

## Chapter 5

# Return Migration, Parenting and the Subcontinent: Parents and Youths' Perspectives of Life in India

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### Abstract

This chapter examines the lifestyles of upper-middle- and upper-class return migrant parents and youth living in Bangalore, a city in southwest India. It does so by addressing the following questions: What benefits do return migrant parents see in raising their children within their country of ethnic origin? What are the experiences of youth who grow up within their country of ethnic origin? I answer these questions by analysing 95 conversations with return migrant parents and their children, as well as alumni of Bangalore-based high schools. Building upon literature related to parenting, social class and racial-ethnic socialisation, I discuss parents' efforts to produce children who have the skills needed to succeed within the twenty-first-century global economy, and how the youth experience these child-rearing practices.

*Keywords:* Return migrants; Indian Americans; parenting; transnational youth; identity; India

### Introduction

I met Naresh and Damini Iyer, an upper-middle-class South Indian return migrant couple, in their penthouse apartment in a high-rise complex located in a northeastern suburb of Bangalore, a city in southwest India. Naresh works as a director for a publicly traded US IT company that has operations around the world. Damini works as a math teacher – a profession she pursued after working

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as a banker so that she could better focus on raising her children. While they live in India full time, Naresh often returns to the United States for work and sometimes takes the couple's son, Anand, with him on these trips.

The Iyers initially moved to the United States for Naresh's work. They first landed in Chicopee, Massachusetts, before relocating to Nevada, Missouri and then, finally, South Carolina. While in the United States, they had two children: Zuleika and Anand. Interestingly, it was their children who motivated them to return to India. Naresh and Damini felt that life in the United States was too easy and that this would handicap their children's ability to succeed later in life. Meanwhile, they began to see India as the place that would give their children the skills needed to achieve success within a competitive world. They also liked that by raising their children in India they would be exposed to Indian culture to a greater extent. Therefore, after spending more than a decade in the United States, Naresh and Damini relocated their family to Bangalore.

They opted for Bangalore, as opposed to their natal city of Chennai, the capital of the South Indian state Tamil Nadu, for two main reasons. First, they anticipated that their children may have some challenges adjusting to the relatively hot and humid weather that is customary in the city. To see if their children could adapt, they tested out living in Chennai for a short period of time. Unfortunately, their children would constantly get sick. Therefore, they felt that this would not be an ideal place to raise their family. Second, they found the schools in Bangalore to be more supportive of people migrating from other parts of the world. They noted that schools in Bangalore would give children 'time to breathe' and 'get adjusted'. For example, shortly after they arrived and enrolled their children in school, their daughter's foreign language teacher would spend half of the day on Saturdays teaching her Devanagari script. Additionally, their daughter's school did not mandate that she be tested in Hindi or Sanskrit. The Iyers compare the welcoming atmosphere they found in Bangalore to the more rigid conditions they anticipated in Chennai where schools would expect their children to have facility in Indian languages, particularly Tamil (a South Indian language), on par with their India-raised classmates from the first day. Therefore, because of the weather in Chennai, their children's health and the openness of Bangalore schools relative to those in their natal city, the Iyers chose to relocate to Bangalore.

Even though they lived outside of Chennai, Damini and Naresh's parents remained very present in their children's lives, especially Anand's. For example, when they first moved to Bangalore, Damini's parents helped Anand adjust to the new city. Anand told me how his maternal grandfather would take him around to places, such as Cubbon Park and the Circus. Importantly, his maternal grandparents' presence in his life has not waned as he got older. He described to me how during his exams, they would come to Bangalore to make him tea and snacks as he studied. While his maternal grandparents make relatively frequent visits to Bangalore, Anand's paternal grandparents do come to the city to help celebrate family birthdays. As a result of his time in India, and getting to know his grandparents, Anand told me that he feels 'better connected to his roots'.

While in India, the Iyers enrolled their children in a well-known, English-medium school with campuses throughout Bangalore, the Indian Academy of Science (IAS). Aside from getting a good education at the school, Zuleika

and Anand could also take advantage of numerous extracurricular activities that would help them better connect with the community and gain beneficial skills that will help them later in their professional lives. For instance, Zuleika told me how through IAS she volunteered with the Interact Club, which she describes as a corollary to the Rotary Club for those under the age of 18. Through this group, she took field trips to destitute homes where she brought household necessities, such as cleaning products, and served food to those in need. She also volunteered for a group that assists those with autistic children, which gave her the chance to learn about how autism impacts families. As an aspiring doctor, she found this community work to be important because she could see, first-hand, the complex problems facing families and individuals with health issues. According to her, these experiences helped improve her empathy skills.

While there are many boons to being able to raise their children in Bangalore, Damini expressed to me some remorse about aspects of life in the United States that are not easily replicated in the subcontinent. Many of her concerns stem from the level of cultural engagement she sees among her children, especially her youngest, Anand. For instance, she expressed a longing for the days in which they would attend events at the Hindu temple as a family and send the children to Sunday School. She also recalled how Anand used to sing a Tamil song during Diwali and be very active in celebrating the harvest festival Pongal – activities that he has stopped doing since moving to Bangalore. Damini also feels that had they stayed in the United States, Zuleika and Anand would have kept up with their studies of Carnatic music and learnt to play the veena. Instead, they both play keyboard and Western classical violin. Despite these concerns, the Iyers like that by relocating their children to Bangalore, they can provide them with first-hand experience of life in the subcontinent, which they believe will benefit them once they become adults.

By analysing 95 interviews with upper-middle- and upper-class return migrant parents and their children, as well as alumni of Bangalore-based high schools, this chapter addresses the following questions: What benefits do return migrant parents see in raising their children within their country of ethnic origin? What are the experiences of youth who grow up within their country of ethnic origin? To answer these questions, I examine how affluent return migrant parents use resources available in India to cultivate children who have the skills and disposition necessary to become hardworking, high-achieving, and empathetic adults with a deep connection to their ethnic identity.

Through this chapter's discussion of return migrant parents and youth, I illustrate how parenting practices and childhoods are changing in response to what is taking place within the contemporary global economy. By focussing on the experiences of relatively affluent Indian and Indian American return migrant parents and youth living in Bangalore, India, this chapter broadens our perspective on what it means to be a transnationally mobile Indian or Indian American, explores how the global economy shapes elite parenting practices and childhoods, and makes an argument for why parents – who are relatively well-settled in the United States – may opt to uproot their lives and relocate to a country roughly 8,000 miles away. In other words, this chapter provides a snapshot of contemporary life for one relatively small, elite group, and in so

doing, it contributes to our understanding of international migration, parenting within a transnational context and elite childhoods.

## Child-Rearing Practices in a Transnational Context

Intensive parenting practices have become normalised among relatively affluent parents. Intensive parenting is characterised as labour-intensive, child-centred, expert-guided and emotionally absorbing (Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996). This form of parenting emerged as a result of a confluence of factors including parents' fears that their children will *not* be 'okay' in a competitive, global economy (Brown, 2014; Faircloth, 2014), the notion that childhood is a sacred space and that children have a special value outside the market economy (Hays, 1996), and the belief that parents' actions are deterministic of their children's future academic, professional and personal outcomes (Faircloth, 2014).

Annette Lareau (2011) conceptualised one type of intensive parenting logic: concerted cultivation. Lareau originally coined this term based on a study that included Black and White middle-class families in the United States. She found that middle-class parents engaged in child-rearing practices designed to give their children advantages later in life. These practices include discussions between parents and children, as well as children's participation in organised extracurricular activities. Lareau suggests that through these experiences, children develop a sense of entitlement, learn to make demands on adults, and develop the ability to navigate institutions, such as schools, to their advantage. Lareau's analysis of parenting practices forefronts the role of social class in shaping parenting norms. However, other scholars (e.g. Ayling, 2019; Etienne, 2021) argue for the necessity of considering how class *and* race work in tandem to influence the way parents raise their children.

There are three notable examples of scholars who explicitly build upon Lareau's work by infusing her class-based parenting framework with discussions of race and ethnicity to explain parenting practices among Indians in diaspora. Collectively, these studies extend Lareau's framework by placing race and ethnicity at the centre of the child-rearing logic of middle-class parents from minority backgrounds. However, they are just three examples among many others (for examples, see, Barn, 2008; Mukherjee, 2021; Purkayastha, 2005) that discuss how members of the Indian/South Asian diaspora pass on elements of their ethnic cultural heritage to the next generation.

For instance, in Dhingra's (2018) elaboration of concerted cultivation as it applies to middle- and upper-middle-class Indian American families in the United States, the author argues that parents' status as immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities influences their emphasis on education and their proclivity for promoting their children's involvement in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. Meanwhile, Usha Mukherjee and Ravinder Barn's (2021) study of professional middle-class Indian parents in Britain reveals that parents' desire for their children to learn more about their heritage and combat racist discrimination influences the types of activities in which they enrol them.

For example, they highlight how parents promote their children's engagement in heritage activities through language lessons, watching Bollywood films and being involved in Bollywood and Indian classical dancing. Additionally, they describe how parents incorporate discussions about racial identity and racism into their conversations, as well as enrol their children in self-defence courses to help them come to terms with and combat their prior and possible future experiences of racial discrimination.

Last, Pallavi [Banerjee \(2022\)](#) conceptualised the term *visa-regimented trans-cultural cultivation* to describe the parenting practices she witnessed among families of highly skilled Indian workers in the United States, whose child-rearing practices are shaped by their (middle) class background, transnational lifestyle and legal immigration status. This parenting logic consists of involvement in extracurricular activities, passing along aspects of ethnic heritage through religion, food, language, skill development and spending extended periods of unstructured, leisure time with extended family both within the United States and India. Overall, this parenting logic aims to cultivate children who are multilingual, talented and excel in school.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on child-rearing practices by considering how upper-middle- and upper-class Indian and Indian American return migrant parents enact a class-specific, racialised parenting logic within a transnational context. I refer to this parenting logic as *transnational concerted cultivation* (for a more comprehensive discussion of this concept, see [Atterberry, 2021](#)). An important aspect of transnational concerted cultivation is harnessing the resources available in India to produce high-achieving, hardworking and empathetic children who are also connected to their ethnic heritage. Interestingly, parents have a relatively easy time providing their children with the resources they need to cultivate the first three characteristics compared with the fourth. For example, while the parents I interviewed want to use India as a tool to socialise their children into what it means to *be an Indian*, they face unexpected challenges to doing so. These challenges emerge from how Indian culture is structured in India relative to the United States, and the interactions their children have with peers and extended family members that challenge their ability to claim an unquestioned Indian identity. Parents did not describe similar challenges when it came to the other qualities. I elaborate on this in the findings section.

## Data and Methods

The data analysed for this chapter come from 95 interviews with return migrant parents, their children and former students from Bangalore-based high schools who were born and/or raised in the United States prior to relocating to India with their families. Participants in this study come from upper or dominant caste, upper-middle- or upper-class backgrounds. Additionally, the vast majority of participants are Hindu. They either work as professionals within the areas of healthcare, information technology (IT) or education, or are the children of similarly situated professionals. In other words, those who I interviewed grew up with and continue to experience varying degrees of class and caste privilege.

Additionally, all participants live within a context where transnational mobility is the norm. In the case of parents, they may anticipate travelling internationally for work or vacation. Meanwhile, the youth I interviewed often recall travelling to the United States, Europe and elsewhere to attend summer programmes, enjoy family vacations or participate in school-based exchange programmes.

I conducted all the interviews, except for one, between May and June 2015, and March 2017 and January 2018. About 80% of the interviews took place in-person, whereas the remaining 20% were conducted via telephone or a videoconferencing technology (e.g. Skype or WhatsApp). Interviews were conducted remotely if a research participant lived further than a two-hour commute from my residence. In one instance, I conducted a remote interview with a high-school student at the request of the parent to limit the interview's interference with their child's schoolwork. All interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I developed an interview script that included questions and broader points of discussion that I wanted to address with each participant; however, I let each interviewee dictate the flow of the interview. In this way, I could make sure that what was most important to each participant was discussed while also addressing the topics necessary for my study.

Each interview lasted between 19 minutes and over 2 hours. Most interviews were digitally audio-recorded and then transcribed. In the rare instance when participants asked that I not record them, I took handwritten notes on the interview and then created digital field notes. I have used pseudonyms for all participants and obscured any identifying details to protect their identity. Only after analysing the interview transcripts and field notes did I connect the data to extant literature on parenting, ethnic identity and childhood.

## **Producing High-Achieving, Hardworking and Empathetic Children**

Parents described India as being better suited as a place to raise their children relative to the United States. For instance, Riya Haldar states:

Some of our Indian friends [in the USA] who decided to settle and stay back there [...], their kids were not high achievers as compared to the parents. The parents were super achievers. They were like the well-known M. D. [medical doctor], gynaecologist, and the husband was some big fund manager with like a million dollar home with like a pool and stuff and the kid could be – for all you know – a garage attendant some place and still trying to figure himself out. And um, which was I guess for them it was alright, but for me it didn't sit well. I mean, in my view it is that if you are having kids, you should give them the best and they should also be somewhere in life.

Riya saw what was happening to her friends' children and she feared the same thing possibly happening with her own – if they stayed in the United States. She conveyed to me how she felt that the lack of rigour in some of the local middle and high schools, along with the cushion provided by upper-middle- and upper-class parents' affluence were to blame for the lack of achievement among the US' second generation. Fearing her children having a similar outcome, she and her husband began to question how (and where) they were raising their children and ultimately decided that relocating to India would be the best option.

Other parents felt similarly. They believed that second-generation Indian Americans in the United States were not pushed to excel. They described witnessing the children of friends and extended family members struggling to enter a professional vocation. Additionally, they expressed concerns about how growing up in affluent urban and suburban enclaves in the United States may distort their children's understanding of how the world works. In other words, parents had qualms about raising their children in the United States. In contrast, they believed that India would provide their children with the resources and motivation to garner the skills needed for future success.

### ***Enrolment in 'Good' K-12 Schools***

Bangalore's educational offerings serve as one of its main attractions for the transnationally mobile, affluent families that I spoke with. The city provides a mix of 'good' English-medium schools that offer state, national and international curricula. Importantly, these schools provide their students with the opportunity to cultivate the skills needed to be successful in high school and later in life. For example, I spoke with Kiara, an 11th grade student at IAS, who intends to go to college in India or Singapore for architecture. When identifying the benefits of attending IAS, Kiara told me, 'I've always liked doing something different. Like something that was other than academics or other than just coming back home and doing homework. Something that's as a break but would also add up to my career, add up to my resume'. At the time of the interview, she was part of a Cultural Club and Environmental Club, so I asked her, 'So, how do you feel being involved in these different clubs and activities is helping you build towards your career?' She replied by saying that through these school clubs she has learnt skills such as how to be a 'good loser', how to initiate conversations with strangers and acquaintances, and the value of teamwork. Additionally, at IAS, she is learning how to adapt to change and compete for scarce resources. She referred to the opportunities provided by the school as helping her to climb 'a ladder' whereby she can reach new personal and academic heights both at and beyond IAS.

Others, such as Pratap, a student at the Richmond Academy of Science (Academy) – a school that offers the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum – talked about how they benefitted from the international exposure their school provides, viz international exchange programmes and/or having classmates from around the world. They felt that this exposure early on would help them navigate the multi-ethnic and multinational spaces they might encounter in college and/or

the workplace. Still others liked how their school provided them with a plethora of extracurricular activities where they could cultivate leadership skills, such as time management and public speaking.

Beyond facilitating their children's cultivation of advantageous skills, parents also appreciated how Bangalore-based high schools could catapult their children to competitive colleges within India, and around the world. For instance, when remarking on how he decided to send his sons to the Academy, Matthew says, 'The students coming out of there go to great schools – the U Chicagos, Johns Hopkins and things of that sort. Great schools'. Overall, parents could rely on schools in Bangalore to provide their children with a 'good' education, and they could relax knowing that their decision to relocate to the subcontinent would not handicap their children's chances of attending a competitive college or university in India, the United States or elsewhere. The ability of Bangalore-based schools to prepare their students for admission to competitive colleges and universities is evident in where their alumni attend college. Some of the alumni I interviewed attended institutions such as Princeton, Pomona, New York University, Fordham and UC Berkeley.

### ***Facilitating Connections to Extended Family Members***

One of the other boons of relocating to India was the opportunity for children to form close connections with their extended family members. For example, I spoke with one woman, Amara Bhalsod, a mom of two who lived in Oregon before relocating to Bangalore, about the benefits of raising her children in India. During our conversation, she talked about the importance of family in helping keep children on track. She said:

So, you are not like the driver of your car – that is the thing. Your parents, your elders, your cousins – they also guide you in a lot of things: how to go about the life path, which is like appropriate and much safer – before you fall in a pit of a problematic situation, which is not easy to handle in India but not acceptable also.

By having extended family in the area to support them, Amara believes that her children are more likely to make good decisions and avoid making bad ones. Additionally, Amara feels that forming connections with extended family members will encourage them to pursue a more professional path. For instance, she liked how, 'In India, everybody – most of her [daughter's] cousins – are very, very competitive. They all want to join medicine or IT or accounting, something like that. Like everybody's pursuing a career'. This is different from life in the United States, which Amara characterised as being much more permissive of things like teen pregnancies and dropping out of school relatively early. By having extended family in the area to support them, Amara and the other parents I spoke with believe that children are more likely to make decisions that will benefit them.

The importance of family to children's aspirations is highlighted by the case of Aarushi Kaleka. In her early years, Aarushi's grandparents took care of her while her parents were busy working. She spent a lot of time with her maternal grandfather who worked as a cardiologist. When talking about his influence in her life, she says, 'I've been really inspired by my grandfather – he's a doctor – and also, he's my main inspiration. Just seeing him treat his patients every day just made me want to become like him'. Due to her grandfather's influence, Aarushi anticipates pursuing a career in the medical profession as either a psychiatrist or a cardiac surgeon.

### ***Exposure to the Economically Marginalised***

Extended family members play an important role in transnational youths' lives. They shape youths' aspirations, while also providing them with the support needed to excel academically and professionally. However, extended family members are not the only resource parents utilise to ensure that their children grow up to be hardworking, high-achieving and empathetic. Parents also value exposing their children to the lives of those from less affluent backgrounds to encourage them to excel, while also learning to be considerate and caring of others.

I spoke with one couple that values exposing their children to the economically marginalised – Dhaval and Kamda Chola, a middle-aged professional couple from Tamil Nadu. In the United States, the Cholas lived in a relatively affluent section of the California Bay Area. As a result of where they lived, their children's exposure to the poor was quite limited. However, in India the family has hired servants including a maid and a cook. While Kamda expressed some ambivalence as to whether having servants was good for their children's development in general, it was quite clear that they appreciated how having servants enabled them to learn more than they otherwise might about the lives of the poor. Exposing their children to the economically marginalised has dual purposes: to make them more empathetic to others, and to encourage them to be hardworking and steadfastly pursue their goals. This is clear in the following exchange between Dhaval and Kamda:

Dhaval: So, I think that allows them to appreciate the things they have a bit more, right. I think they have some level of appreciation now that they do have it a lot easier than other people. Just given sort of how they've grown up. I think that appreciation would not have been as easy had they grown up in the Bay Area. So, the heterogeneity in the environment. The diversity there. It is not something we had to work at giving them. It just happens automatically, right. Like I was saying, we have gardeners, maids, cooks coming in. They all come with their own problems.

Kamda: So, they know a different side of the world, you know. We live this way, they live that way. [...] So, they probably get somewhere in their mind that I really have to do something very well in my life: [...] make a living for myself, do a job, be independent. Otherwise, there's also this other side where life is not so good. Maybe that pushes them to do a little better.

Like what other parents expressed, raising their children in India is paramount to the Cholas being able to inculcate the 'correct' values in their daughters. While in the United States their lives would have been too circumscribed to those who come from a similar class background, in India they learn about the lives of those from different social classes first-hand. This not only encourages their daughters' curiosity and concern about people who come from less affluent circumstances but also demonstrates to them that they are relatively privileged, while encouraging them to not take their advantages for granted and to work hard. The Cholas are not the only parents who encourage their children in this way. I also spoke with parents who demonstrate their compassion for others by running social service organisations, helping their children conduct social service work and donating money to support college scholarships.

Parents' efforts to encourage their children to care about those who are less affluent are not lost on their children. For instance, children described being involved in different volunteer activities including participating in clean-up drives around local lakes and highways, establishing libraries in government-funded schools, raising money for children experiencing health crises and joining the National Social Service (an initiative by India's Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports that facilitates high school and college students' participation in government-led community service activities). One of the most profound acts of social service engagement came from Sajan Talwari, a student at the Academy. In response to noticing the number of children in Bangalore who lacked shoes, Sajan started a shoe drive with his father's assistance. Their efforts ended up receiving media coverage, and so Sajan expanded the shoe drive's operations to include other organisers in different localities.

While it is not clear whether their exposure to the economically marginalised motivates transnational youths' desire to work hard, the youth I spoke to want to succeed. Their efforts to succeed academically and professionally are evidenced through their conscientious attitudes towards their academic and extracurricular activities, their drive to attain their ambitious higher education and professional goals (see [Atterberry, 2021](#)) and their enrolment in highly competitive colleges and universities.

## **Parenting, Ethnic Identity and India**

Some parents hoped that raising their children in India would result in them becoming more grounded in their ethnic identity. For instance, Karun and Malvika Chowdhury saw the move to India as removing any questions that their

eldest child, Liyana, may face about her identity. Karun says, 'As a consequence of the move, it turns out that she doesn't have to be - anything. She's just who she is'. When prompted to elaborate, Karun stated, 'There is something to be said about being amongst Indian people. You're not different. And when you're not different, you're not questioned. And, therefore, you can do what you feel like comfortably. That's it. It's as simple as that'. Karun and Malvika believe that by moving their daughter to India, they have simplified some of the challenges about her identity that she would have encountered in the United States; however, the reality of transnational Indian Americans' experiences in India is much more complicated than what the Chowdhurys describe.

### ***Being Indian (American) in India***

Transnational youth discussed instances in their schools – most often interactions with their classmates – that reminded them of their differences from their India-raised peers. For example, when discussing her experience acclimating to IAS, Bhavya recalled:

There would be girls who would come up and irritate you. And just because I'm from America they used to be like, 'Oh so if you're an American, why are you in India? But if you're an American, how do you know an Indian language? And how do you look Indian?' And I tried to explain to them that I am of Indian origin, but I was born and raised for a few years in America.

School was not a neutral setting in which the multiple identities that Bhavya claimed were equally appreciated and celebrated. In fact, because of her multiple identities, she experienced ridicule from her classmates who struggled to accept that she could be both Indian and American. In contrast to Karun Chowdhury's statement that being among Indians leads to youth benefitting from their identity going unquestioned, Bhavya's example shows that this is far from reality.

Being made to feel different is not an experience unique to those enrolled in a primary or secondary school. This also happens in college. I interviewed Zuleika who – unlike many of her transnational peers – opted to attend college in India. She made this decision because she did not want to accrue debt and knew that she could more easily afford college if she stayed local. When we talked about her experience of belonging within India and the United States, Zuleika stated that she feels that she does not fit in anywhere. In college, her India-raised peers would assume that she was 'just' American. Her transnational background and the years she spent living in India as a child went unacknowledged. Her India-raised peers would say things like 'She's so fancy' to highlight her difference from them. This led to Zuleika feeling *too* American among her college peers in India. This mirrors her feelings of difference in the United States where she often feels *too* Indian.

Even those who are simultaneously citizens of India and US permanent residents reported moments of social ostracism related to their identity. I spoke with one such person, Tiya, about her experiences with having her identity questioned. She described how she experienced the most ridicule through interactions with peers and extended family members who would laugh at her American-accented speech and chide her for not knowing certain Indian languages. Tiya reminds us that these issues related to transnational youths' experiences of identity are not strictly the purview of US citizens living in India. The feeling of being an outsider may also extend to Indian citizens who spent their early years in the United States.

With that said, not everyone experiences bullying or social ostracisation. For example, Kavita – a college student in New York City – shares the following about her time in India, '[...] when I met people from other schools who were Indians from India or weren't from America it wasn't a big deal. If anything, they were like "Oh that's cool, like how was it or something?" No one ever treated me negatively I don't think'. Like Kavita, other transnational youth stated that they did not face social ostracisation while living in India and were generally accepted by their peers and the broader community.

### ***The Role of Context in Parenting Practices***

Not every parent has or holds onto Karun Chowdhury's idea that their children may fit seamlessly into Indian society; rather, they understand how they may have to adjust their parenting practices based on the realities of raising their children in the subcontinent. For instance, Ananya Subashree described how she and her husband switched their children from one school to another by saying:

We wanted our kids to be in that ['local'] crowd because we wanted them to get exposed to that in the first place. But then they didn't fit in so well there because they were not used to that culture. The transition was not easy on them. Once we moved them to [a different school] they were more comfortable because they saw many kids that had returned from USA and also the crowd was a lot different.

While Ananya and her husband had certain ideals for the type of school their children would attend, the reality was that they could not adjust to being educated among other 'local' schoolchildren because of their very real differences from them due to their transnational background. In fact, many of the parents I spoke to made initial schooling choices for their children because of their perceived and real differences from the local Indian population (for a discussion of this, see [Atterberry, 2022](#)).

Parents adjust their child-rearing practices to life in India in other ways, as well. For example, I asked Matthew about how he and his wife, Soniya, inculcated a sense of being Indian in their two boys while in the United States. He said,

'The church played a very important role. In a sense, Christians are extremely rigid [as it concerns] the ways of the church. So, we participated in all of that. They went to the Sunday School'. However, once they returned to India, Matthew says that he became less religious and stopped sending his children to Sunday School. He even referred to the teachings of the church as 'brainwashing'. When discussing his about-face in his attitude towards religion Matthew says:

Religion was important from a perspective of religion's sake, but it was a tool for building up an identity primarily as an Indian and a Syrian Christian. So, when you're in India you don't need tools to help you build an identity as an Indian. And the second is, the need for religion as an identity – not the need, the rationale – went away. I was convinced it was doing more damage than good. So, I moved away from it. And our discussions and conversations became much more varied in nature.

While they were devout Christians in the United States, in India Matthew describes his family as being more *spiritual* in nature – they talk about Buddhism, Hinduism and even practice yoga.

Matthew is very comfortable with the changes that he sees taking place regarding how he raises his children in India relative to the United States; however, this is not the case for all parents. I asked one mom, Ravika, who lived in Texas before moving to Bangalore, the following question: 'How do you feel about the decision to raise your children in India?' She gave this impassioned response:

Right now, 80% I don't regret. But 20% seeing the Indian children in the USA right now, they know much more about our culture than children living in India. [...] They know much more about our culture and then they speak more of our language than children in Bangalore do. My children do not know how to read and write my mother tongue. Their mother tongue! They don't know how to read and write but children in USA – they know.

Ravika was not the only mom who languished at the idea that her children do not know how to read and write in their mother tongue. During another interview, one mother admonished her children – in front of me – for their reluctance to communicate in Tamil, a South Indian language.

Parents offered several explanations for why they may experience more challenges in cultivating their children's ethnic identity through language acquisition, religious engagement and extracurricular activities in India. Pramila and Janak Iyengar, return migrants from New Jersey, suggest that this difference in cultural engagement may be due to the varied pressures parents feel in India relative to the United States to transmit Indian culture to their children. Pramila says, 'They're [Indians in the USA] a little more conscious that they have to work harder at making an effort with the Indian culture bit. Here [in India], you don't have to

work that hard because it's part of living. So, you're a little bit more relaxed about those things'. Janak reiterates this idea by saying, 'I think maybe Indian American parents in the USA are working harder to give their kids an appreciation of Indian culture. But for us, it's easier, I guess. It's all around us so we don't have to do as much'. Echoing this idea, Ravika says, 'So, I felt that since it's not a common thing in USA, children are pushed to educate themselves towards their mother tongue, go to temples, learn this, learn that'. Children may not experience a similar 'push' in India.

In other words, the challenges parents face when trying to inculcate certain aspects of Indian culture into their children's lives may be due to their relaxed attitudes towards transmitting culture in India relative to the United States. In the United States, parents cannot depend on broader society to teach their children about Indian culture and what it means to be an Indian. As a result, there are infrastructures, such as Sunday School, designed to help children learn about their heritage. In India, parents feel that they can 'relax' and rely on the broader social environment to teach their children what it means to be an Indian. This results in parents not making as much effort as they might in the United States to define what it means to be an Indian in terms of specific religious and other cultural practices. Whereas some parents, such as Matthew, wholeheartedly embrace the changes brought about by being in India, others miss how Indian culture is structured in the United States.

## Conclusion

The return migrant parents I interviewed want to provide their children with the skills and resources they need to become successful adults. As such, they start early – ensuring that their children have access to what they need to become high-achieving, hardworking and empathetic people. To accomplish this task, parents realise that they need to raise their children in the 'correct' environment. After careful considerations, they decide that India is the best place for their children.

In the subcontinent, their children have access to 'good' schools, extended family networks, and numerous opportunities to engage with people from socioeconomically marginalized groups. Parents rely on these resources to cultivate children with advantageous characteristics and skills. In this way, India becomes a source of an abundance of advantageous cultural and social capitals that transnational youth may be able to leverage as adults. Interestingly, parents also want their children to be able to cultivate a deeper understanding of their ethnic heritage while living in India. While several studies discuss how – for Indians living in the diaspora – trips to the subcontinent can be advantageous to children's development of their ethnic heritage (e.g. [Banerjee, 2022](#)), that is not the case for the families I spoke with. In fact, living in India seems to curtail youths' engagement with aspects of their ethnic heritage to some extent. As such, the reality of life in India is complex for these families. While in many ways India provides parents with the resources to raise the future generation of upper-middle-

and upper-class, transnationally mobile professionals, it is not a seamless process and does have its own hurdles.

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