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**Diasporic Sincerity:  Tales from a 'returnee' researcher**

**Abstract**

*This paper explores how my diasporic 'returnee’ status positions me with the participants in my research endeavors within education reform NGOs in and around Bangalore, India. I argue that in addition to forcing me to reassess the scripts of ‘belonging' I hold as an Indian American, the very stories that make me part of the diaspora reshape the research context by offering my interlocutors new narrative tropes by which to (re)imagine India. These re-imaginings precipitate a destabilization of context specific categories that limit social interaction, such as caste, class, gender and regional belonging, allowing me the possibility of ethnographically sincere encounters across a diverse set of participants (Jackson, 2010). However, as I persistently transgress boundaries I find myself in vulnerable positions, as the politics of difference within the organization threaten to undermine my research endeavor.*

**Keywords:** Diaspora, transnationalism, researcher reflexivity, nationalism, education, development

**Bharat and India**

Three days after we landed in Bangalore, India we, two Indian American anthropology doctoral students conducting preliminary research on Indian educational reform movements, were picked up from our guesthouse in a late model Toyota SUV at 5:30am and whisked off to a rural town about 80 kilometers from the city. The purpose of this initial daylong visit was to meet a team of education reformers working for a large educational NGO based in Bangalore whom we would be working closely with for the duration of the summer in the small town of Mangala.[[1]](#footnote-1) When we got into the car, Sandeep, one of the key members of the management team for the Bangalore based NGO and our primary liaison in the organization, explained that he wanted to take the time the ride offered us to discuss what we should expect in our upcoming interactions with the staff whom we would meet in the town. As a way of introducing us to both the organizational and larger social context we were entering, he utilized the putatively oppositional concepts of *Bharat* and *India* to categorize two different ways of being in the Indian nation state. Bharat is the Sanskrit name for India, he said. It is a stand for term used to describe those who are of the vast agrarian countryside of the subcontinent. These people, he continued, speak regional vernacular languages, practice traditional customs, and steadfastly represent an older, enduring moral, ethical and social order of the subcontinent. India, however, he argued, reflects those who are of the ‘city,’ the cosmopolitan elite. It evinces a way of being that reflects a commitment to the project of a modern Indian nation state. More often than not, Indians speak English (or Hindi) and have little to do with the non-legible areas that sit outside of the comfort of their neighborhoods tucked inside the bellies of cities such as Bangalore.

He went on to describe the animosity between those who identify with Bharat and those who identify with India as borne of mutual distrust – Indians feel those of Bharat are stupid, backwards, corrupt and inefficient. Those of Bharat, meanwhile, feel that Indians are out of touch and disconnected with the realities on the ground that face the majority of people in the subcontinent. These concerns, he suggested, are exacerbated by the fact that there is a significant caste association with each ‘imaginary’, as India, or the Indian nation-state has long been thought of us an upper-caste project, while Bharat has fought for its place at the political and economic table using the democratic structures within the Indian national project to further its concerns.

The binary of Bharat/India is by no means Sandeep’s invention. Indeed, Bharat/India has been deployed in several key moments in contemporary public discourse over the last three decades, along with other terms in binary tension such as subaltern/elite, or vernacular/Anglophone, to mark the power differentials inherent in ongoing postcolonial struggles for self-definition of the nation amongst its members within the national political and social sphere. For instance, Sharad Joshi, a high caste farmer from Maharashtra who in the late 1990s organized farmer protests by calling attention to the primacy of the urban cosmopolitan middle class in the contemporary Indian imaginary, utilized Bharat/India as a metaphor to describe contemporary sociological divisions within India. Simply put, he argued that Bharat, a marker for the spatial, cultural, social, and linguistic diversity of rural India, was being left out of the vision of a 21st century India by those who live in the nations teeming cities (Corbridge & Harriss, 2000, Gupta, 1998).

Bharat/India has also been utilized by politicians to describe the politico-religious fault lines that connect post independence ‘India’ with an explicitly secular Congress party and Bharat with the conservative Hindu nationalist party (Hansen, 1999). Hansen (1999) traces the changing face of the Hindu nationalist movement from independence into the 21st century, noting its use of Bharat to lay claim to the traditional, by suggesting that Bharat was in fact the authentic representation of an older Hindu moral framework characterized by tolerance, and syncretism, which stood in opposition to a pseudo-secular modern India. Indeed, Hansen shows how Hindu nationalists in the 1990s narratively constructed India as a failed liberal project precisely because in its efforts to support the Muslim minorities rights it upheld extremely conservative positions antithetical to a liberal modern state, thereby rendering the notion of India defunct. The recent rape incidents in Delhi spurred the most recent political deployment of the India/Bharat binary as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) party members quickly capitalized on the international publicity the rape cases garnered to suggest that rape is a problem brought on by ‘westernization’ and is endemic to India’s cities *not* Bharat’s villages.

In this essay I focus on the social context Sandeep, as a ‘higher up’ in a large reform and development focused NGO, marks in his use of India/Bharat in his interaction with my colleague and I, two Indian American anthropology students who, at the time, were interested in how educational reform led by civil society institutions were being instrumentalized in rural India. One the one hand, Sandeep utilizes Bharat/India to describe divisions *within* his large NGO, which, perhaps ironically, is an organization committed to collapsing the unsalutory effects of social difference in India through an improved government run education system. However, as importantly, Sandeep is also utilizing this classificatory binary to place us, two diasporic researchers, within an interactional framework in which we would soon be ensconced. Indeed, Sandeep’s stated purpose to share the India/Bharat imaginary, as we careened down the Bangalore - Mysore Road, his body uncomfortably twisted so he could face the two of us in the back seat, was to prepare us for a chilly reception when we arrived in Mangala, not from the NGO’s constituents but rather from the organizations staff that ran the field site operations in the district. The field site staff, he continued, represented a regional, caste, and religious diversity in India not evidenced in any other department in the organization. He acknowledged that while the organization is committed to the sort of diversity that this particular team evinced, they are also committed to creating a highly competent and highly skilled staff capable of bringing about substantive change in India’s government education system.

This has meant that the majority of the staff in the organization, particularly those located in Bangalore come from high caste, cosmopolitan, urban backgrounds. Importantly, Sandeep felt the animosity produced in the Mangala team as a result of this factional and spatially situated divide would quickly be projected onto us as he assumed we would be associated with India by the fieldsite staff and thus be treated with suspicion, much like many of the ‘Indian’ researchers and consultants he brought in previously to conduct staff development.  He went so far as to say that this suspicion was not unwarranted given the way that previous consultants, presumably all cosmopolitan and elite, treated the team -- with contempt and disrespect. What becomes fascinating is that Sandeep, in preparing us for our encounter with the field staff, worked under the assumption that we, two Indian Americans who had spent most of their lives in the U.S., would be immediately positioned as a part of India by the Mangala field staff and within the context of the NGOs reform efforts.

His move to explain the Bharat/India divide clearly shows the complicated axes of difference found within the organization as representative of a larger political, economic and social struggle engulfing India, a struggle that came into clear visibility after independence and one that has intensified since economic liberalization in the 1990s has exacerbated unequal social and economic conditions within the nation. Sandeep’s deployment of the India/Bharat binary also reveals a tantalizing clue as to how diaspora are positioned within this milieu, as individuals located on the margins of the political projects of the many, even as they are invited to participate in the specific projects of the few. The story that follows is one that describes the interstices of my engagement with this domestic educational NGO in India and attempts to show the complicated nature of cultural contact and negotiation when the stakes are defined by lofty and time sensitive organizational goals, goals that fall nothing short of nation building through educational reform. Thus, embedded in this story of cultural negotiation within a organizationally defined reform project, I begin to ask, how is the diasporic ‘returnee’ being imagined in this process of nation building in a historic moment in which India is portrayed as ascendant in a global economic order (Kapur, 2011)? I suggest that if we follow the returnee, in this case myself and my colleague, into a change making project where the returnee is called on to play a role in development efforts, something of the axes of social negotiation around class, caste, religion and regionality that defines a 21st century Indian moment will be revealed.

My interest in following the returnee is also coupled with an investment in thinking through contemporary ethnographic method and interrogating the intersubjective possibilities of participant observation as a means to gain valuable insights about our contemporary world as well as to build a more robust and collaborative ethnographic engagement, the kind that Marcus and Fischer (1999) describe as the future of the discipline. Throughout this essay I utilize and extend the concept of sincerity developed by Jackson (2010) to analyze a particular and peculiar set of performativities that arise when diaspora return ‘home’ and engage with social worlds that are simultaneously familiar and alien and, conversely, where their diasporic bodies blur lines of sociological distinction. For Jackson (2010, see also Keane, 2002 on sincere speech) sincerity “emphasizes some of how anthropologists and their informants embody an equally affective subjecthood during the ethnographic encounter” (281). I argue that it is an attention to the affectively charged exchanges between the diasporic researcher and so called native subject that reveals how diaspora are simultaneously positioned quite optimistically as redemptive ‘bridges’ across social difference as well as definitive examples of social incommensurablity in contemporary India (See Chakrabartty, 2001).

**Locating the diasporic researcher**

Anthropologists, at least rhetorically, have recognized that stopping short at a reappraisal of the hierarchy of knowledge regimes without reimagining how the researcher reveals herself in the flux of engagement would be tantamount to an exercise that still confers on the anthropologist a kind of existential, superordinate position. While there has been some serious efforts to redress their positions of authority by acknowledging how their personal contingencies shape the research context, even the research subject, Jackson (2004) and Behar (1996) describe the danger that, in an effort to be transparent about ones subjectivities, anthropologists often display laundry lists in their write ups that potentially reify categorical markings, such as race, class, ethnicity etc., and thereby limit the heuristic possibilities of self-reflexivity.

Jackson (2004) argues that rather than establishing an illusory fixity to ones notions of belonging through the production of lists, that anthropologists are obliged to trouble the very categories they inhabit by paying close attention to how those categorical markers animate interactions within the field. By troubling the categories we inhabit during our fieldwork encounters, Jackson suggests we create the possibilities for more sincere, collaborative possibilities with our participants as we invest in affective exchanges that mitigate the potentially impositional, extractive interactions that have ethically confounded our discipline. For Jackson (2004) the ‘troubling’ that goes on in the field will inevitably bleed into our written accounts, offering a more substantive, rigorous and sincere record of the moments of our everyday engagements with our interlocutors as political and politicized subjects in our own right.

One instance of a problematic categorical habitation can be found in Narayan’s (1993) and Jackson’s (2004) discussions of the historical trajectory of the discourse around the native anthropologist. Early anthropology saw ‘native’ positions as biased, incapable of the objectivity necessary to make powerful observations regarding cultural practice -- indeed for the anthropologist going native was to be avoided at all costs. However, emic perspectives were seen as necessary, even crucial to making anthropologically sound observations provided they were coupled with the etic analysis of the White anthropologist. Thus, key informants were sought after, to provide the insider position that would effectively produce the ‘translations’ key to a successful anthropological incursion. While the discipline, following the changes wrought in the larger world, now includes a diversity of ontological positions amongst its ilk, the notion of an insider (emic) and outsider (etic) binary prevails in contemporary anthropological discourse even though simplistic notions of belonging have clearly been disabused of their worth (Jackson, 2004). These simplistic notions play out such that native anthropologists are believed to start out from an “overly identificatory position, relinquishing some of their ability to create the requisite disassociation from the field that writing up is supposed to encapsulate” (Jackson, 2004:34).

Narayan (1993), in her musings on the famous Indian anthropologist of the 1950s, Srinivas, demonstrates how the notion of native insider anthropologist is naïve, as she discusses how his caste, class and gender status made for tricky, and often times comical, negotiations with his informants, those who he would presumably be overly ‘identificatory’ with in the ethnographic encounter and in the subsequent write up. Rather than having an insider perspective, Narayan (1993) notes that Srinivas found himself an Indian who having grown up in urban, cosmopolitan, India, was an outsider to the village he was studying; echoing Fanon’s (1967) skepticism that cosmopolitan trained elite ‘natives’ where just as much outsiders as the white colonizers before them. Indeed, she describes how Srinivas was so out of touch with caste practices that villagers had to often remind him of his high caste position and the necessary pro forma etiquettes that go along with the status. Yet, even as one could argue that Srinivas could not easily be boxed into the category of insider, neither was he an outsider. Indeed, if villagers had to remind him regularly of his caste status, something of an emic position clung to him, even if located in his name alone. Jackson (2010) calls the comical and tragi-comical nature of the kinds of interactions that occur in the field between anthropologists and their informants’ important windows into the political that often escape scrutiny. Dubbing these moments of misrecognition and laughter instances where the ethnographer can note the performance and political valence of sincerity, he argues for a greater attention to this important backstage to our anthropological endeavors that often go unheralded in our write ups.

As a ‘returnee’ to India, a descriptive designation that functions as a metonymic marker for the larger phenomena that has in part radically reshaped Indian urban development (Nair, 2000), my position further complicates the category of the native anthropologist and brings into relief several important moments of ethnographic sincerity that are particular and peculiar to the diasporic experience. The notion of returnee subsumes me within a globally dispersed South Asian diaspora (Kalra et al., 2005; Shankar, 2008; Shukla, 2003) where something of the liminal, or what has been theorized as the hybrid nature of my experience, marks me through the significatory departures I take from any sort of essentialized markers of identity I might possess (Bhabha, 1994; Kapchan, 1999; Young, 1995). What I call significatory departures include both a linguistic and corporal repertoire, a peri-performative mixture of practice that reassigns meaning, however temporarily, to certain markers, such as gender and caste. These departures, when seen within an interactional context, open windows of misrecognition that are sometimes accompanied by laughter, new social possibilities, and greater access. I argue for an attention to these intersubjective moments and their ethnographic purchase, which I term diasporic sincerity.

Yet, as I show in this article, these performative departures are definitively marked by their temporal and spatial finitude. I argue that the valence of diasporic “returnee” as a harbinger of change (Charkabartty, 2000), the enduring inscriptions of caste privilege and a powerful cosmopolitan class-consciousness, all serve to limit the excursions of possibility that hybridity suggests. Indeed, Hutnyk (1997) notes these limits when he argues that hybridity as a concept is politically void precisely because the entanglements of an enduring classificatory regime negate its salience. While I agree with Hutnyk (1997) that the concept of hybridity is defunct when deployed as a category unto itself, as a static state of being marked with particular scripts, narratives, and so on; I suggest, following Bhabha (1994), that if we think of hybridity, of the diasporic experience, as one of interstice “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference” then we can begin to see how the “intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.” (13).

The intersubjective experiences of nationness that I experienced in my day to day interactions as a returnee with the diverse staff of two reform focused NGOs in peri-urban Karnataka becomes particularly important if we consider that their organizations’ reform efforts are premised on an ideology that the agrarian villager’s children need a more viable set of skills to compete with their urban counterparts in Bangalore and that an acquisition of these skills will eventually bring about an economic equity that will serve to erode enduring divisions within the nation state. This utilitarian and somewhat idealistic argument that a skills based education will provide the necessary impetus for social change stems from the belief that the means to uplift for the rural and urban poor of India is through a more sustained contact with the market system (Lukose, 2009). The project to connect the poor, whether rural or urban, to the global market place has exhaustively been referred to as the neoliberal turn, a belief that a nation states development through economic strictures that promote global market integration coupled with a human rights agenda can change the social trajectories for the most vulnerable communities in the nation. This belief harkens, and indeed in remarkable ways is similar to the original Nehruvian project of post-colonial India; to create a technocratic and urbanized nation where all could benefit from a rapidly advancing modernity (Chandra, 1991; Ludden, 1992; Gupta, 1998). Indeed, for the particular organization featured in this piece, their very governing documents state that the constitution of India is their rubric for educational reform. While in this essay I cannot explore the full significance of this reemergence of nation-building taken up by large Indian NGOs that have, in large part, been funded by technology focused corporations that became wealthy in post-liberalization India; it is worth noting that the account presented here does point to the relationship between the rapid growth of the technology sector that has changed Bangalore’s (and other Indian cities) spatial, social, and economic contours (Nair, 2000), the diasporas role in this expansion, both literal and imaginary (Chakravartty, 2001), and the industries desperate need for skilled workers (Balakrishnan, 2012) – a need desperate enough that technology entrepreneurs are entering the world of educational reform and rural development. In the next section I show how, as a market driven ideology for reform drives the day-to-day engagements of the NGO staff that are already, by all estimations, at odds with one another because of the historically produced power differentials within the organization that dictate action, reflection, and dialogue; notions of nationness, community interest and disjuncture are revealed in moments of diasporic (in)sincerity.

**Tracking the diasporic researcher**

The thirty odd or so members of the Mangala group were waiting for us as our SUV pulled up on the small street where the office is located – in the back end of a town known for its sugarcane cultivation, its proximity to the heritage city of Mysore, and its strategic location on the Mysore-Bangalore Road. We, somewhat nervously, entered into a large room in the center of a residential house that had been converted into office space and sat at a large table located with the team to talk through what our plans were for the upcoming weeks and were met mostly with silence with a notable exception – the director of the team, Rao, in concert with Sandeep, asked questions and gave us suggestions for how we might move forward with the research plan. The broad brush strokes of the plan had been developed over the course of the prior six months with the senior management of the NGO, which included Sandeep and Rao but notably excluded all the members of the Mangala team. The opportunity to access and engage with this particular NGOs project came about when the NGOs senior management came to Philadelphia in the fall of 2010 under the auspices of a research group at the university dedicated to research on and for India. The university based research group had reached out to doctoral students who were interested in doing collaborative research projects in India with NGOs and my colleague and I showed interest in the project. The research group subsequently arranged a meeting for us to meet the two senior NGO staff that were, at the time, travelling through the U.S. to garner interest in their work. During our meeting the director of the NGO, a former corporate CEO now in his 60s, remarked, “ We would love to have you do a research project with us as long as you are ready to roll up your sleeves and work.” This statement was followed by conversation about India’s need to engage its diaspora and, in retrospect, was significant insofar as it marked how the senior officials deployed a nationalist sentimentality in their speech address that seemed to require a demonstrative commitment to the nation on our parts as diasporic Indian researchers.

The general research plan that we developed with senior officers of the organization was to offer a 14 week course on qualitative research methods -- focusing on imparting the basics of participant observation and interviewing as ethnographic method to field site staff located in the small town of Mangala. During this period members of the field site based staff would attend workshops and simultaneously collected qualitative data from various government education offices and schools within the 40-kilometer radius of Mangala, using research questions that we collaboratively developed during workshop sessions to guide the collection process. Together we, the field staff, my colleague and I, would analyze the data as it was produced. Clearly, this produced interesting research positionalities for the two of us, as we straddled the twin roles of ethnographer and educational consultant charged with not only imparting particular research techniques but to demonstrate their efficacy. Our agreement with senior officials at both organizations to conduct research towards shared instrumental ends – we would get exposure to on-the-ground happenings, they would get diasporic researchers that are ‘committed’ to India with western research training -- reveals what Ortner (2006), in her work to clarify the complexity of human agency, would call ‘a project’ -- where multiple goals are envisioned, several conversations are engaged, and collaboration is seen as an ideal. However, even as we envisioned an affectively charged research ‘project’ with specific collaborators at the table, one which had patriotic undertones in the language that was used to describe it, other actors who we would engage with on a daily basis at the rural field site in Mangala were not directly included in the collaborative process of imagining and delineating the forthcoming pedagogical engagement. These ‘local’ actors along with the senior staff in the Bangalore office, constituted a network of intentions that delineated the field that my colleague and I inhabited for three months. Ortner (2006) calls this ‘field’, littered with the projects of many, the place where serious games “involving the intense play of multiply positioned subjects pursuing cultural goals within a matrix of local inequalities and power differentials” are resolved (138).

In the weeks that followed we began to interact regularly with the Mangala team, who initially referred to as the foreign researchers. “Your accents when you speak English make it hard for us to understand you,” said Rao, the team leader, laughing after the first full days of engagement in Mangala. Of course, the fact that neither of us spoke Kannada, the regional language, helped to produce us as foreign in the team office where everyone preferred Kannada over English or Hindi. However, what became clear as we spent more time in the field is that very few of the staff in Bangalore spoke Kannada, and that rather than simply falling into the role of foreigner due to our inability to speak Kannada, our linguistic failings coupled with our perceivable markers of belonging to the subcontinent, inevitably positioned us within the India/Bharat binary across the organization. Moreover, our temporary status provided an impetus for the constant distancing by the Mangala staff in various subtle and not so subtle gestures.

Initially, we had little to no personal interaction with individuals within the group for the first two weeks or so, save for one man, Raman, who was charged with making sure we were comfortable in the accommodation we were provided by the organization in the city of Mysore, about 40 kilometers from Mangala. When we suggested that we were fine and could ‘fend for ourselves’ he deployed what I recognized as an old and familiar script in South Asia. He said, “you are guests and if you are going to perform the work I must make sure you are comfortable.” The term guest indexes two particularly important significations, first, with regards to how it is used in everyday South Indian sociality, second, with regards to what ‘guest’ might mean within the context of our collaborative professional engagement as diaspora returned. The idea that guest is god, or that one must take care of guests as their transience marks them as divine or in some way above or beyond the structural confines of everyday life, is a common utterance in the subcontinent. In many peoples’ homes, whether in the regional vernacular, in the national language, Hindi, or in English; often there will be a prominent sign that reads “guest is god.” In Kannada the word/expression for hospitality, the way one must treat guests, is *upachara*, which roughly translates to right conduct (Prasad, 2007). In the everyday practices of the people whom I worked with, the significance of right conduct towards a guest cannot be discounted as a moral system that, at least for a time, superseded other perceptual systems of ordering.

Georg Simmel (1950) marks this notion of guest with his ideas on the stranger as “the potential wanderer, so to speak, who although he has gone no further, has not gotten over the freedom of coming and going” (6). Jackson (2004) notes that Simmel’s (1950) stranger is oft evoked in anthropology as a means to index the romantic ideal of the ethnographer as the outsider, the storyteller, the bard, more capable of telling stories than the native. As a rejoinder to Simmel’s wandering stranger I suggest that there is something about the stranger that implies a freedom from the confines of the customs or practices of a cultural system. This freedom from customs allows the guest an opportunity to trope on the commonplace practices in such a way that they are, at least temporarily, redefined. For instance, in our speech address to people who were older than us in the organization, we were able to be far more direct than what was common within the cultural context. During our workshops our use of and encouragement of direct speech engendered the possibility for dialogue in ways that occasioned a temporary suspension of social norms. The term guest, however, also marks our status within the organization and therefore, in India, as one of temporariness, a status that perhaps reveals our incomplete commitment to the nation building project located in the prevailing mission of the organization as it seeks to grapple with the past as it strives to change the future. In several instances Mangala staff members remarked at how short our stay was, or asked whether we would remember them when we returned to the States. Memory, evoked in the particular, stood for a larger remonstration, a remonstration that indexed the temporariness of our stay in relation to the project we began and, perhaps, more significantly a remonstration for our originary subcontinental departure.

As I developed relationships with some of the team members outside of the office, relationships that offered me insight into the day-to-day politics of the organization as team members shared with me specific incidents of conflict within the team and between the team and the Bangalore office, something of my guest status seemingly fell away. Slowly, through the sharing of stories I became placed within the contours of the class, caste and regional regimes of the subcontinent. Indeed, my deployment, knowingly and unknowingly of culturally appropriate practices, my familiarity and ease at discussing the epic and popular stories of the subcontinent, all served to place me not as a guest but as a returnee with a cultural, political, and affective stake in the idea of nationness. However, this process of capture into the national was benign, a series of humorous moments produced by intersubjective experiences that indexed the complicatedness and absurdity of national belonging. One rainy evening I rode on the back of Prakash’s motorcycle, a member of the Mangala team, to a coffee shop in town. The rain fell in sheets, a typical blustery monsoon torrent that sporadically came and went during the rainy season. He asked me to open up my umbrella, saying “ listen, if you ride on the back of the bike with an open umbrella you will no longer by an NRI (non resident Indian) but a true Indian.” We arrived to the café soaked, laughing, ready for coffee. These sorts of performative gestures around national and cultural belonging allowed my interlocutors and I, through humor, to mark boundaries through significatory gestures and allow for the transgressions of those boundaries to create greater rapport.

In the office, however, it was a different matter. As the months passed my colleague and I had shown that we could, at least to some degree, straddle the line between the two stated and somewhat conflicted concerns of process and product, thereby releasing some of the tension and temporarily bridging the divide between the team and the central office. However, several incidents and the development of particular professional relationships over the course of our professional sojourn ultimately revealed the precarity of our positions and the limits of our ability to bridge the deep divide within the organization. The first glimpse of our unstable positionality within the organization was revealed in our developing relationship with Preethi, a newly appointed staff member who was also a recent returnee to India, although she, unlike either my colleague or I, spent her early years in India and spoke fluent Kannada. Initially, she quietly attended our workshops, but as time went by she started to advise us on how to interact with the team and regularly interjected in the sessions as a translator, from English to Kannada, and at times from English to English. We found out later that she was designated to take over our roles as liaisons between the central office and the Mangala team as well as to take up our research project and continue it after we departed. Preethi initiated her own performances of diasporic (in)sincerity with the Mangala team, when, during the breaks between sessions, she would ask jokingly (in English) if she was part of the team and they would jokingly reply to her in Kannada/English that she wasn’t yet but she soon would be. These peri-performative gestures, when taken together with her linguistic incursions in our classroom space, where she interjected in Kannada when she felt she needed to further explain a point that either I or my colleague made, served to highlight our putatively outsider positions within the group – positions that were, when seen against Preethi’s proficiency in Kannada, almost exclusively based on our linguistic incompetency. Importantly, as I mentioned earlier, the lack of Kannada proficiency was a deficiency held by most of the senior officers in the organization, including Sandeep. As she deployed linguistic familiarity to index her shared kinship as well as to unwittingly remind the team members of their lack of proficiency in English, she highlighted the hue of language politics that played out within the organization, one which marked English as the language of power and decision making while limiting the vernacular to in-the-field interactions. However, Preethi’s linguistic and cultural proximity to the Kannadiga members of the team could only be used to limited effect when placed within the context of the spatialized power differentials that undergirded the relationship between the main office and its satellites. These power differentials played themselves out, in part, in the ways in which decisions were carried out, where expectations from the Bangalore staff were consistently translated into organizational imperatives.

The first incident that clearly marked our inability to bridge divides within the organization occurred when Preethi set certain dates for us to provide additional teaching sessions for those on the Mangala team whom she felt needed additional assistance and asked us to present those dates to those members of the team at the end of a workshop session. We started to present these dates, then realized that to offer predetermined dates for additional instruction would undermine any of the dialogic work we had done with them that demonstrated the possibility of a shared decision making process rather than the top down approach they had grown accustomed and resistant to. Improvisationally and a bit clumsily, instead of announcing the dates, we asked them what dates would work best. The end result, despite our efforts (and perhaps because of them) to include the team in a decision making process that was already predetermined, was that no one whom we were told were interested in or were required to attend additional sessions showed up to the ‘additional’ sessions. This incident, which demonstrated our first failure to engage directly with the team and create shared goals and responsibilities, marked our drift towards Preethi and the Bangalore staff regarding vital communication and heralded the beginnings of what I will suggest is the recapture of our diasporic bodies into the Bharat/India divide located within the organization precisely because it highlighted the limits of the returnee to create new possibilities for direct historically unburdened communication between ourselves and the field staff. Indeed, for my colleague and I, as we developed a closer relationship with Preethi, we began to unwittingly direct our communication around logistics and goal setting to her rather than the Mangala team staff.

The final incident proved a more definitive marker of incommensurablity within the organization, one that proved so enduring that Preethi’s efforts at continuing the pedagogical and research work we started sputtered almost as soon as we departed. My colleague and I decided to do a final presentation of our collective work with the Mangala team to the central office staff. Preethi and Sandeep met this idea with great enthusiasm as well as concern. They were both worried, given the history of how the team had been received at the central office, that team members would not be willing to join us, and that if they did, they would not be received well by the Bangalore office personnel. Yet, they also felt, that if successful, this kind of event would indicate the beginning of a reparative process between the satellite field team and the central office. After a month of preparation the day came for the presentation – four team members, including Rao, the team leader, reluctantly travelled from Mangala to a university space in Bangalore that would seat about 70 people, a space that Preethi arranged weeks before the event. In the days just prior to the event my Indian American colleague, with the help of Prakash, a Mangala team member, developed a presentation sequence that utilized film clips from interviews we garnered from each of the participants from the Mangala team, to discuss certain key issues during our three month interaction. On the day of the presentation, the ‘live’ team members sat silently next to us while the voices of their virtual peers mingled with our exegesis on our collective experience. When the time came for question and answers, predictably, most of the questions were directed to us. When Preethi, my colleague and I tried to redirect the questions to the team, the team members, rather than answering the questions responded as if from a proscribed script. On more than one occasion, members of the audience, after the team member spoke, redirected the same question to my colleague or I. Several times, as I looked across the audience composed mainly of city-dwelling NGO personnel, academics, and activists, I could see their palpable disinterest in what the team members had to say. The English the team members spoke, with some exceptions, was not as polished as those of the crowd. Indeed, I could read the discomfort on the bodies of the team members on stage, as they articulated their English scripts with their eyes downcast, their words tumbling out of their mouths with rapid speed as if to escape before it was too late and they were forgotten. Here English functioned as an index of difference that revealed the pronounced temporal and spatial distance between the Mangala team members and the Bangalore staff.

After the talk the team members, with the exception of Prakash, came to us, shook our hands, and quickly departed. We had convinced Prakash to skip work the next day and spend the night in Bangalore to celebrate with us the closure the final event represented. As Prakash, my colleagues teenage cousin, and I left the university space, silently walking through the campus towards the exit where the constant flow of Bangalore traffic awaited us, a campus that is only partially constructed much like many of the development projects underway in Bangalore, a city that strains at its seams as its continues its exponential growth, I was awash in mixed feelings. Prakash, perhaps sensing my turbulence, turned to me and said, “don’t worry, you’ll come back soon and continue the work you started.”

**Conclusion**

In retrospect it seems Prakash’s use of the term work to describe my engagement as we walked out of the presentation that day, perhaps, unequivocally marks the divide between my perceived affinities and experience of a life elsewhere (in the U.S.), and my labor (anthropological, engaged or otherwise) in India. Indeed, Prakash’s use of the term work to describe my efforts, taken in the context of my imminent departure to the U.S. and predicted eventual return to India, suggests that, for diaspora, there can only ever be a partial commitment to the nation, one that is always marked by partings, one that, therefore, can only be considered work not life. Taken as work, our subsequent failure to develop a sustained qualitative research endeavor that was imagined by the organizational leaders as a bridge between the Mangala team and the staff at the Bangalore office, reveal the obdurate reproduction of power differentials within the organization undergirded by historical difference that cannot be so easily bridged by evocations of nationess vis-à-vis the diasporic figure. The dimensions of these differences emerged in our very first conversation with Sandeep in the car ride to Mangala, where the Bharat/India binary was deployed to help us understand the remit of our work as returnee researchers brought in to bridge divides.

Bharat/India, as a classificatory device, as I discussed earlier in this essay, originally harkens to a populist farmers movement in the 90s, which utilized the two terms to reveal the tensions between agrarian Bharat and an urban, technocratic India. According to Gupta (1998) this peasant populist movement, through discourse generated by its leaders, insisted that “the interests of India undermined the well being of Bharat”(80). The endurance, flexibility and salience of this populist discourse is evident as twenty years after it was deployed by activists it is still being evoked, in this case within the a national, domestic NGO focused on education. This is not surprising considering that this NGO, like others of its kind, seek to represent the interests of the rural poor by advancing an agenda of educational reform. This sort of education reform agenda, in seeking to provide an education based on skills commensurate to the telos of urbanized modernity India’s elite has aspired to since independence, a telos that, in some quarters, produces a stubborn and enduring resistance.

Yet, the resistance that I discussed in the above passages was not produced in the interactions between the NGO and the rural communities that it ostensibly serves, but rather it was a set of tensions located within the organization itself. Inter-organizational conflict played out as a result of an official pragmatism that inadvertently reinforced historical caste, class, gender, and spatial divides. Field officers in Mangala were chosen for their jobs because they were fluent Kannada speakers, had knowledge of the region, were more representative of the caste positions of the constituents they would serve and had, in their previous jobs, worked with communities or the state bureaucracies that serve them. They were, in effect, produced as the ‘proper’ representatives of the organizations vision for change, as they presumably would be accepted in the field as legitimate, legible, and competent. The Bangalore office contingent, meanwhile, were either previously employed in corporate India or were highly educated with terminal degrees in the social sciences. Most comfortable speaking English, the staff in the Bangalore office were set aside for doing policy work at the higher levels of the educational bureaucracy, or for conceptualizing creative or research oriented projects to augment the overall goals of the organization. The irony of this division of labor, where the English speaking, educated caste elite of the organization occupied positions of relative power, while the vernacular speaking, caste diverse, at least in the case of the Mangala office, were deployed in rural field sites, is striking given the goals of the organization is to, in Sandeep’s words, “close the gap between rural and urban India.”

Given all of this, I suggest that my colleague, Preethi, and I, as diaspora “returned,” were brought in by the higher ups in organization, more than simply to proffer expertise, to provide a sense of we-ness within the organization. This we-ness required the ambiguous and affectively charged interstice of hybridity to inscribe itself such that it would function as a bridge between the Mangala and the Bangalore staff. However, the ambiguity of our positions as sincere (or insincere) diasporic subjects who were ostensibly willing to roll up their sleeves and work for a common patriotically inflected goal of reform, only temporarily mitigated the enduring effects of historic inequality that played out within the organization. Elizabeth Povinelli (2001) describes the project of bridging, or what she calls the project of social commensuration one where “the liberal national form seems continually to reconstitute some nominal, and normative, we-horizon out of …publicly celebrated, or scorned, but in any case seemingly economically vital, flows of people, images and things”(326). Yet, the liberal project of nation building through symbolic representations of we-ness has clear temporal and spatial limits if the people, images, or things that reconstitute a we horizon are simply laminated on top of or placed within historically unequal social relations. Moreover, diaspora, as Prakash gestured towards in our walk out of the presentation and into the waning afternoon light of a transforming Bangalore, when enlisted to perform the work of suturing social disjunctures within the homeland context, only serve to highlight the difference between the *work* of social commensuration within the national context and life that lies just beyond and behind the thresholds of the national imaginary.

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1. All names of people and places, save for Bangalore, are pseudonyms. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)