SIX

THE TRAVELING DIAPER BAG

Gifts and Jokes as Materializing Immaterial Labor

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In a large and airy sitting room, illuminated by a bright ceiling light giving the walls a warm yellow glow, a young nephew of Mihir's swayed back and forth on a swing, affixed to two sturdy iron hooks in the ceiling of Mihir's parents' house. His cousins, nieces, and nephews populated a nearby couch. Their apartment is in the city of Pune, near Mumbai, in a centrally located neighborhood called Bhavani Peth, which had been inhabited by professional and upper-caste Punekars since at least the 1940s. The family apartment overlooks a courtyard dotted with potted plants and flowers peeking out between the motorcycles, scooters, and small cars that line the interior walls of the building. I unpacked the small packet of photos from his travels across Europe that Mihir had entrusted to me. As we all sat drinking tea and eating snacks from the low glass coffee table in the center of the room, I noticed along another wall a series of shelves with small objects on them—an ostrich egg, a statue of the Eiffel Tower, a porcelain bear from Berlin, and another building I did not recognize, which turned out to be the Kuala Lumpur towers in Malaysia. Mihir's mother picked up each of these small souvenirs in turn, guiding me through their histories. These were gifts picked up on the parents' trips to visit Mihir in his various jobs abroad or gifts he brought back with him on his twice-yearly visits. The lion with the fish's tail was from Singapore, where he had worked for two years, the Eiffel Tower from Paris, the bear from Berlin, and the ostrich egg was from South Africa.

At the time of my visit, Mihir had been working in Germany for over three years. It was the longest time he had spent in any one country outside of India. Mihir had worked on short-term contracts in South Africa, Malaysia, and Germany. At each place, he had brought his parents to visit for a month or more. They always brought back something from Mihir to remember their travels by, proudly displaying these gifts in the showcase in their living room.

The objects displayed in the sitting room of Mihir's parents stand in for an absent son. They materialize his success, the care of his family, and a foreign world of experience and value brought within the confines of the household. An only child, Mihir was especially close with his parents, concerned that as they grew older they would have no one to take care of them. With a regular audience of appreciative kin and neighbors to admire them, such objects concretize a collective nurturing enterprise over which Indian middle classes can both confederate and compete.

At an earlier moment during fieldwork, Rajeshwari and I were on our oft-repeated morning walk in Berlin's Gesundbrunnen Park Rose Garden when, after a heated debate comparing India and the West, she paused the conversation to tell me a joke.[1] "We have a saying," she declared, "Germans are hardworking. Indians are both lazy and hardworking." I asked her how Indians can be both hardworking and lazy at the same time. "Well, it's like with time," she responded. "The Germans are very punctual, and once they come to work, they work until it is time to leave. But they may not necessarily enjoy the work. But Indians, they may come late but will enjoy the work while they are doing it." "And Americans?" I asked. "Americans," she answered, "are cunning."

Within the context of a European office, getting to work late but working hard while there is most often not a sign of a promotable, high-value employee. In the workplace, this characteristic can indicate that the Indian workforce is good at writing code but not good at "front end" operations such as dealing with customers, who demand punctuality. In Rajeshwari's joke, she explicitly brings pleasure into the domain of work.[2] The lazy and hardworking Indian is someone who enjoys software development but does not take everything that surrounds the work too seriously—such as punctuality and constant productivity. Calling Indians, herself included, lazy and hardworking, she draws on the norms of corporate culture and then creates a space between them for an interested but nonprofessional

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relationship to work. In Rajeshwari's reckoning, the opposition between ordered Germany and unruly India is a mark of distinction, implying a different relationship to labor, one governed by the pleasure of writing source code, fixing bugs, running tests, and figuring out how to translate client demands into workable programs.[3]

Mihir's gifts and Rajeshwari's joke invite me to think about how Indian coders in the diaspora extend—and curtail—the meaning of their work outside the office. This chapter follows the potential subversion of jokes and gifts at the same time that it recognizes how they normalize social relations for the Indian middle class. The way Indian programmers tell jokes and give gifts is a local resolution to the demands a regime of immaterial labor makes of them and is thus a way to rematerialize—that is, make concrete and open up to revision—this work.[4]

Shalini Shankar notes that objects make social meaning available for negotiation by making them visible at the center of collective attention.[5] Giving gifts and telling jokes fine-tune the ability of programmers to open up cognitive labor to questioning and, concomitantly, to innovate ways of inhabiting the world that is a resounding note in building an Indian middle-class sensibility. In other words, telling jokes and giving gifts at once spur critique of a global cognitive economy and consolidate middle-class hegemony.[6]

In chapter 4, I showed that technologies of state produced a cadre of expert technicians who would become the Indian middle class. The middle classes were called on to lead India's technological development in the years leading up to Indian independence. Their identity as moral and developmental leaders has largely been enabled by their association with technological development. Far from diminishing with the rise of neoliberal, open market policies in India, this position coalesced around using private, entrepreneurial high-tech initiatives for the good of the nation. In this chapter, I turn to another side of this relationship. I ask, "How does cognitive labor get materialized by Indian middle classes for consumption at home?"

Many accounts of the Indian IT workers characterize them as tacking back and forth between Western and Indian cultures.[7] Such a characterization correctly identifies the dilemma that Indian programmers face in commensurating global white-collar work and Indian citizenship. Yet it also misses the most interesting thing about how Indian coders move between

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worlds—they sketch out a blueprint for defining the Indian middle class as they go.[8]

I have been arguing in this book that autonomist Marxism has been at the vanguard of conceptualizing how subjects are constituted under contemporary capitalism. As autonomist Marxists expand the notion of the cognitariat to include a discussion of how contemporary capitalism remakes cooperation, creativity, and improvisation into the formal properties of production, they theorize what has changed in capitalist relations since Marx.[9] Contemporary capitalism stresses flexibility and the open horizon of the future as elements of productivity. But because autonomist Marxists largely posit a universal, unmarked cognitive laborer, they tend to miss the contradictions that emerge as labor is embodied.[10] Focusing on these contradictions reveals, for instance, how leisure time concomitantly serves as an arena in which to build alternatives to the rigors of the office and as confirmation of middle-class status conceived of as the right to enjoyment. Spaces of leisure allow an ethic of denying work's hold on life to emerge precisely because under contemporary capitalism leisure is experienced as threatened and is therefore brought to the center of social attention, as I argued in chapter 5. This ethic of pleasure, or eros, constitutes at the same time an exclusionary bourgeois sensibility for the Indian middle class. In other words, eros neither is completely subsumed within the logics of cognitive work nor provides a liberatory escape from capitalism and its attendant inequalities. Here, I examine how the potential open-endedness of eros is closed off in building a middle-class Indian sensibility. In other words, even while jokes and gifts extend the "life" of programming work beyond the ambit of an individual's experience of labor, they also curtail dissent and set limits on the acceptable extension of these worlds.

Jokes and gifts, although normally considered two very separate kinds of social forms, have formal properties that make them "good" to rematerialize cognitive work. Both jokes and gifts have a part that is social and a part that is individual: a part that depends on someone doing the telling or choosing, and an audience that does the listening, commenting, and passing along. By seeming to embody the delicate calibration of individual initiative and collective obligation, both jokes and gifts invite reflection on how to inhabit the world.[11]

In what follows, I unpack the many different ways that gifts and then jokes extend and curtail eros, from providing care at a distance to marking

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class distinctions, from shaking off the seriousness of work to ending an argument. In commensurating worlds of work and worlds beyond work, jokes and gifts do what might be called *affective unwork* and *affective work*. They loosen the bind between the worker and the job (they "unwork" it), but also, they reconstitute a bind between the work and other worlds (they "work" it) in such a way as to stop further elaborations of eros. They make possible creative play within and against the dictates of the economy knowledge.[12]

Gifts Connect and Nurture

The fish and ostrich egg, Kuala Lumpur towers, and Berliner Bear extend Mihir's influence even when he is not present at home. Such objects extend the "fame" of programmers to kin and friend networks in India. They create felicitous arguments to those family members who sustain programmers financially and emotionally about the worth of programming overseas and the value of an individual's experience abroad.[13]

An expansive and continually elaborated theory of the gift is one main contribution of anthropology to social theory. In Marcel Mauss's seminal formulation, a theory of the gift is a necessary correlate and corrective to a theory of individualized commodity exchange. Recently, David Graeber has rehabilitated Mauss's theory of the gift to argue for the historical specificity of modern debt.[14] In this work, Graeber points out that even Mauss's morality of the gift is most often understood as a kind of exchange relationship, framing the gift as simply the other side of trade.[15] The consequence of thinking of debt as only an exchange rather than as also reciprocation, according to Graeber, is that the entire world of social obligation, mutuality, and reciprocity has been reduced to a single and singular form of economic transaction built on the principles of formal equality and social distance.[16] Yet, despite remarking on the significance of gifting outside exchange, Graeber builds a largely "economistic" theory of debt forgiveness in the remainder of the text. Although this economic reading of the gift is useful in complicating received notions of debt, it curiously sidesteps the social meanings of gifts, focusing instead on the transactional demands that the law of the gift implies. There is also an erotics of the gift.

While recognizing that gifts answer a demand for reciprocation, there is also a pleasure of sending and choosing small gifts. In this section, I explore eros as counterconduct—a pleasure in gifting that disrupts the logic

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of a cognitive economy work ethic that transacts work hours for increased remuneration.[17] In the pathways they take, small gifts set down social networks as a hedge against the risks inherent in short-term programming. They lay the groundwork for future moves to other sites within a globalized programming economy. And, in their "unimportant" materiality, they both open up and set limits on the possibilities for life outside of work.

In my field notebook, I wrote the following shortly before a trip I took back to the United States:

> I was leaving in a few days and I had promised Aunty to take some photos back with me to give to her daughter, who also happens to live in New Jersey. Aunty proceeded to pull out a rather large package wrapped in a plastic bag from Woolworth's. This was obviously not photos. "You don't mind, do you Sareeta dear?" she asked me. When my husband saw how big it was, he started shouting, "Why are you giving her such a large thing? She won't have room for it!" I told her not to worry, it's not a problem. I could make space in my suitcase. I asked her what it was. As she handed it to me, she said, it's a diaper bag. I peeked inside the bag and saw a small white foam and plastic diaper bag with "Sesamstrasse" written on it and Big Bird, Elmo, and Cookie Monster dancing merrily along its border. I did not have the heart to tell Aunty that "Sesamstrasse" is just the German version of Sesame Street, and her relatives in the United States were surely able to buy similar bags without much trouble. There is a new baby in the family you see, she said, and handed me her daughter's address in New Jersey. I glanced at the address and said, well I may have to mail the diaper bag because your daughter lives about three hours by car ride from my house. She said her daughter knew already and would come to collect the bag. I returned home and dutifully called Aunty's daughter the following day. Preethi told me on the phone that she won't pick up the bag but she is sending her brother, an engineer who works close to where I live. The bag itself isn't for her, even though she just had a baby. Rather, it is going to travel with another Aunty to Cleveland, where she is visiting her daughter. From Cleveland it will then go on to India with this daughter to finally reach Preethi's cousin, who also just had a baby of her own. Preethi, on the other hand, is getting ready to send her one-year-old to India with her in-laws. I asked if it was difficult, to send her baby to India. She told me that yes, it

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was, but both she and her husband have jobs and it is just becoming too much for them to handle. So, the diaper bag is going to India after all. It is bought in Germany, then travels to New Jersey by plane, then from northern Jersey to southern Jersey by car, then from Jersey to Ohio by plane, where it will finally board another plane to go to its final destination, Bangalore. All this for a bit of plastic costing no more than thirty dollars, and passing through the hands of professional people who earn salaries in euros and dollars, not rupees.

A diaper bag might seem an odd way to materialize cognitive work, since it is a low-worth object similar to those easily acquirable in any Indian city, but only if materialization is conceptualized as producing financial worth as high-price commodities. This diaper bag is a small plastic token of a parent's love. When children are raised by their grandparents while parents work, the effort invested in making a diaper bag move to India helps to lay nurturing blanket of care over distance. The diaper bag constitutes a community, pulling together strands of kin and friendship over the three continents of Europe, North America, and Asia, creating new bonds in the same gesture that it refreshes existing ones. Although the final recipient may not be aware of all the complicated steps of the bag's dance across the oceans, she is cognizant of the time between its purchase and its arrival, of the status marker of a diaper bag for India where diapers and bags to put them in are uncommon, and of the simple fact that it has passed through innumerable hands to get to her. All this makes it not just a diaper bag but an object invested in chains of care that stretch and connect places across the globe.

In diaspora, the giver and receiver roles of gifting are stretched out across space, so that relations of obligation extend in all directions across the network of kin and family through which a present has passed, since "at any given moment any event [of gift giving] is infused with an ambience of potentialities or 'futurity,' as well as the past."[18] The motion of these gifts, passing as they do through multiple hands, constitutes the very network on which they depend, making of scattered groups a diasporic community—linked through webs of allegiance, obligation, memory, and exchange to multiple points of origin.

The futurity crystallized in small gifts such as the traveling diaper bag disrupts the usual way that diasporic economics are considered. Rather

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than transmitting remittances home, gifts translate cognitive labor into nurture. Often, the way that money is transacted for objects of care reflects a system of value that rests less on the purchase price of objects than on the amount of work invested in them. They make promises of return and of care that imply time spent in regimes of cognitive labor abroad will only be temporary.

In her study of Sri Lankan housemaids working in the Gulf states, Michele Ruth Gamburd shows how family structures are maintained despite long-term separation by means of investing profits into conspicuous items of consumption such as refrigerators, on the one hand, and into emblems of masculinity such as alcohol, on the other. The combination of large electronics and liquor maintains the standing of a family in the village and enhances male potency, associated with the abandonment of intoxication.[19] By comparison, in the current instance, the problem is transforming a surfeit of capital into the goods of affection. What will count as nurturing objects will depend on the care with which gifts are chosen and the work it takes to send them.

Choosing and Sending Gifts: Signaling the New

The rhythm of most programmers' weekends is punctuated by the purchases of concrete items, either to be sent to India or to be used, always with the idea that they are movable objects of consumption, such as a laptop computer or DVD player. On one occasion, several members of the group bought cell phones that were on sale in a local supermarket to send to India with someone who was soon to travel there. These cell phones had a particularly sleek black look and were spade shaped with a slide-out keyboard—a design that they said their relatives in India would appreciate and that was not available there. Another time, I went with Madhu, Bipin, Meenakshi, and Rajeshwari to the clothing store H&M to pick out T-shirts to send home. The four spent almost an hour going through racks of shirts, rejecting all those that they thought could be easily purchased in India. Now that Indians have access to similar consumer goods as those abroad, they told me, it has become harder to choose gifts that family will value. They first rejected all T-shirts with sayings or graphics on them. These were too commonplace in Indian metropolises today. Next, they thought about color choices. They tried to find colors that were not so readily available in India, like pale yellows for men or unusual shades of blue. Finally, they settled on plain

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polo shirts in a variety of colors, which they thought would be something different from what could be gotten at home.

The taste that programmers enact when deciding among colors and styles of T-shirts and among cell phone aesthetics may be understood as creating a pattern of consumption that marks class membership.[20] Yet, from the perspective of gifting, it is independent, individual, and chosen activity that distinguishes IT workers and other professionals from the mass of Indians at home and, increasingly, those abroad working in lower-paid service industries. These gifts are understood at home as a marker of this choice, signifying the worth of having traveled abroad, and acting as a material stand-in for absent sons, daughters, spouses, and parents. Gifts bring with them a world that people at home cannot yet access. Being part of the Indian middle class is not only about access to consumer goods but about access to the broad and open-ended worldly possibilities that these goods can index, since "these goods communicate a desire to belong to the same wider world to which both the inhabitants of the global metropoles and the affluent . . . belong."[21] Small gifts then simultaneously divert cognitive labor into chains of care and consolidate an Indian middle-class position as being part of establishing ways of living for Indian subjects more broadly. Picking just the right T-shirt can open up a conversation by proxy about what could be a good life and how it is best lived, as design, price, color, and quality become indexes of affection and of material well-being. In other words, perhaps what is most important in the materialization of immaterial work for middle-class Indians abroad is the opportunity to try out, argue over, and negotiate the "ends" of work.

Many cell phones, T-shirts, and photos make their way into Adi and Maya's suitcases as they move back to London. On a sunny day in May in their Kreuzberg apartment, friends and well-wishers come and go, many bearing small packages. While a Tamil film plays in the background, in the bedroom, three suitcases sit on the bed with their guts spilling out. Programmers approach Maya and Adi with parcels to be delivered to family in the United States, in England, and in India. They have each figured out a person in London who will pick up the package and send it on or take it in their suitcases further on this journey. Maya and Adi find room for most of the packages they are given. While the couple fits the parcels together with their clothes in their suitcase like a complex, three-

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dimensional puzzle, in the front room the talk turns to the film. A familiar debate begins on the quotidian scene of family life flickering on screen, as the audience weighs the material well-being of life abroad with the emotional attachments such images evoke. The debates frame gifting as an act that is both economic and extraeconomic, transferring wealth and innovating ways of inhabiting regimes of cognitive migrant labor.

Gifts materialize cognitive work by commensurating the world of work with the demands of family and friends.[22] They help make convincing arguments for the value of work overseas and extend care at a distance, even as they produce a feeling of ownership over a cosmopolitan world of goods and ideas by signaling the new. In these ways, gifts both disrupt and reaffirm the logic of cognitive labor—they slow down the pace of work through care taken in choosing and sending low-worth things, and they performatively enunciate the worth of the global IT industry to making middle-class lives in India.

The joy of converting money into gifts is one way to make cognitive labor material. Telling jokes which bend and warp the conventions of cognitive work is another. As I recount below, jokes also diffuse and limit the extent to which the norms of labor can be subverted.

Joking as Undermining the Office

Anthropologists seem to be rediscovering humor as a site of social analysis.[23] Taking exception to earlier structural analyses of jokes that treated humor as a means of reasserting social order, more recent analyses strive to understand how jokes work in situations of uncertainty and how they "may unsettle the status quo and destabilize the social order."[24] Like some earlier cultural analyses, these new efforts nevertheless see jokes as providing a counterdiscourse or alternative frame to accepted norms. In this way, they follow from Mary Douglas's argument that jokes "connect widely differing fields" in a way that "destroys hierarchy and order."[25] When viewed from within cognitive economies, jokes do something else. They help translate the labor of coding into the delight of juxtaposing different possible social orders and the opportunity juxtaposition affords for imagining new worlds.[26]

In corporate work, this enjoyment faces off against what Gabriella Coleman calls "the question of sovereignty" or the ability to shape and pursue projects in acts of individual expression and technical creation."[27] In

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Coleman's account of hacker wit, jokes simultaneously build a common platform of insider knowledge and elevate a single coder above his peers by reminding "the user that behind these highly systematized genres, there is a discriminating and creative individual."[28] Like Coleman's hackers, the Indian programmer emerges as a thinking and desiring presence in the office, where others are governed only by the rule of the clock or the rule of profit. This kind of focus on the embodied pleasures of coding does not strictly oppose immaterial labor but is rather a counterconduct, a practice that emerges when affect is constructed as something essential to the workplace.[29] It can "unwork" programming, moving it toward "pleasure in the now" rather than ends-oriented labor as it is constructed through the examples of the hardworking German and the cunning American.

Lee Siegel's study of humor in India argues that as an alternative to Greek-derived traditions, where tragedy and comedy are two opposing sides of theatricality, in Sanskritic theories of humor, jokes are a flavor (*rasa*) that can be added to any emotional tone—from romantic love to heroism—as intentional parody. "The comic rasa," writes Siegel, "is experienced when something tastes funny, when representations of the emotions of love or courage or sadness fail to produce the corresponding and expected" emotions.[30] Comedy is used to point out that "the depictions of the emotions which correspond to the aesthetic sentiments—courage, fear, sorrow, love, and the others—are not real or appropriate."[31] In other words, when drawing on this tradition of humor, the turn to a joke can be used to remind oneself or others not to take themselves too seriously or, in a more piquant vein, to point out the hypocrisy of those who should know better—the lecherous holy man, the venal man of the people, the criminal police officer. The lazy programmer as a contradictory trope brought to light the comic rasa of corporate culture where adherence to coming and going on time often masks the nonperformance of work. Being lazy but hardworking, in Rajeshwari's joke, is both a source of pride and an admission of a shared flaw. It also mocked the programmers themselves—those who should be professionally ambitious but find themselves to be more lazy than the hardworking Germans around them. This ironical attitude toward the self has been a pillar of middle-class identity in South Asia since the colonial period, where "irony provided a center to" both the large-scale adjustments to new political realities and "the almost invisible readjustments of behavior in the everyday."[32] The current conjuncture that resituates

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middle-class Indians as essential to, yet often marginalized within global coding economies, marks another moment of increased social tension in which "laughter and insight go hand and hand."[33]

I often noticed that jokes of the kind Rajeshwari told me came after moments of intense, unresolvable discussion and disagreement. She told me her joke after we had been walking in the park and talking for some time. We turned in our conversation to the topic of why, in her terms, India is "so behind" the West. I dutifully recited my history of colonialism and the theory of the drain of wealth from India by the British Raj, and Rajeshwari countered with the impatience of time. She responded that the British Raj was, after all, history and that little progress had really been made since then. I wanted in part to reply to her with an account of how those structures of governance carried over into Indian governing ideologies after independence, but I stopped myself, aware that her whole life and experience in India had led her to this question and to her assessment of the current situation. We had reached a sort of impasse in the conversation at this point, and into this breach Rajeshwari came with her joke.[34]

I do not wish to pin down a single meaning or function to Rajeshwari's comic intervention in the eddy of our conversation. Perhaps she was finding through the joke a way to resolve the dilemma of India's "backwardness" by pointing out the two disparate ideas of civilized life submerged in this narrative—one measured in work finished, the other measured in work enjoyed. Perhaps, too, she was poking fun at me, the cunning American, who argues a question about India's present state of development in terms of a narrative of past colonial events. Maybe the joke was a reminder not to take the discourse of progress too seriously. But the joke also made me uneasy in that it provided an answer to Rajeshwari's question—"Why is India so behind the West"—in the varying capacities of Indians, Germans, and Americans. Indians simply did not have the work ethic, according to this other possible reading of the joke.

One day in early spring as we were sitting around drinking hot cups of tea in Meenakshi and Rajeshwari's sitting room, as the conversations had meandered yet again from the advancement of Europe over India and the impending rise of India nonetheless, Mihir stopped everything with a cutting joke. Mihir had a friend and his wife visiting from Switzerland where they were both doing postdocs in microbiology. This friend, an old classmate from Mumbai, explained how the lab facilities over there were

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so much better than in India and the scientists so much more dedicated to their work. His wife, though, was of the opinion that the vanguard of science was moving squarely away from Europe. It was already located in the United States. "And," she continued, "it would soon be moving to India and China completely." We all nodded sagely in agreement. If IT technologies could move to India and China, was it not only a matter of time before other sciences moved there as well? Mihir broke out into a grin.

Pausing for dramatic effect, he looked around at all of us seated on the floor and began. Three archaeologists, Mihir reported, "are digging in the distant future. The first is Russian. He digs 50,000 feet down, finds copper wires, and says, look, we had telephones! The second is American. The American digs 60,000 feet down, finds cables, and says, look, we had fiber optics. The third is Indian. He digs 100,000 feet, finds nothing, and says, look, we had cellular phones!"

The room roared with laughter, thighs were slapped to shouts of "Too good, too good." And I asked Mihir later what made the joke so funny. He answered, "Everyone is going so crazy over this technology thing. This is just taking it to the extreme." Mihir thought that "everyone, absolutely everyone, these bosses, the politicians, whomever," were touting the prospects of IT labor to ridiculous extents.

The joke came after an afternoon-long meandering conversation among a dozen or so programmers that ranged from science and religion to national development. The discussion was quite heated at times, with one faction arguing for the inevitable rise of India in the world and another asserting that almost anywhere was better than India. The evidence presented for the former were historical figures such as Ashoka (the third-century BCE Hindu-Buddhist emperor), whereas evidence for the latter was modern-day comparisons of working conditions for scientists in the United States, Germany, and especially Switzerland. Talk had once again reached an impasse. There was no simple way to resolve what was better for Indians, waiting for India to rise or seemingly abandoning India and searching out the conditions in which their work could be done elsewhere. Mihir's joke is again quite ambiguous. It could be poking fun at those who cling to the idea of a once and again resplendent India, including Hindu nationalist idealogues who claim the primacy of Hindu science. Or it could be saying, with an ounce of pride, that Indians will, no matter what, even in the face of all evidence to the contrary, never really give up on India and

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will make something out of nothing, a trait of tenacity and improvisation, often called *jugaad*, of which they can be proud.

What the joke did do was to defuse the argument and make an opening in this impasse. Everyone laughed, or at least smiled appreciatively, and the talk could move on to other things. Here, the timing of the joke provided its comedic flavor; it was again an exhortation not to take the dominant mode of the discourse (patriotic, heroic) too seriously. And it was a way to defuse the tension within the group around intractable problems, like international development and the unknown future, and the necessity of being a patriotic Indian. By allowing rigorous discussion while also drawing a line around the limits of discussion, these conversations and the jokes that end them reinforce "the middle class's claim of being an enlightened representative of public opinion while also needing to distinguish itself" from how other groups might expand the materialization of labor.[35]

Distance from the World of Work (and Migration)

Another mode of joking I came across loosens personal attachment to the politics of global IT work. While I was sitting with Adi talking to him about visa laws in various countries, he quite unexpectedly pulled from his worktable a letter he had received from the German visa office. I reproduce it here in full because what he gave me after showing me this letter was a joke that seemed to mirror, if even in a different register, the form of the letter. It read, in German (and excerpted for length):

> Dear Mr. Srinivas:
> According to the documents provided here, you last entered the Federal Republic of Germany on 05.06.2002 with a visa that allowed you to take up employment as an *IT*-Specialist.
>
> The first resident permit was issued you for this purpose on 07.07.2003 through 30.06.2004.
>
> In the meantime, you moved into my area of responsibility and applied for an extension of your residence permit on 25.06.2004. At the same time you stated in your interview of 05.08.2004 that you have been unemployed since 01.10.2003.
>
> According to the Ordinance on Employment of 01.08.2002, as *IT*-labor [*IT* Fachkraft], you have the right to unemployment benefits for six months after having been employed for a period of one year. This

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time limit is expired and new employment has obviously not been obtained.

According to § 10 AuslG I.V.m. *IT AV* [the Immigration Law], a residence permit can be issued.

Foreigners are allowed to reside in the Federal Republic of Germany only for special purposes. Such a special residence purpose is, for example, an activity or apprenticeship according to the *AAV*. This also means, however, that it lies in the interest of the Federal Republic of Germany for the foreigner to leave immediately on completion of the purpose of residence.

Because of the high population density and the duties of the Federal Republic of Germany towards members of the states of the European Union as well as members of other foreign states that have taken up permanent residence on federal territory, there is an official interest in controlling the immigration and residence of members of foreign states. For this reason, following the prescriptions of the foreigners' laws is particularly important.

This means that it lies in the interests of the Federal Republic of Germany for foreigners as a rule to emigrate again immediately on the completion of the purpose of residence.

Because of the factual and legal situation described I intend to reject your application for an extension of the residence permit.

I further intend to issue you an emigration deadline of 3 months after receiving my final decision and in the case of an involuntary emigration to threaten you with extradition to India according to § 50 para. 2 AuslG.

At the same time I notify you here that you can be extradited to another country to which you are allowed to immigrate or that is bound to accept you.

Your Sincerely,
On behalf of [*Im Auftrag*]

After we parsed the bureaucratic language, we talked for a while about the claims of this particular bureaucrat. Adi was particularly irked by the power that this individual had over his case. It was clear from the language that the bureaucrat could have decided to extend his visa. In fact, the reason to deny a visa had to be made in terms of whether "the residence of

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the foreigner for any other reason restricts or places in danger the interests of the Federal Republic of Germany." We focused on the reasons she had given, "the high population density and the duties of the Federal Republic of Germany towards members of the states of the European Union as well as members of other foreign states that have taken up permanent residence on federal territory." There was no population density problem in Germany. Newspapers had been reporting for years that the birth rate in Germany was sinking, to the detriment of the country. Unless, of course, as Adi pointed out, she had meant that the "immigrant" population was too high in Germany. This was clearly a political issue, thought Adi. He further opined that it revealed the anti-immigrant attitude of most Germans—this was already known to him. He was perplexed and bothered by the seemingly arbitrary decision-making process. It was the power of the state as embodied in the deciding bureaucrat that troubled Adi.[36] He thought that well-qualified technological experts like himself should be subject to a different, more logical decision-making process and not lumped together with all other immigrants.

After we finished talking about his letter, he thought for a while and with a grin rushed back over to his desk. He told me he wanted to show me something and printed out an e-mail he had received earlier in the week. It was a joke about outsourcing, and it read (excerpted for length):

> OUTSOURCING ANNOUNCEMENT, Washington, D.C.—Congress today announced that the Office of the President of the United States will be outsourced to overseas as of August 30. The move is being made to save $400K a year in salary, a record $521 billion in deficit expenditures and related overhead.
>
> "The cost of savings will be quite significant," says Congressman Adam Smith (R-Wash), who, with the aid of Congress's research arm, the General Accounting Office, has studied outsourcing of American jobs extensively. "We simply can no longer afford this level of outlay and remain competitive on the world stage," Congressman Smith said. Exporting American jobs has been a popular trend lately, ironically at the urging of President Bush.
>
> Mr. Bush was informed by e-mail this morning of the termination of his position. He will receive health coverage, expenses and salary until his final day of employment. After that, with a two week waiting

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> period, he will then be eligible for $240 a week from unemployment insurance for 13 weeks.
>
> Unfortunately he will not be able to receive state Medicaid health insurance coverage as his unemployment benefits are over the required limit. "I'm in shock," Mr. Bush stated, "I thought for sure I'd have some job security around here. I have no idea what I'll do now," he further lamented.
>
> Preparations have been under way for some time for the job move.
>
> Sanji Gurvinder Singh of Indus Teleservices, Mumbai, India, will be assuming the Office of President of the United States as of September 1. Mr. Singh was born in the United States while his parents were here on student visas, thus making him eligible for the position. He will receive a salary of $320 USD a month but with no health coverage or other benefits.
>
> Congress stressed patience when calling Mr. Singh as he may not be fully aware of all the issues involved with his new position. A Congressional Spokesman noted that Mr. Singh has been given a script tree to follow which will allow him to respond to most topics of concern. The Spokesperson further noted that "additional savings will be realized as these scripting tools have already been used previously by Mr. Bush here in the US. Such scripts will enable Mr. Singh to provide an answer without having to fully understand the issue itself."
>
> Congress continues to explore other outsourcing possibilities, including that of Vice-President and most Cabinet positions.

This kind of humor is not quite about refusing to take oneself seriously; it is instead about refusing to take the world the programmers operate in too seriously. As Mihir explained, "Outsourcing is hype." At the same time, because it is hype, Adi will get another job in London. And again, at the same time, because of the hype about the political costs of outsourcing, Adi was refused a visa extension. This was how Adi sketched out the humor of this joke to me: it poked fun at all these bureaucratic nation-states and their obsession with the Indian IT worker.

The formalism of the joke mimics the formal tone of the bureaucratic letter. Using the genre of a newspaper article, the joke circulates like a piece of authentic news, using the writerly conventions of an article to produce tension between the reality of the news report and its unbelievable content.[37] The

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unknown author interlaces the story with “knowing winks” to the audience that heighten the comedic tension in the text. The name of the congressman, for instance, is Adam Smith, a nod to the author of the *Wealth of Nations* and one of the founding fathers, as it were, of capitalism. The joke also pays loving fidelity to the legal rules and regulations that affect non-national workers and have become a staple of the experience of migrant coders. It points out why, for instance, the Indian worker is eligible to be president (he was born in the United States while his parents were there on a student visa) and reveals when President Bush’s health care and unemployment benefits will expire (thirteen weeks). The joke makes the theme of cost saving present throughout, highlighting the small salary ($320) the Indian “president” will make.

For Adi, this joke cancels out the sting of the letter from the Foreigner’s Office. He is reassured that it is all just farce, the life of the IT worker is a tale, told by an idiot, and all the world’s a stage. Adi not only tells jokes to regain his perspective but also meditates regularly and attends, when in India, local meetings with others who meditate. He often tries to convince others to meditate too, with varying success. Like meditation, the joke helps him let go of his anger about the visa letter. In his interpretation, the ultimate message of the joke is that nation-states act in ways that are arbitrary yet unassailable. The only solution is to detach from the very idea that the nation-state might be a rational actor, make new opportunities for oneself when able, and laugh, whenever possible.

Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak analyze an emergent mode of parody in the United States they call “American stiob,” after a late-socialist version of parody “typified by a parodic overidentification with the predictable and repeatable forms of authoritative discourse.”[38] This overidentification with authoritative discourse is effective as a means of dissent precisely because of its ability to resist being slotted, and therefore dismissed, as political.[39] In other words, by hewing closely to forms of political speech but changing the content, such hyperrealistic parody can unearth and make available for critique the status quo and the rhetorical tropes that undergird it that would otherwise be difficult to combat.

The fake news announcement about outsourcing the U.S. presidency uses this mode of parodic overidentification, which is heightened when Adi puts the joke side by side with, in his opinion, the equally ridiculous letter from the German Foreigner’s Office. The strict adherence to the form

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of an article allows for the content of the joke—the replacement of President Bush with an Indian worker in Mumbai—to appear credible and, in the process, reveals petty injustices (lack of benefits, race toward the lowest wage) of the actual, everyday workings of the software outsourcing industry. At the same time, unlike the public addresses that Boyer and Yurchak analyze, this joke circulates in a more limited public sphere, where its ability to rupture the perceived way of doing things confronts the need to accept and find ways to thrive within the status quo. Because Indian programmers parody from the racialized margins of European-American life, their critique is almost exclusively made available for private consumption. These kinds of jokes do not point in one unambiguous direction but work instead on multiple fronts to reconcile the uneven politics of the multiple worlds IT workers traverse.

The jokes that Indian professionals tell can create an opening toward imagining things otherwise; they can also be an invitation to accept the unchangeable and work around it, as they do for instance, when they refuse to add comments to their coding projects as a way to make them indispensible in their jobs. Jokes can create closure around seemingly intractable problems, inaugurating agreement in a situation where opinions cannot be resolved.[40] Rituals of telling stop dissent and bring about temporary conversational closure by pointing out the shared, intimate, and contractual nature of diaspora. They build group voice but also undercut that voice from assuming a homogeneous form by refusing to make definitive pronouncements on the future. Jokes can both provide an artificial support presuming agreement in the diasporic community of programmers and remove this prop allowing contradictions to emerge.[41] They arrange, like the chairs do in Meenakshi's sitting room, the group in a circle around one another.

The ways that such jokes work, I will argue in the last section, are key to understanding the middle class as formed through identification with existing frames of sociality but also critiquing the demands that others (family, friends) can make of them. Being a middle-class Indian requires continual assessments that sort what can be individualized from what "confirms and commands long-term commitments."[42] The habitation of being Indian, diasporic, and a programmer partakes of the pleasures of aligning personal goals with social roles but also moving away from them.

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Middle-Class Eros

The times and places of a joke's telling and a gift's giving, how each is chosen, and how each draws an audience of participants around it help programmers bend work toward pleasure. Eros, expressed through enjoyment of jokes and appreciation of gifts, does not conform to value as measured financially but produces for Indian middle classes something just as valuable—it materializes the access to different ways of life that working abroad provides, and it provides a means of adjudicating among these ways of inhabiting the world. In doing so, the joke and the gift create spaces of experimentation and negotiation within their experience of diaspora.

A few days after visiting Mihir's parents in their apartment in Bhavani Peth, I was at my uncle and aunt's house when their daughter-in-law's brother and his wife come to visit. They had with them a suitcase full of stuff they had brought back with them from the United States, where they live, for family and extended kin in Pune. The contents of the suitcase tumbled out onto the living room floor, prompting the brother-in-law to tell us a joke. This gifting, he revealed, "goes too far sometimes." "You know," he continued, "parents sometimes ask people to take big things in their suitcases, like kitchen utensils." And this is not even the worst of it: "Some families send a weekly package of food to their kids in the U.S., by plane!" He laughed, as he told me that these parents think their poor kids will starve in the United States without their care packages. I asked how this could be legal, and he allowed, they pay bribes at the airport to get these packages on the planes.

A programmer named Mayur Reddy was baptized during our late-spring visit to Berlin's Treptower Park with a moniker he would never be able to shed. His phone kept ringing. He was on call with his support team that Sunday and had to be available to answer questions about his company's product and to come into the office if necessary. Each time his phone chirped, he picked it up and walked a few feet away. By the third time, someone shouted out, "Hey, 'Mobile Ready,' what are you answering the phone all the time for?" "Mobile ready" is a pun on "Reddy," and it became his nickname. The joke temporarily punctured the pressure of work, which is real, but at these moments of pleasure, work must not be taken too seriously—a demand for leaving work behind that his fellow programmers are ready to support.

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Middle-class erotics are not boundless. Developing a middle-class imaginary also requires setting limits to pleasure and to critique. Even while they are commensurating worlds of work and of family and friends, joking and gifting are mobilized to curtail dissent. "Mobile Ready" was teased because he was too focused on work—ready with his mobile phone attached to his ear, even when we were off duty and in the park. He seemed to fully embrace the demand of the cognitive economy to fully surrender the "soul" to capitalism, making him unable to turn off his cognitive economy self to focus on the pleasures of daily life. This joke pokes fun at Mayur's cognitive economy work ethic, devaluing the world of work and revaluing his family and friends who demand his time and attention. Parents who FedEx food go overboard too, from the opposite direction. They express their care in daily fussing, expressing at once their inability to let their children be on their own and their ignorance about how life is lived overseas.

The traveling diaper bag extended care for a child across the distance of overseas jobs. As it moved from Europe to the United States and then India, it picked up value as it knit people together and gained in significance as care was taken to transport such a little bag over so many seas. These expeditions transformed cognitive labor into materially affective intimacy. One wonders whether a joke could be made out of this kind of gifting or whether such a small object might remain a testament both to the virtue of hard work and to the pressing need to slow the rush of capitalist labor.

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