamilnadu's population of 62 million as recorded in the 2001 census, but the true figure must be lower, mainly because of emigration from the state, although this cannot be confirmed because neither the government of India nor any other organization collects statistics about "Forward Castes" (including Brahmins), who cannot benefit from the reservations system operated for the "Backward" and "Scheduled Castes" in education and employment.

The Tamil Brahmins' rural history goes back to at least the Pallava period (c. 575–900), when they were settled on lands donated by kings and chiefs. As Ludden (following Stein 1980) explains, during the medieval period in the river valleys under the "alliance" between Brahmins and Vellalas—a high-ranking, non-Brahmin "peasant" caste—irrigated agriculture developed as "high-caste landowners brought under their control land, labor, and water; established their status in the agrarian system as a whole; and developed technical skills to expand the irrigation economy, all at the same time." In the pre-colonial economy, owning land "meant to be a member of a family in a group of shareholders; and to own not soil itself but all the varied resources involved in one's family share" (Ludden 1985: 85). These shares were normally unequal in size and value (ibid.: 89). The British, following Muslim usage, called a land-owning shareholder a *mirasidar* and, by the British and eventually by

themselves, *mirasidars* came to be regarded as “hereditary landlords.” When the colonial government imposed the *ryotwari* system of land settlement on the Madras Presidency during the nineteenth century, the *mirasidars* acquired, as individuals or families, proprietary rights to very variable amounts of land, as well as obligations to pay tax, unless (like many Brahmans) their lands were confirmed as tax-free (*inam*). Notwithstanding the imperial ideology of land settlement and emergent capitalist ownership, the reality was “an accommodation with the political elites of the countryside” (Baker 1984: 71), so that rural society stayed much the same, even though more extensive change would occur eventually. As a group, moreover, Brahman and Vellala *mirasidars*—supported by the British, as by previous rulers—were in practice “the government in the wet zone” and, with other high-caste peers, “comprised the subregional ruling class” (Ludden 1985: 90; cf. D. Kumar 1983: 210–11).

A crucial feature, as Ludden explains, is that “Mirasidar wealth, education, and cultural refinement depended on freedom from work in the fields” (1985: 90). All *mirasidars* had their land cultivated by non-Brahman tenants or by landless laborers, normally belonging to the Pallar and Paraiyar untouchable castes. Especially among Brahmans, who were in principle the bearers of Sanskrit culture and religion, “not putting one’s hands in the mud would have become a mark of entitlement to elite stature” (*ibid.*: 91). Disdain for manual agricultural work is not peculiar to Tamil Brahmans, however, even if they justified it on religious grounds, for Vellalas and other landlords throughout south Asia and beyond have shared the same outlook. Yet caste variations were or became significant by the late nineteenth century. Vellalas were portrayed as the Tamil country’s authentic agriculturalists (Irschick 1994: 196–202), so that proverbially “farming is in the blood” for Vellalas, whereas other castes make bad farmers (Ludden 1999: 144). Brahman *mirasidars*, in particular, are identified as landlords without any organic connection to the land.

To impose their land settlement, the British relied heavily on extant administrative systems. In the countryside, two key figures were the village accountant and headman. Many of these men, especially accountants, were Brahmans and likely to be literate, which gave them an advantage over others in English education. These “revenue Brahmans” (Conlon 1977: 54) and other men in the village elite progressively joined the ranks of the colonial state’s personnel, especially in the river valleys (Baker 1984: 89; D. Kumar 1983: 209; Ludden 1985: 102–7). (The Nawab of Arcot’s eighteenth-century revenue administration in Madras was dominated by Telugu Niyogi Brahmans [Wagoner 2003: 796].) Engagement with the state often meant a move to town and, during the later nineteenth century, *mirasidars* in general and Brahmans in particular moved in increasing numbers to urban areas for education and employment. In the 1890s, it was reported that many a formerly “contented” *mirasidar*, “wishes to give his boys an expensive English education and to marry his daughters to educated husbands,” which often proved

financially difficult. In numerous families, too, men were leaving to find jobs elsewhere (Raghavaiyengar 1893: 337). A lot of these mobile Brahmans belonged to major landowning families, but men with no or only a little land also joined the migration, as did many priests, who were mostly poor. Educated Brahmans soon began to dominate administration and law in particular. In this process, crucial in the emergence of a new Brahman identity marked by “twin roles” as both “authentic” and “modern” (Pandian 2007: 37, *passim*), Brahmans were further assisted by their privileged position in the colonialists’ notion of Brahmanical “tradition” as the keystone of south Indian society (Dirks 2001: 166–72, *passim*).

BRAHMAN VILLAGES: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

The Tamil Brahmans’ history can be further explored through twentieth-century village ethnographies. In “Brahman villages,” where Brahman *mirasidars* owned the majority of the land and formed the dominant caste, Brahmans (both landlords and others, such as priests) lived in the *agraharam*. The *agraharam*, consisting of one or more streets, was exclusively occupied by Brahmans and spatially demarcated from the main village area, often called the *ur*, where the non-Brahmans lived. The untouchables lived in a colony (*cheri*) separated from this area. In most Brahman villages today, the *agraharam* also houses non-Brahmans, but rural Dalits, the ex-untouchables, still tend to live only in their colonies and we have never heard of any Dalits living in an *agraharam*.

Limitations of space mean that we can refer to the Brahman village ethnography only summarily.³ The first systematic surveys of Tamil villages, done in 1916–1917, included two Brahman villages: Dusi, near Kanchipuram, in the northern Palar valley, and Gangaikondan, near Tirunelveli, in the southern Tambraparni valley. Dusi and Gangaikondan have been restudied several times, especially in 1936–1937 and 1983–1984.

In 1911, there were 251 households in Dusi, whose *agraharam* contained sixty-six Brahman households, almost all Sri Vaishnava. Virtually all non-Brahmans worked the Brahmans’ land as tenants. The Brahmans were nearly

³ In this list of all significant Brahman village ethnographic studies, the village name is followed by fieldwork dates, ethnographer’s name, and bibliographical details. Palar valley: (1) Dusi: 1916–1917, P. K. Acharya (Slater 1918: 84–94); 1936–1937, A. K. Veeraraghavan (Thomas and Ramakrishnan 1940: 182–213); 1957, Dupuis (1960: 340–55); 1983–1984, Guhan and Bharathan (1984); (2) Manjapalayam, MM, or “sample village,” 1963, 1967, 1971, Mencher (1970; 1972; cf. 1978: 292–95). Kaveri valley: (3) Kumbapettai: 1951–1952, 1976, Gough (1956; 1960; 1969; 1981; 1989); (4) Thyagasamuthiram, 1957–1958, Sivertsen (1963); (5) Sripuram, 1961–1962, Béteille (1965); (6) Appadurai, 1979–1982, Yanagisawa (1996: 225–78); (7) Tippirajapuram, 2005–2006, HariPriya Narasimhan. Tambraparni valley: (8) Gangaikondan, 1916–1917, P. S. Lokanathan (Slater 1918: 53–76); 1936–1937, B. Natarajan (Thomas and Ramakrishnan 1940: 55–116); 1983–1984, Athreya (1985); (9) Mel Ceval, 1972–1973, Reiniche (1978); (10) Yanaimangalam, 1988–1990, 2003, Mines (2005).

all rich, and most were literate. Three graduates from Dusi were employed elsewhere, and twenty-four boys had gone on to higher education (Slater 1918: 84–86, 91–93). From 1932, emigration from Dusi increased in response to local water shortages and the impact of the depression. Brahmans in particular left, so that by 1937 only forty-two Brahman households remained and the *agraharam* presented “a very deserted appearance” as vacant houses were derelict. The number of absentee landlords had greatly increased as well (Thomas and Ramakrishnan 1940: 182–83, 188; cf. Dupuis 1960: 350–52). In the following years, Brahmans continued to leave. There were thirty-three Brahman households in 1959 and only sixteen in 1983, when half the now small *agraharam*'s residents were non-Brahmans, although Brahmans, many of them absentee landlords, still owned a lot of land. Their power and authority, however, faded markedly in the 1960s, so that the “once autocratic and high-handed” Brahmans had to come to terms with the newly dominant Nayakkars (Guhan and Bharathan 1984: 6, 16, 47, 161–62, 168).

In 1911, Gangaikondan, a large village, contained 729 households, of which about 100 were Brahman. Although most land belonged to Brahmans, who had it cultivated by tenants, they were almost all in debt, so that “the Brahmans are deteriorating in numbers and prosperity,” whereas people of other castes “show signs of progress.” Most Brahman men were literate and a few had left the village for higher education (Slater 1918: 53–56, 68, 73). By 1936–1937, Gangaikondan's Brahmans—now down to seventy-five households—were emigrating and losing their lands because they had supposedly “degenerated into idle rent-receivers;” the “resort to higher, English education” was “another drain” (Thomas and Ramakrishnan 1940: 59, 61). The Brahman decline in population and landownership had accelerated by 1960 and still further by 1983–1984, when only thirty-six Brahman households remained in the village's total of 1,344, although, interestingly, a few Brahmans had moved into Gangaikondan after retirement and from other villages whose *agraharams* had been emptied of Brahmans (Athreya 1985: 8–9, 11, 15, 18, 96–97, 130).

The fertile Kaveri delta makes up most of the old Thanjavur District, where Brahmans, many of them wealthy *mirasidars*, were an unusually high 9 percent of the population in the late nineteenth century (Washbrook 1975: 24). Despite emigration and land sales, Brahmans in the delta in the 1950s were still “wealthier, more numerous, and more powerful than in any other south Indian district” (Gough 1981: 27). The most detailed ethnography of any Tamil Brahman village is by Gough, who did fieldwork in the delta in Kumbapettai in 1951–1952 and 1976. Kumbapettai contained 194 households in 1952, and 233 in 1976, but Brahman household numbers fell from 36 to 33. The net Brahman decline was therefore small, but there was considerable movement in and out. In 1952, the *agraharam* was exclusively Brahman but, by 1976, it also contained eight non-Brahman families (Gough 1989: 240–45). In 2005,

when we visited Kumbapettai briefly, the *agraharam* housed only six Brahman families, who were outnumbered by non-Brahmans. Gough explains that between 1850 and 1950, “individual family fortunes waxed and waned greatly” among Kumbapettai’s Brahmans. A few families made money, but by 1952 the majority were becoming steadily impoverished, and were losing land to more prosperous non-Brahman farmers, merchants, and moneylenders (1981: 200–1, 242, 247). Declining wealth pushed many Brahmans into emigrating, and by 1952 fifty-eight men worked outside the village, mostly employed in “lower-grade government service,” although a few had higher-status jobs or ran businesses. Relatives of Kumbapettai’s Brahmans also lived in various urban centers in south India, as well as further afield. Many emigrants were absentee landlords, although land was sometimes looked after by one family member remaining in Kumbapettai after the others left (*ibid.*: 201, 207, 236–38, 299). Between 1952 and 1976, Brahmans sold yet more land, and their local power and authority were collapsing, which encouraged further emigration (Gough 1989: 262–65, 272–74, 311). In 2005, we were told that one important factor is that Brahman landowners cannot manage their farms, because they can no longer exert authority over Dalit laborers.

In Sripuram, studied by Bêteille in 1961–1962, the Brahman landlords were mostly richer than in Kumbapettai. Sripuram contained 349 households, including 92 Brahman households in the *agraharam*, which had no non-Brahman residents (Bêteille 1965: 26). Nonetheless, Brahmans were still leaving, so that half the landlords were absentees, and many men were selling land, especially to pay for their sons’ education. Brahman power and authority were also in decline by the 1960s (*ibid.*: 114–16, 129–31, 168–70). Sripuram’s Brahmans, however, have not fallen as far as might have been predicted, although emigration has continued. In 2005, we found that Brahmans still occupied more than half the *agraharam* houses; non-Brahmans first bought or rented these houses around 1980, but the Brahmans have now decided not to let them have any more. Identical agreements have been made in other *agraharams* in the vicinity, but whether they will hold is uncertain. Nonetheless, they are a sign that some rural Brahmans are trying to reassert old prerogatives and to prevent more cases like Yanaimangalam in the Tambraparni valley, where the *agraharam* has so many non-Brahman residents that it is now the village’s most mixed street instead of its most exclusive (Mines 2005: 13).

Tippirajapuram, the Kaveri delta *agraharam* where we have done ethnographic fieldwork, is also still mainly occupied by Brahmans, whose eighty-two households outnumber the thirteen non-Brahman ones. Tippirajapuram is one of the leading villages of the eighteen-village Vattima subcaste of Smarta Brahmans. In smaller Vattima villages, however, the *agraharams* now house many more non-Brahmans, and some of them Brahmans have

largely abandoned. A few of Tippirajapuram's Brahmans are still large landowners, but a notable feature is the high proportion of them who are retired, and whose economically active children live in towns and cities in Tamilnadu, elsewhere in India, or overseas, especially America.

The ethnographic data reveal many differences between individual villages and some possibly systematic variation between the Palar, Tambraparni, and Kaveri valley regions. In particular, Brahman decline has probably been steeper in the first two than in the Kaveri valley, especially in the delta. Even so, the general direction of change is plain, for the cumulative evidence shows that the size of the Tamil Brahman rural population, and the amount of land it owned, have hugely decreased over the last hundred years. Furthermore, in the wet-zone villages, Brahman social, economic, and political dominance has mostly disintegrated. Quite rapidly, therefore, a Brahmanical agrarian order that lasted a thousand years in the Tamil country fell apart during the twentieth century.

In wealth and power, Tamil Brahman *mirasidars* never matched the great landlords in some other regions, such as the Nambudiri Brahman landlords of neighboring Malabar (north Kerala). Even by the standards of pre-modern India, however, the social structure of Brahman villages in Tamilnadu was extremely unequal and exploitative, especially for landless untouchables. Yet resistance by any of the lower castes was a relatively minor cause of change. Instead, it was overwhelmingly Brahmans themselves who brought about this social revolution in the countryside. Partly "pushed" by indebtedness, land sales and loss of local dominance—in which the anti-Brahman movement admittedly did play a significant role after Independence—and partly "pulled" by new opportunities in education, salaried employment, or in some cases business, Brahmans gave up being lords of the land and decisively migrated to the towns and cities.

GENEALOGICAL EVIDENCE

Genealogies provide some insight into this movement for particular individuals and families. In Tippirajapuram, genealogies have been collected from seventeen individuals, and the two that we outline briefly and partially here are as representative as any of eighteen-village Vattima cases.

Nagalingam, born in 1927, belongs to one of Tippirajapuram's leading landed families. Both his grandfathers were landlords there; his father qualified as an accountant, but did not practice and instead looked after his land, which Nagalingam has retained. Nagalingam is also an auditor still working in the City Union Bank (CUB), which is largely controlled by Vattimas. He went to college in Madras and qualified as a chartered accountant in 1953. He first worked for a central government department in Jaipur and Calcutta, and later joined a leading private-sector company, but he fell ill and returned to Tippirajapuram in 1963, where he practiced accountancy and worked for

the CUB. Nagalingam and his wife have two sons in their forties, both auditors in Chennai, and one daughter in her fifties who is a housewife married to a doctor living in Ohio and has three children, all trainee doctors.

Nagalingam's father had one brother, whose only daughter, Rajalakshmi, also born in 1927, married a landlord, and they have four children, now in their fifties. Rajalakshmi's elder son works for the CUB in Coimbatore and the younger son works in Bangalore for a financial advice and services company started in Chennai in 1974 by Vasudevan, Rajalakshmi's younger daughter's husband, who is also a chartered accountant. Vasudevan's elder daughter is an IT professional living in the United States, his younger daughter is married to a CUB manager in Kumbakonam, and his son works for his father's company in Chennai. Rajalakshmi's elder daughter is married to her cross-cousin (once removed), a landlord in another Vattima village, and they have three sons, one working for the same financial company in Mumbai (Bombay) and the other two for software companies in Chennai. Nagalingam's father also had one sister, whose four sons, all born in the 1930s, are respectively two retired lawyers, who practiced in nearby Kumbakonam and Mayuvaram, and two landlords (one just mentioned as married to his cross-cousin). Each lawyer had two sons: one works for the CUB in Tiruchirappalli, and three are in Chennai, one in a large private-sector company, one in business, and one an accountant.

Like Nagalingam's family tree, Sitaraman and Mahalakshmi's also displays a mixture of rural landholders and urban professionals, which is quite typical among Vattimas in Tippiirajapuram. Sitaraman, born in 1936, is a landlord, as was his father and father's father. Sitaraman has few close relatives, but his wife Mahalakshmi, born in 1944, has a large extended family. Mahalakshmi's father and father's father were landlords. She and Sitaraman have three children, all born in the 1960s. Their first daughter, who is widowed, works in Chennai for the financial company mentioned above, their son works for a private company in Bangalore, and their younger daughter is a university administrator in Philadelphia, although her husband is a professor in Singapore. Mahalakshmi's eldest brother is a retired accountant in Hyderabad; his first son is a speech therapist in the United States, and his younger son works for a state-owned oil company in Gujarat. Her second brother is an engineer in a private company in Chennai; his son, who studied in one of the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT), and his daughter, an IT graduate, both live in the United States. Her youngest brother is a retired engineer living in Tiruchirappalli, whose son is employed by a major software company in Bangalore.

On the whole, Vattima *mirasidars*—like Nagalingam and Sitaraman—have probably stayed in their villages for longer than other landowning Brahmans in the Kaveri delta. Today, though, such landlords are in a minority, because most Vattima men, especially in the younger generation, live and work in urban

areas, and nobody expects them to keep their family lands and return to the village, even after retirement. In Nagalingam's family, banking and accountancy have been common occupations, mostly practiced in Chennai and other Tamilnadu towns. Mahalakshmi's family members have entered a wider range of professions and spread further afield. In particular, one of her three children, and three of her five nephews and nieces, live in the United States. Although these genealogies were collected from people still living in a village, they illustrate a characteristic Tamil Brahman pattern in which men—and in recent years women as well—are normally able to improve on or consolidate their forebears' occupational status. Genealogies thus display a general tendency towards expansive migratory movement and upward social mobility.

We have collected several other genealogies, from various sources, but will discuss only one more example: a Sri Vaishnava family from the Kaveri valley village of Vangal, whose exceptional genealogy, available on a website, contains more than 1,000 individual names.⁴

Thiruvengata Chari (1837–1934) was a landlord, who had three daughters (all married to landlords) and four sons. The eldest son, Srinivasa (1867–1932), became a government civil engineer, although he kept his link with Vangal and built a house there. After Srinivasa's death, however, the house was given away by his three sons, who all settled in Madras. The eldest of these sons also became a government civil engineer, and the other two joined different government departments. (Engineering, as noted below, has become an important profession for Tamil Brahmans.) Thiruvengata Chari's second son, Satagopa (1869–1954), became a lawyer in Salem and had four sons: one worked for a government department and settled in Tirucchirappalli, and two went to Madras, one becoming an oil company executive and the other working for the Reserve Bank of India. On the fourth son there is no information. Thiruvengata Chari's third son, Rangunatha, married a wealthy contractor's daughter and lived in Srirangam (near Tirucchirappalli).

Thiruvengata Chari's youngest son was Sir V. T. Krishnamachari (1881–1964), who studied law in Madras before entering government service. During his career, he was variously the *dewan* (prime minister) of Baroda princely state for seventeen years, an Indian delegate to the League of Nations and later the United Nations, and the deputy chairman of the Indian government's Planning Commission. Krishnamachari had three sons: the eldest became Advocate-General for Madras, the second joined the railways in southern India, and the youngest became a senior economic advisor to the Indian government. Krishnamachari's two daughters lived in Madras and respectively married an engineer and a railway officer.

⁴ At <http://www.vangalheritage.com/index.htm>. We thank V. L. Vijayaraghavan, compiler of the website, for his assistance.

In this Vangal family, three of the four sons of Thiruvengata Chari entered government service or the law. Although Srinivasa kept a residence in Vangal, his two brothers—and all their sons—settled in towns and cities. Apart from Rangunatha in Srirangam, this family's menfolk moved into urban employment within one generation and abandoned village life entirely when Srinivasa died in 1932. The majority of the numerous descendants of Thiruvengata Chari's professional sons had, or have, similar urban, professional jobs. Today many of them—women now, as well as men—work in IT, banking, or other private-sector industries, either in India or overseas (mostly in America), and some are employed by the government or public sector in India. Collectively, their migratory expansion and professional mobility have been unusually extensive. Eventually, in the 1960–1970s, Rangunatha's descendants also migrated to towns for employment, but they almost all remain in India and have been less socially or geographically mobile.

Krishnamachari belonged to the group of “often lordly but highly efficient Indian Dewan[s]” (Low 1978: 378), several of them Tamil Brahmins, on which the princely states and the colonial government came to rely. Tamil Brahmins had earlier served as state administrators in Hindu Travancore and Muslim Mysore (Bayly 1988: 152), so that Krishnamachari continued a tradition also followed by numerous other Brahmins who entered government service during the colonial period, even if few of them attained high office. Yet the tradition is really far older, because in all classical authorities on Hindu kingship, a legitimate, righteous king invariably depends on Brahmin ministers, counselors, and jurists (Lingat 1973: 207–23). While such continuities should not be exaggerated, when Tamil Brahmins became bureaucrats and lawyers, they were, often consciously, pursuing a path with ancient precedents. This is so even though these professions are governed by modern conceptions of knowledge and rationality, and the criteria for recruitment into them were secular educational qualifications, not Brahmin birth. Indeed, modern knowledge and rationality are fundamental to all the professions esteemed by Tamil Brahmins. These include law, administration, and management, as well as medicine, engineering, and computing, for which the Brahmins' “natural” ability in mathematics—perceived as the preeminent intellectual discipline—supposedly qualifies them.

Engineering as a profession for Tamil Brahmins deserves special mention. Engineering in colonial India was mainly civil engineering (the branch entered by Srinivasa from Vangal and his son), and its development was closely tied to that of the government's public works departments (PWD) (A. Kumar 1995). Indian engineers were excluded from senior official grades until about 1920, and British prejudices about their professional fitness were often voiced (Basu 1991). Nevertheless, Indians did make progress and Tamil Brahmins were prominent among them. In the Madras PWD, the first Indians were appointed as assistant engineers in 1877 (one Brahmin and one

non-Brahman), as executive engineers in 1890 (one Brahman), and as superintending engineers in 1920 (two Brahmans and one non-Brahman). In 1925, the first Indian chief engineer, a non-Brahman, was appointed alongside a European, although in 1935 there were two Brahmans and one European. By 1900, in all grades, there were sixty-seven engineers, of whom fifty-eight (87 percent) were Europeans, eight (12 percent) were Brahmans, and one (1.5 percent) was a non-Brahman. Until 1940, the total complement remained fairly steady, but European numbers gradually fell after 1920 and non-Brahman numbers rose. Despite some fluctuations, however, Brahmans made up over 20 percent of engineers from 1925 to 1940, so that they were considerably over-represented in the profession, just as they were in administration and law. Tamilnadu's historians, however, have rarely mentioned Brahman engineers and the PWD (cf. Irschick 1986: 63–64, 69; Saraswathi 1974: 47–48).⁵

Despite its proximity to mathematics and science in which Brahmans have been prominent (Arnold 2000: 8, 154), engineering additionally requires “hands-on” technical skills, which has made it uncongenial for a few Brahmans. The majority, however, have never been deterred, and Tamil Brahmans were the pioneers in engineering in south India—eventually in the mechanical and electrical as well as civil branches—and they remain well-represented in the profession. Software engineering is non-manual work in offices, of course, but the Brahmans' current prominence in IT is an extension of their prior presence in engineering, rather than an entirely new development.

THE BRAHMANS' “EXODUS” FROM RURAL SOCIETY

Nagalingam still has land in Tippirajapuram and is an example of a Brahman who went to the city to study and work, but later returned to his village. He did so for health reasons, but he had never completely turned his back on rural life. Certainly, many Brahmans did and do move in and out of villages; landowners are particularly likely to return, as are retired people, but some Brahmans move to *agraharams* conveniently located near towns where they work, as Tippirajapuram is for Kumbakonam. Other Brahmans move to *agraharams* still dominated by Brahmans, such as Tippirajapuram or Gangaikondan (Athreya 1985: 11, 130), because they prefer to live within their own community. Yet Brahmans who return to their villages or move to other ones are in the

⁵ The data on engineers in the Madras PWD derive from the annual publication, variously titled “India List” and/or “India Office List” (London: W. H. Allen or Harrisons). Brahmans can be identified by their caste surnames—Aiyar, Aiyangar, or (occasionally) Acharya—but in later years a few of them may have given up these surnames, so that Brahman totals may be too low. European totals may also be too high, because they may include some Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians. Irschick (1986: 69) cites different data on the high proportion of Brahman gazetted officers in the PWD. In the Madras Electricity Department, which became independent of the PWD in 1932, Tamil Brahmans were also disproportionately well represented and the first Indian chief engineer, appointed in 1944, was a Brahman (personal communication from Srinivasa Rao, IIT-Madras, Jan. 2007).

minority, which is why so many *agraharam* houses have been sold or rented to non-Brahmans, or left empty and abandoned. Indeed, a very striking feature of Tamil Brahman migration to urban areas has been its rapidity and completeness, both at the aggregate level of the caste as a whole, and at the family and individual level. Villagers have often become urbanites within the span of one generation.

According to Dupuis, in the Palar valley area where Dusi is located, the Great Depression was the decisive factor in starting “the great exodus” of Brahmans that “transformed a rural class into an urban class” (1960: 51). Especially in the Tambraparni valley, the “exodus” had really started earlier, but Dupuis is still fundamentally right that Tamil Brahmans, through migration, became “an urban class” in the twentieth century.

The Brahmans’ urban transformation was not always easy—as Dupuis’s evocative story of a *mirasidar* and his son who migrated to Madras in the 1920–1930s shows (*ibid.*: 51–58)—but it was plainly facilitated by their typical attitude to agriculture and land. As we have seen, the ownership and control of land mattered greatly to Brahman *mirasidars* for social, economic, and political reasons, but they were patriarchal landlords, not farmers committed to agriculture as a means of livelihood. They never got down into their fields. Non-Brahman *mirasidars* were no different, but modern non-Brahman landowners generally have more interest in and commitment to agriculture than Brahmans, and are willing to work in their fields. This is an attitude that they, like Brahman landowners, regard as important for managing Dalit laborers. (We do not know whether Dalits actually interact with Brahman and non-Brahman landowners differently.) Nowadays, some Brahman landowners have become modern, capitalist farmers. We have met several Vattimas who are scornful about other Brahman landowners’ managerial incompetence and cultivate their wetlands very profitably, and a few similar cases are mentioned by Gough (1989: 277–78) and Yanagisawa (1996: 253–55). But modern Brahman farmers—new “agrarian citizens” rather than “old gentry” (Ludden 1999: 187)—are rare. Moreover, even though most urban residents in Tamilnadu are of course non-Brahmans from a wide range of castes, they are generally more likely than Brahmans to keep family land, to which they may have a strong emotional attachment, and more likely to sell only if their farms are small and unprofitable. Particularly compared with non-Brahman peasant cultivators, therefore, the Brahmans’ detached or even disdainful outlook enabled them to quit their lands and rural life relatively easily.

Of course, adhering to traditional purity rules and religious observances is normally more difficult in urban areas than villages. In a rural *agraharam*, Brahmans can fairly easily control the purity of their food and water, their houses and (in the past) their streets and temples as well, but they find it harder in a socially mixed, urban environment. Some *agraharams* survive in towns and cities, and many Brahmans try to live in streets or apartment

complexes where they form a majority, but living completely separately from non-Brahmans is never feasible. Finding pure well water in cities suffering chronic water supply problems is particularly difficult and is one more reason why a small minority of very conservative Brahmans still keep away from urban areas, so that they can conform to orthodox rules.

A rural *agraharam*'s separation from the main village also permitted a general detachment from all non-Brahman social life, which is singularly illustrated by an elderly Brahman widow in Sripuram, who told us in 2005 that she came there after marriage in 1946, but has never once entered the non-Brahman area of the village next to the *agraharam* street. Such willful isolation from non-Brahmans is admittedly extreme. Nevertheless, another reason why urbanization has generally been easier for Brahmans than non-Brahmans is that the latter—except of course for Dalits—are more fully integrated into local village caste society. As Barnett (1976: 25) explains, the Brahmans' "position and status was independent of their residence in any given local area," whereas for non-Brahmans, especially higher castes, "rank was directly dependent on village economic and ritual dominance," so that their urban migration involved movement into a riskier, socially unstable environment. Moreover, in some senses, *agraharams* never were fully rural spaces, for *mirasidars*, especially Brahmans, "combined attributes normally assigned either to rustic family farmers or urban elite intellectuals" (Ludden 1985: 94). All in all, therefore, despite the hazards to their purity, the vast majority of Tamil Brahmans have made the changes and compromises needed for urban life fairly easily.

Significantly, too, apart from some ambivalent idealization of villages as peaceful, pure, or "traditional," many Brahmans regard them as unrefined places inhabited by less educated, less intelligent people. Their attitude is typified by the Tamil Brahman who tried to explain that owing to their education and "brain," "especially in villages, there are no Brahmins, they come to cities, the city is better" (Chuyen 2004: 156). The more sophisticated version of the same idea is that the city—specifically Chennai—is a center of the Brahman literati's great tradition (Singer 1972: 62–64, *passim*), as Brahmans themselves also proclaim (Hancock 1999: 64–67). In other words, conforming to a standard stereotype of the city as more civilized than the village, Brahmans today typically regard themselves as natural city-dwellers.

The overall outcome of the Tamil Brahmans' exodus from the countryside is that migration and urbanization are fundamental to their modern history and contemporary society, both in reality and in how they imagine and represent themselves. There is and was a normal template for this migration. Initially, there is a one-way movement from the village to an urban area—Chennai or another town in Tamilnadu—for education, employment, or both. This migration frequently inaugurates a rapid process of personal and familial urbanization, so that migrants' sons, who have probably spent all or most of their lives in an urban locality, separate themselves from rural life. Urban Brahmans

take little or no part in managing their lands, which are either controlled by family members still living in the village or rented out to tenants; otherwise and often, they are sold. Most Brahmans settled in urban areas rarely leave them, so that today village life is an alien experience. Migration, furthermore, has not been impeded by the marriage system, because although most Brahmans have arranged marriages within their caste or subcaste, they have no preference for marrying locally, as do even some educated, middle-class non-Brahmans, like the Gounders in Tirupur studied by De Neve (n.d.).

Now, as in the past, urban Brahmans often migrate between towns and cities—for example, from a regional town to Chennai or a city elsewhere in India—and they also often circulate around them, especially when in jobs, like many in government, which require regular transfers. L. Caplan, in a discussion of migrant middle-class Christians that also applies to Brahmans, notes the importance of circulation among urban centers, but he emphasizes, too, how Chennai “attracts and selects migrants in quite a different way from other, less dominant, urban localities.” The city is the “hub” of the regional economy, a business, educational, medical, and legal center, the seat of the state government, and the Tamils’ cultural capital (L. Caplan 1987: 60). Hence within Tamilnadu the top of the social mobility ladder is Chennai and, because it is the hub, “Brahman emigrants [are] always present on Chennai’s social and spatial horizons” as well (Hancock 1999: 48).

By the early twentieth century, Brahmans dominated all grades of the bureaucracy, law, and education in the Madras Presidency. This domination was an immediate cause of the rise of the anti-Brahman, Dravidian movement and eventually the non-Brahman parties that have ruled Tamilnadu since the 1960s. Especially after Independence, anti-Brahmanism stimulated the Brahmans’ migration from villages and their emigration out of a state where they faced discrimination. The anti-Brahman movement’s well-documented but controversial history will not be discussed here, however, except to mention Barnett’s insight that the “conflict between the ‘forward’ Brahmins and the ‘backward’ non-Brahmins . . . might more accurately be defined as a conflict between a landowning non-Brahmin elite with a history of rural dominance, and a nascent urban Brahmin elite that had used the opportunities presented by British rule” (1976: 17). The Brahmans’ urbanization, in other words, was a crucial but often overlooked dimension of the emerging opposition between them and non-Brahmans. In 1921, the colonial government introduced measures to try to ensure more equitable recruitment, which were the initial precursor of the post-Independence reservations policy. Some Tamil Brahmans then left for other cities, such as Bombay (Irschick 1969: 236, 301), although Bombay’s economic opportunities were probably more important, since in practice the new measures in Madras had hardly any immediate effect. Bangalore was also a favorite destination and, especially after Independence, so was Delhi, where many Tamil Brahmans worked in central government services,

which had no caste quotas (except for Scheduled Castes and Tribes). By the 1960s, 40,000 south Indians lived in Delhi and as many as 75 percent of them were Brahmans (Singh 1976: 61, 158). Either to obtain jobs or because of transfers, however, Tamil Brahmans have moved all over India and, in the last two or three decades, significant numbers have migrated to foreign countries. All this geographical mobility throughout more than a century means that a large proportion of Tamil Brahmans live outside of Tamilnadu. Nevertheless (although no statistics exist to prove it), there are almost certainly more of them in Chennai, especially its southern suburbs, than in any other urban area, and many Tamil Brahmans regard Chennai as the city that they can most call their own.

Before we turn to contemporary Chennai, two important points must be added. First, upwardly mobile middle-class Tamil Brahmans have generally migrated more extensively than their lower-class counterparts. Brahman clerks employed in government or banks, or cooks or factory workers, for example, were and are more likely to be fairly stationary within Tamilnadu than those in professional occupations. Secondly, in almost all cases of Brahman migration, men, not women, have been the active agents. Men decide to move for education and employment, and their wives and families accompany them. Similarly, parents encourage or permit sons, rather than daughters, to move away from home for education or employment. In recent years, however, daughters have often enjoyed the same educational opportunities as sons and, particularly in the IT industry, young women are often as mobile as their male colleagues. But during most of the period discussed here the great majority of Tamil Brahman women moved only at the behest of husbands or other male kin. This is graphically illustrated by several family histories published recently (Gulati 2005; Kamakshi 2005; Raj 2005; Sundaram 2005; Sivaraman 2006).

BRAHMANS AND MIGRATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHENNAI

In 2003, when we told middle-class Brahmans in Chennai about our research on globalization, they often replied that it mainly meant overseas migration, especially to America, and that “every” Brahman family today has members abroad. People said, too, that overseas migration is a middle-class “craze” or “obsession” encouraged by the new IT industry. In fact, though, overseas migration began earlier, and by the early 1980s, among the upper-middle-class people in Chennai studied by P. Caplan, many of them Brahmans, “there [was] scarcely a family that does not have a close relative who has migrated [abroad]” (1985: 58).

In our research, we also found that many, though not all, middle-class Brahmans have relatives living overseas. Foreign emigration, however, usually only adds to a family’s history of movement within India, and circulation owing to job transfers is a significant aspect, as illustrated by several interviews done in 2003–2005 with Tamil Brahmans living in the middle-class,

southern suburb of T. Nagar. Transfers every few years are the norm for bank officers, for example, and in the 1970 and 1980s employment in banks—which were nationalized in 1969—was attractive to Tamil Brahmins partly because Tamilnadu’s reservations policy was making it harder to get jobs and promotions in state government services. Just three examples from our interviews are summarized here.⁶

Leela and Malini are friends in their forties. Leela is a housewife, and her husband Siva, from Madurai, is a retired bank officer. They have lived in various places in Tamilnadu, as well as in Calcutta. They have two daughters and share their apartment with Siva’s unmarried brother, a computer engineer. Another brother, a lawyer, still lives in Madurai. Leela was raised in Kumbakonam and is one of seven children. One of her brothers and two sisters also live in Chennai, another sister is in Thanjavur, and one brother and one sister work in Dubai. The son and daughter of one sister live in the United States. Malini belongs to the community of Palghat (Tamil) Brahmins, who settled in north Kerala centuries ago, and she is a Hindi teacher. Her husband is Venkat, also a bank officer, and they have a son and a daughter. They had recently moved to Chennai from Calcutta, and before that had lived in Lucknow, Ahmadabad, Mumbai, and Bangalore. Venkat comes from Thanjavur. Malini grew up in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, where her father worked in a central government ordnance depot. Malini has three brothers, with whom she has little contact. She has no close relatives abroad, although one nephew spent a few years as a lecturer in the United States.

The third woman, Deepa, is also in her forties, and was born in Mumbai. She works for a bank in Chennai, has a son who is a student in the city’s IIT, and a daughter. Her husband Arjun, also from Mumbai, is a bank manager. He and Deepa worked in Bangalore before arriving in Chennai. Deepa has lived in Chennai for nearly twenty years, and when Arjun was transferred to Mumbai she stayed in Chennai with the children so that their education would not be disrupted. Arjun now works for a new, private-sector bank, and when their daughter enters college Deepa will seek a transfer to Mumbai to rejoin him.

⁶ In the research in Chennai in 2003–2005, thirty-four interviews were done in T. Nagar with middle-class individuals (or families), twenty of them Tamil Brahmin. We also interviewed thirty-eight IT professionals (including twenty-six Tamil Brahmins), mostly in major software companies, and eleven managers and engineers in manufacturing companies (including four Tamil Brahmins). Within each category, a few people of unidentified caste may also have been Tamil Brahmins. Further interviews were done with teachers and a variety of other informants. In the research on Vattimas in 2005–2007, Tippirajapuram was the main fieldwork site, but other Vattima villages were visited. Interviews were also done with Tippirajapuram residents’ relatives in Chennai, and other cities in India and the United States. In the Chennai middle-class research, and to some extent among urban Vattimas, the ‘snowball’ technique of locating people for interview had to be used, so that our sample of informants was a tiny, haphazard fraction of the potential universe. In any qualitative ethnographic study of an urban middle class, this methodological problem is normally unavoidable.

Deepa has several cousins living in the United States, and at the time of the interview her son was deciding between offers of a job in a major Indian software company and a postgraduate place in an American university.

None of these three women is truly typical, but the geographical movement and distribution of their family members do exemplify a collective experience and shared social history that any middle-class Brahman in Chennai would find familiar. Foremost in this experience and history is a combination of uni-directional migration—from village to town, from Tamilnadu to elsewhere in India, from India to a foreign country—and circulation between Chennai and different urban centers in Tamilnadu and India as a job demands. Normally, men move for work and their wives accompany them, even if they also have paid employment. Some women, however, are becoming more self-assertive and do not always go with their husbands, especially if they have children in school. Sometimes, too, children stay with their grandparents so that their education is not disrupted. Yet many children do move a lot and it is common to meet Tamil Brahmans in Chennai who have spent first their childhood and then their working lives all over Tamilnadu and India, so that they have lived in the city for only a short time.

These peripatetic Brahmans may know Indians from many regions and they sometimes mention their diverse friends and colleagues. Visvanathan, for instance, who is retired, was born in Kerala and studied in Chennai, and he reminisced about his long career with colleagues from all over India in the public-sector steel plant in Rourkela, Orissa, in something akin to the Nehruvian style discussed for the Bhilai plant by Parry (2003: 221–23). Visvanathan's son, whose wife comes from Delhi, works in Chennai and his married daughter lives in Delhi, and in his family they can speak Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, and English. Many friends in Rourkela were Bengalis and Visvanathan and his wife became so used to celebrating the Durga Puja festival that they still feel obliged to visit a Bengali association's shrine for the goddess in Chennai each year.

Yet people may tend to eulogize India's diversity more when they are back in Chennai than they did before. For instance, Punjabi landlords in Delhi prefer their mainly Brahman south Indian tenants over fellow Punjabis because they pay their rent on time, but this is partly because the southerners find Punjabis intimidating and aggressive. Nor are other prejudices about language or skin color dissolved by regular social interactions between the two groups (Singh 1976: 77, 79). In Delhi, too, most friendships among Tamil Brahmans, or other south Indians, tend to be within their own group (*ibid.*: 104–8), and anecdotal evidence suggests that this is common everywhere. On the other hand, Visvanathan and his wife's interregional friendships are not unique to them. Moreover, linguistic chauvinism is particularly rare among Tamil Brahmans; many speak several languages and those raised outside Tamilnadu sometimes know Hindi or another Indian language better than Tamil. Almost all

middle-class men, as well as many women and children, also speak English more or less fluently. Whether circulation through transfers has “provided the cement to assemble national imaginations” (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003: 348) is hard to say, but it has certainly made people more aware of diversity and probably reduced regional parochialism.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY PROFESSIONALS

The numerous IT professionals with a middle-class Brahman background have the same collective experience and shared social history. The IT industry is dominated by the young and only a handful of senior people are over forty. By looking at people of different ages, however, we can discern some of the effects of the industry’s evolution, which is actually tending to reduce, rather than increase, overall geographical mobility.

India’s largest software and services company, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), was established in Bombay in 1968. In the 1970s, TCS began to obtain business in the United States, which quickly expanded there and elsewhere during the 1980s. Many young men working for TCS in the early years were Tamils, particularly Brahmans, and two of them were Ratnam and Krishna.

Ratnam, who is in his fifties, runs his own very small software company in Nanganallur, near Chennai. He comes from a humble background in Srirangam, where he attended a government, Tamil-medium school. He then studied mathematics at a college in Madurai before going to IIT-Madras for his master’s degree. In 1972, Ratnam joined TCS in Bombay and was soon sent to Boston and then Portland, Maine, where he worked for Burroughs under the American computer company’s agreement with TCS. After several years, Ratnam resigned from TCS and moved to California, where he worked for fifteen years before returning to Nanganallur in the late 1990s to establish his own company. Most of its business comes from the United States with the assistance of his American partner and friend in California. Ratnam was a first-generation migrant from Srirangam via Madurai to Chennai and then Bombay, followed by America, and he has hardly moved around in India at all, unlike Krishna.

Krishna, who is slightly younger than Ratnam, runs his own small software company with his wife Indu in Chennai. His father’s father was a priest and landlord in Chengalpattu, not far from the city, who lost a lot of money. Krishna’s father was therefore raised in a poor family, but he eventually secured a job working for the army in Poona. He then worked for the railways, first in Poona and afterwards in Madras. Krishna’s mother’s father, the son of a landlord who had gone bankrupt, worked as a stenographer in the Madras High Court, but moved to Delhi in 1948. Because his father was being transferred between railway centers, Krishna lived with his maternal grandparents in Delhi, so that he could have a stable education in one of the city’s Madrasi schools (Singh 1976: 56–57). His sister remained in Madras.

Krishna returned to Madras to study electronics in Guindy Engineering College (later Anna University) and then completed a master's degree in IIT-Kharagpur, West Bengal. After working for two years in the public-sector steel plant at Bokaro, Bihar, he decided that the job was "stale" and moved to Bombay in 1978 to join TCS. His father was "aghast" at Krishna's reckless resignation from a secure, well-paid, government job. Krishna worked for TCS in Bombay for three years and then on a client's project in the Netherlands for two years. In 1983, he married Indu, a doctor's daughter from Bangalore with a degree in botany. Their only son was born in 1984 and has recently completed his degree at an English university. In 1983, TCS sent Krishna to Chicago to set up their operation there, but in 1988 he and his family returned to India, partly to be closer to his retired, widowed father. He joined Wipro (another major Indian software company) in Bangalore, but left in 1990 to establish his own company, which was relocated to Chennai in 1999. Krishna's new venture had Indu's full support, although his father now disapproved of his resignation from the safety of TCS.

Until 1978, Krishna and his forebears had followed a prototypically Tamil Brahman route from penurious ex-landlord status, to bureaucratic employment in Madras, Poona, and Delhi in the next generation, to Krishna's education in Guindy and Kharagpur, followed by a job as an engineer in Bokaro. Before he was thirty and went to Bombay, Krishna had already lived in many different places, but when he joined TCS he sharply deviated from what was then a tried and trusted Tamil Brahman career path, and he did so again when he set up his own company. Like other people in the software industry, including Ratnam, Krishna decries what he sees as Brahman risk aversion and hostility to business, although many Tamil Brahmans actually have set up IT companies during the last decade (cf. Chuyen 2004: 153). Even if his risk taking was deviant, however, Krishna's career movements—to Bombay, Europe, and America—merely extended his earlier mobility and paralleled the migration to the west then being undertaken by many Tamil Brahman professionals.

The most significant innovation in both Ratnam's and Krishna's movements was their return migration from America to India, which was made possible by the development of the Indian IT sector. Most people in Chennai agree that there is more talk than action about return migration, but it does now occur, as it rarely did before the 1990s. In the global labor market for software engineers, opportunities to obtain well-paid work are fairly abundant, so that temporary movement abroad is quite common. Importantly, though, many IT professionals in Chennai—as well as Bangalore (Upadhy and Vasavi 2006: 117–18)—now say that they do not want to emigrate, because career prospects and living standards are comparable with those in the west. Ratnam, indeed, said that if he were a young man today, he would not go to America. Moreover, although overseas project assignments remain part of the job in all major IT companies, the industry's evolution means that more work is now done

“offshore” in India rather than “on-site” at foreign clients’ offices. Thus young IT professionals today usually spend less time abroad than TCS pioneers like Ratnam and Krishna.

These points can be illustrated by referring to five Tamil Brahman software engineers in their thirties, whom we have discussed elsewhere (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007: 128–31; 2008). All five are now project managers or assistant managers in one major Indian software company in Chennai, which we call Indian Computer Services (ICS). Ravi, Balaram, Anuradha, and Jayashree were mainly or wholly brought up in Chennai. Lakshmi comes from Palayamkottai in southern Tamilnadu. Ravi and Jayashree have master’s degrees in technology from the IITs in Kharagpur and Chennai, respectively, and Balaram has one in computing from a university in Hyderabad. Anuradha and Lakshmi have only first degrees in engineering from colleges in Coimbatore and Madurai, respectively.

After Kharagpur, Ravi first worked in Calcutta before joining ICS in Chennai in 1995. Ravi, accompanied by his wife, has spent one year working on a project in England. Were it not for his elderly father, Ravi might have stayed away for another year, but he does not want to settle abroad. Balaram had various jobs before joining ICS in 1994, but he resigned in 1995 to go to Australia with his family, where he worked in the IT sector until he rejoined ICS in 2003. Balaram has also worked in Britain and America, and ICS sent him to Ireland in 2004. Anuradha first worked for two different software companies in Chennai, for one of which she did project work in Britain and America. She then moved with her husband to America, working there for ICS between 2000 and 2002, before returning to Chennai. Jayashree had a couple of jobs in IT in Chennai before she and her husband left to earn money in 1992. They went to Hong Kong for two-and-a-half years, where she did contract work, followed by six months in Singapore, and then returned to Chennai where Jayashree joined ICS. Since returning to Chennai, neither Anuradha nor Jayashree have been abroad again on project assignments for ICS. Lakshmi moved to Chennai when she got a job with ICS in 1995. In 2003, without her family, she went to Britain for a three-month project, her only stay abroad.

Ravi and Jayashree, like Ratnam and Krishna before them, studied at IITs, but this elite educational background is now unusual among software engineers. Because software engineering in companies like ICS or TCS has progressively become more routinized and reliant on standard packages, IIT graduates are over-qualified and can secure more technically demanding, better-paid jobs. Nowadays, most new recruits in major software companies have only a bachelor’s degree in engineering, usually from one of the leading engineering colleges in Tamilnadu. Some young people leave the state to study engineering, but out of twenty software engineers under thirty (not all Brahmans) on whom we have information, only three have done so. One is a peculiarly well-qualified Brahman who studied in both IIT-Madras and the Indian Institute

of Management in Calcutta, and the other two are Brahmans who went to the well-regarded Birla Institute of Technology and Science in Pilani, Rajasthan. All the rest stayed in Tamilnadu, and the main reason why they could do so is that young men and women, including Brahmans, can nowadays obtain good engineering education in the state, which in turn enables the best graduates to get well-paid, high-status jobs in Chennai's top IT companies.

These companies (unlike banks, for example) rarely transfer staff between different offices in India. As we have seen, though, overseas work is common, and although Lakshmi has been away for only one short project assignment, Ravi, Balam, Anuradha, and Jayashree, in one way or another, have all spent longer abroad. Only Balam, however, has acquired as much overseas experience as Ratnam and Krishna did in the IT industry's early phases. Among our twenty younger software engineers, seven had been or were on overseas assignments in 2005; two had spent more than one year in the United States, but the rest, as is now increasingly common, were away for only a few months. Those who had not been abroad all hoped to go soon, because overseas assignments are important for career progress—they provide good “exposure” through new opportunities and experiences (Fuller and Narasimhan 2006; Upadhyaya and Vasavi 2006: 116)—and attractive for personal reasons. Rarely, though, do they lead to permanent settlement abroad as Non-Resident Indians (NRI), as has been common for many Tamil Brahman (and other Indian) professionals since the 1970s.

In sum, therefore, Chennai's development into a nodal city in the globalized informational economy, together with the IT industry's evolution so that more work is done offshore in India, have helped to reduce overseas migration by software engineers, including the many Tamil Brahmans among them. This reduction, as well as decline in the exploitative practice of “body-shopping” (van der Veer 2005: 279–83), may look surprising, but in fact it is not, because the very logic of “offshoring” means that flows of people may diminish as the work travels to the site of labor, instead of the reverse.

According to Castells, the “cosmopolitan” “managerial elites” of global capitalism share “an increasingly homogeneous lifestyle” and “an international culture . . . not linked to any specific society” (1996: 415, 417). Maybe IT professionals in Chennai do not really belong to Castells' managerial elites, but when seen by their computers in their offices, which look like those anywhere in the world, such claims about uniform, transnational lifestyles, cultures, and spaces separated from their local surroundings appear plausible. Nonetheless, a critical study of Indian migrant software engineers in the United States, which shows that “a homogeneous and undifferentiated diasporic class” is a theoretical illusion that ignores the salience of the migrants' class and caste backgrounds (Mir, Mathew, and Mir 2000: 25–31), is salient within India as well. And although Hannerz endorses the concept of occupational transnational cultures, he comments that they tend to be organized to make Europeans and

Americans “feel as much at home as possible,” whereas for everyone else, “involvement with one of the transnational cultures is more likely in itself to be a distinctive cultural experience” (1996: 107). This certainly applies to IT professionals in Chennai, for they are fully aware of their work culture’s distinctiveness, for example, its relatively egalitarian gender relationships (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008: 195–200). They are also cognizant about how different foreign cultures actually are, which is why they emphasize the importance of “exposure” to them. But north and south India are different, too, so that the maximal exposure abroad differs only in degree from the exposure elsewhere in India. Through mobility, therefore, IT professionals (or other people, like transferred bank officers) acquire an experiential competence in other cultures (or subcultures). This could be classified as cosmopolitanism (Hannerz 1996: 103) or national sensibility, or both, for in any large country these apparent opposites may be continuous with each other.

As we have already seen, however, whether anything beyond a reduction in parochialism occurs among mobile Tamil Brahmans is unclear. For ordinary labor migrants, comments Hannerz, “the involvement with another culture is not a fringe benefit but a necessary cost, to be kept as low as possible” (ibid.: 106). Not surprisingly, hardly any Tamil Brahmans eat snails to demonstrate cosmopolitanism (ibid.: 104); more often, they worry about how to find pure vegetarian food, so that stories of software engineers in carnivorous countries who survived on nuts or vegetarian stock cubes are common currency among them. Of course, many are more relaxed, like the Vattima IT professionals (and some, but not all, of their wives) who told us in America that they had adjusted fairly easily to life and work there. But neither they nor the vast majority of Tamil Brahmans, even in the global IT industry, have become transnational cosmopolitans; rather, they are “espousing a new form of global nationalism, or nationalist globalism,” and overseas they tend to “cling” to Indian cultural values “as a means of maintaining their sense of self” (Upadhyaya and Vasavi 2006: 119, 120).

CONCLUSION

Economic growth in Tamilnadu means that since the 1990s employment opportunities have expanded not only in IT, but also elsewhere in the private sector where no reservations exist. Thus Brahmans generally feel under less pressure than before to leave Tamilnadu to find good jobs. Steadily declining anti-Brahmanism in the state, as well as the continuing value of the Brahmans’ “cultural capital,” have also eased their position (Fuller 1999: 35–37). Brahmans have not stopped moving, of course. Nevertheless, staying in Tamilnadu, especially in Chennai, is now more likely to be the most rational strategy, even for ambitious young Brahmans, than it has been for fifty or more years.

Brahmans are obviously not the only Tamils who migrate, although the mercantile banking caste of Nagarattars (Nattukkottai Chettiyars) (Rudner 1994)

are almost certainly the sole Tamil community whose mobility matches the Brahmans'. There is, though, a pertinent comparison with Anglo-Indians. Among Anglo-Indians in Chennai, who complain like Brahmans about the reservations system and mostly see their prospects as dim, there is a "'spirit' of emigration" (L. Caplan 2001: 130) and "the issue of emigration looms large in [their] consciousness" (ibid.: 134). Elite Anglo-Indians may prefer to stay in India, but "the great majority" regard "emigration overseas as the only way to alleviate a life of hardship and despair for individuals and families" (ibid.: 152). Anglo-Indians have suffered from worse discrimination than Tamil Brahmans, but a comparable spirit of emigration, albeit less desperate, existed among many Brahmans until it diminished in recent years. Thus for Brahmans, the wheel has in a sense come full circle, which it has not done for Anglo-Indians.

Like the Tamil Brahmans, the small Chitrapur Saraswat Brahman caste in Kanara, on the west coast, whose members migrated to Madras, Bombay, and other towns in the late nineteenth century, became "a caste on the move" (Conlon 1977: 174). By the 1930s, the Saraswats were increasingly urbanized and dependent upon urban employment, Bombay being the main center of settlement (ibid.: 201). Telugu Brahmans also migrated to Madras in sizeable numbers, and in the city, and its IT industry, they are still a significant minority. Indeed, in most regions during the colonial period, Brahmans—together with Nayars from Kerala in the Madras Presidency, Kayasths and Baidyas in Bengal, Parsis in Bombay, and some other groups—tended to move to urban areas for education and employment in government and the professions. Apart from Conlon's study of the Saraswats, however, little beyond generalities is available to assess how distinctive the Brahmans of Tamilnadu were or are in their patterns of migration and urbanization.

We end with a very different comparison. In his study of modern Jews, Slezkine broadly distinguishes between "service nomads" or "Mercurians" and the dominant, settled population or "Apollonians." "Modernity was about everyone becoming a service nomad: mobile, clever, articulate, occupationally flexible, and good at being a stranger" (Slezkine 2004: 30), and the Jews "came to represent Mercurianism and modernity everywhere" (ibid.: 39). We shall not evaluate this bold assertion, but the comparison between Russian Jews, Slezkine's main subject matter, and Tamil Brahmans is suggestive. Brahmans, plainly, were never marginalized and persecuted like Jews, and Chettiyars, not Brahmans, were prominent in south Indian banking and business. Yet, unless they emigrated overseas, Russian Jews, similarly to Tamil Brahmans, migrated to towns and cities a century ago and, as a small minority, they also became disproportionately well-represented in education and the professions, as figures for Jewish graduates and professionals in Moscow and Leningrad in the 1920s illustrate (ibid.: 105, 116–17, 223–25). The outcome in the early twentieth century was that the "Jews were becoming modern faster and better than . . . anybody else in Russia" (ibid.: 153).

Whether Tamil Brahmins were becoming “modern” like Russian Jews raises serious conceptual problems, but specifically in relation to urban migration, modern education, and professional employment, they were ahead of other south Indian communities and were starting to turn themselves into service nomads for the twentieth and eventually the twenty-first centuries. Notwithstanding the teleology, their history suggests that they were destined to become urbanites, who would move outward from Tamilnadu to the rest of India and overseas, as soon as the conditions allowed or required it. The Tamil Brahmins’ unusual adaptability and successful exploitation of new opportunities are what make them sociologically interesting and, as we said earlier, education is often emphasized as the key explanatory factor. Yet education and the employment for which it provides credentials have also been both cause and effect of the migration and urbanization that have been formative for the mobile Tamil Brahmins’ success in the modern world, not least as software engineers in an industry whose development may now encourage them finally to stop moving.

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