

THE BEST JOB IN TOWN.(the Americanization of Chennai, India due to outsourcing performed by firms like Office Tiger)

by Katherine Boo

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One Monday this spring, a forty-three-year-old salesclerk at the Home Depot in Plano, Texas, scribbled some updates onto an old resume and took it to his local copy shop. To his education and work history--a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering and technology, service in the U.S. Marine Corps--he added a recent moonlighting job as a handyman and a new "career objective." Ten minutes later, in southern India, a middle-aged Hindu man in a cavernous workplace began to type the Home Depot clerk's words. A prevailing fiction in the Indian office was that the dozens of "document specialists" doing American work didn't actually register the content of the resumes, funeral programs, pro-se lawsuits, and erotic manifestos sent to them over broadband from store counters with "While-U-Wait" signs. Rather, the document specialists were to type, format, proofread, and zap things back while maintaining an exquisite blankness of mind. But American resumes, as much as American erotica, caused an inconvenient upwelling of emotion. "To secure a position at a company that would utilize my skills and provide an opportunity for advancement": row upon row of typing Indians recognized the Plano clerk's yearning as their own.

The typists were new, entry-level employees at a prominent firm in the sprawling coastal city of Chennai--still "wet behind the ears," as Americans would say, or so they'd been informed during a company crash course on Western ways. Their narrow cubicles were lodged on the sixth floor of a pink stucco building whose lobby possessed, in addition to a purposeless set of turnstiles and a statue of the Hindu god Ganesh, solid evidence that even plastic rhododendrons will wilt in extreme heat. Most of the workers had been born in Chennai and would, in all likelihood, die there. Still, from their workstations they could imagine, not unreasonably, that they were seeing a bit of the world. Their employer, a company named Office Tiger, did the work not just of an American copy-shop chain but of seven of the twelve biggest banks on Wall Street--confidential labor carried out in unmarked rooms with film-covered windows, closed-circuit cameras, and electronic security so unforgiving that as the typist finished the resume from Plano three bankers, accidentally locked in a nearby room, were frantically pounding on a door. Office Tiger also performed work for a Big Four accounting agency, several white-shoe Northeastern law firms, an insurance conglomerate, two large publishing concerns, a Madison Avenue advertising agency, global management consultancies, and other enterprises whose identities were

not divulged to workers of the resume-typing rank.

The document specialists, all college graduates, earned roughly a tenth of what they would have commanded for this work in the U.S., and less, too, than they would have been paid in some call centers. But it was the possibility that one could rise up from a lowly position that had made Office Tiger one of the city's status employers, a firm whose workers were so pleased by their affiliation that they put it on their wedding invitations, just below their fathers' names. A foreign notion--that jobs should be distributed on the basis of merit--was amending the rules of a society where employment had for millennia been allotted by caste, and great possibilities abounded. A clerk who today did a bang-up job of formatting the work history of a part-time handyman in Plano might be an adjunct investment banker by year's end.

Chennai, the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu, was at one time an agglomeration of fishing hamlets near the Bay of Bengal--a mile-wide spit of sand upon which seventeenth-century British traders imposed the name Madras. As the imperialists built forts and seaside promenades, the less refined aspects of colonialism sharpened the Tamil-speaking locals' preference for their indigenous culture. This now vast community--the fourth-largest city in India, after Delhi, Mumbai, and Calcutta--was, until recently, a willfully anti-cosmopolitan place. If the Calcuttan post-colonial ideal was outward-looking, intellectual, and romantic, like the heroes of Satyajit Ray films, Chennaiana rated hard work over lofty thought, science over poetizing, and humility over everything else. Though most Chennai residents were Hindu, violence against the city's Muslim minority was relatively rare. Discord between rich and poor was similarly muted--perhaps because the city's elites tended to leave ostentation to the peacocks, which (along with goats, water buffalo, auto-rickshaws, roosters, and homeless families) beautified the roadsides.

For centuries, the Western world knew this city, if at all, through a group of unpretentious tradesmen: weavers who rendered the colorful, comfortable madras plaid that has long outfitted the gentries of Cornwall and Nantucket. This "better cheape" cloth, as one seventeenth-century British trader described it, provided the city with an economic base until the late twentieth century, when tariffs and global competition brought many power looms to a standstill. Some former weavers earned renown for a more macabre kind of trading: as one of the international black market's primary sources of human kidneys. Other

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citizens, though, turned to more renewable resources for economic survival. Capitalizing on their celebrated work ethic, on a dozen practical-minded local universities, and on the ability of the elites to speak, in addition to Tamil, the clipped and elegant English of their colonizers, Chennaians developed the sort of forward-looking economy that many of America's post-manufacturing cities still struggle to achieve. "Better cheape" Western business is Chennai's new niche.

Schoolgirls here maintain a picturesque ancient tradition--entwining their braids, morning and night, with fragrant jasmine flower. The perfume is particularly welcome lately, as constant road construction, unprecedented automotive pollution, and a three-year drought have created a stench that the vanilla candles in the new wi-fi coffeehouses cannot mask. Flower fields have given way to steel-and-glass buildings, which, despite continuous exposure to sun in one of the world's least temperate climates, have become a status essential. The glass in these office towers is blue and black and silver, and its impenetrability seems at first to be a consequence of the city's blinding sun. The refraction is partly by design. American uneasiness about outsourcing--an issue in the current Presidential campaign--has turned Chennai into a secretive city, where the American back-office presence, everywhere felt, is almost nowhere stated. Although American companies with Picassos in their foyers and Corbusier chairs in reception still dispatch work to South Asia office buildings fronted by beggars and spavined cattle, the company names have been deleted from phone books, Web sites, and corporate entryways. The American International School in Chennai, which serves children of American executives and diplomats, recently doubled in size. It wears no sign on its gate.

The British were drawn to India as a physical place: a repository of precious raw materials from which the natives might be parted, and a locus of beauty and mystique. The new American attachment is not physical but conceptual--the lure of cheap, smart, pliable labor. Among Chennai's janitors and security guards, as well as its bankers, the need for discretion about that labor is understood. Even the ephemera of the United States offshoring debate becomes front-page news here; many of Chennai's young professionals now know the names John Kerry, Lou Dobbs, Benedict Arnold, and Timothy Platt--the latter the proprietor of a U. S.-based Web site called yourjobisgoingtoindia.com, which is as closely followed in Chennai as it is in Silicon Valley. Fascination with the American controversy is more bemused than fearful. Chennaians in general believe that what they call "outsource hoopla" has already redounded to their favor,

alerting a wider audience of executives and stockholders to the benefits of wage arbitrage.

Some American companies, such as Ford, have been manufacturing in the region for years, working to capture a piece of a potentially vast consumer market. But now non-factory, professional employment is surging. Among the white-collar options available to Chennai's college graduates are work for Verizon, Bank of America, Hewlett-Packard, Citibank, Visa, MasterCard, and Electronic Data Systems, a Plano-based tech company founded by the free-trade opponent Ross Perot, which recently announced a layoff of fifty-two hundred U.S. employees.

One indicator of Chennai's new corporate mass is the recently opened Park Hotel, where a glass of Chablis costs nearly as much as the monthly salary of the low-caste busboy who spirits away the empties. Situated near a faded mural of Mahatma Gandhi, bare-chested and bent into his walking stick, the hotel features Texas barbecue, "appletinis," and, to ease executive stress, poolside chaises in cabanas. One spring evening, a tense Indian doing Harley-Davidson work sat in one such cabana, promising his ten-year-old daughter, whom he was "raising by cell phone," that on his day off he would take her to a theme park called M.G.M. Dizzee World. The initials M.G.M. are for the park's founder, M. G. Muthu, who made his first fortune introducing the city's growing middle class to American-style installment plans. Now he is educating working parents about expensive American antidotes to guilt--roller coasters and Seven Dwarfs-like characters resembling incarnations of Vishnu.

The Americanization of Chennai has been so swift and--save inside the Park Hotel--so quiet that many of its citizens do not yet grasp the change in their cultural and literal landscape. An animation company makes cartoons seen by American children on Saturday mornings. Radiologists read American MRIs, clerks adjudicate patients' insurance claims, and programmers automate Medicaid eligibility for an entire Midwestern state. Chartered accountants complete U.S. tax returns while underwriters certify U.S. mortgages. And within Office Tiger's pink building aspiring financiers analyze American firms that are ripe for corporate takeover in a place they call Wall Street East.

One afternoon in late March, Office Tiger's wiry thirty-three-year-old co-C.E.O. stood at his desk, surrounded by luggage, receiving from Manhattan the news that his firm had just landed Wall Street investment bank No. 8--a half-a-million-dollar "starter" contract. "There are a few liability issues still outstanding, but basically

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we're good to go," an underling on a speakerphone said. She anticipated a doubling of the contract within the year. "The only tricky thing is that we've got to get the employees hired and ready in three weeks." "Three weeks," the C.E.O. repeated; he was pleased but also harried. Executives of a Fortune 10 company would be descending on the office the following day, but he had decided he would have to miss the visit: officials of a Fortune 5 company were awaiting him the same morning in Bangalore, a thirty-five-minute plane ride away.

The co-C.E.O. is Joseph Sigelman; the other co-C.E.O. is Randy Altschuler, also thirty-three. Their enterprise, Office Tiger, is named not for the fauna of the East but for the mascot of Princeton University, where they met in the cafeteria their freshman year and became best friends. Joe and Randy, middle-class boys who had attended, respectively, St. Ann's in Brooklyn and Manhattan's Hunter College High School, were the kind of Princetonians who sought entree into student government, not the eating clubs. They shared abstemiousness and obsessive work habits (if you dined most nights on applesauce that you kept in your dorm room, you saved money and gained an extra hour to invest in your medieval-history paper) that since college days have become a selling point.

After Harvard Business School and jobs at Lazard Freres, Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank, and the Blackstone Group, in 1998 the friends gave up a combined annual income of half a million dollars and the experience of hearing Paris doormen say, "Welcome back to the Ritz, Mr. Sigelman," in order to pursue an idea born in a late-night fit of pique. It had become apparent to them that not every typist and copyist working the midnight shift in their investment banks--the moonlighting actor, the artist with the ring in his nose--was putting his heart, soul, and syntactical memory into completing the PowerPoint presentations that needed to be done, perfectly, by morning. Randy began to speculate that workers overseas might invest more care in the menial jobs that Manhattanites seemed not to relish. Joe, who had been introduced to Madras on a family vacation when he was twelve, thought that some of its underemployed citizens might be grateful indeed. "You met people in factories or running the elevator who had the intelligence and spirit to do so much more," he remembered. "We thought, why not release that talent?"

The Indian government gave them a ten-year "tax holiday." American and British venture capitalists gave them seventeen million dollars for the startup, only a sliver of which they had to spend on labor. (Tamil Nadu's per-capita income equates to thirty-six U.S. dollars a month.) Their first "office" was a sheet-metal shed. Former

business-school classmates gossiped that Joe and Randy had cracked from the stress of investment-banking and run off to an ashram. Initially, ashram life would have rendered a better return. "We had virtually no business," Randy recalled, "because at the time people thought it was crazy to be sending work to India. So we had a hundred people sitting in a room and we'd get one fax a day to type. When the fax came through, it was like a five-alarm fire--we'd all fall over each other trying to get it done, and we always, always fucked it up." But this slow start turned out to be profitable. During the mutual-reassurance sessions common to foundering enterprises, Joe and Randy got to know their employees better than they ordinarily might have. All were college educated. A third possessed postgraduate or doctoral degrees. Randy returned to New York to establish the American side of the business and, from a small office overlooking a Dunkin' Donuts, pressed his former Wall Street colleagues to give the Indian workers a trial run at higher-end labor.

Six years later, the Manhattan banks that Randy and Joe abandoned still have odes to "thrift" in their marble lobbies, but those banks also have rows of capacious, upholstered, untenanted cubicles. Almost twenty per cent of the jobs on Wall Street have disappeared in the last three years. Office Tiger recently doubled its staff, to sixteen hundred and fifty workers, and will nearly double in size again by year's end, on the strength of "judgment-dependent services": equity analysis, legal research, and accounting jobs that pay an annual salary of up to a hundred thousand dollars in the United States and between ten and twenty per cent of that in Chennai.

"Anything else?" Joe asked the subordinate who had informed him of investment bank No. 8. He ran his hand anxiously through his sandy hair--he had a reservation on the night's last flight. Well, actually, the colleague said, representatives of an investment bank in London wanted in. "They've just got to get the regulatory approvals, see how much of their work they can take offshore."

"All right, that's good. Is that it?"

Well, actually, the woman said, since he was travelling to the U.S. and London later this month, it might be nice if he stopped in to see some Office Tiger employees who were doing on-site analysis at another investment bank. Joe was momentarily nonplussed; he'd forgotten that his Tigers were in-house there.

"I mean, it's not essential," the subordinate said. "Only, if you had time it would be a nice show of support . . ."

"I get it, I'll do it--sweet idea. Anything else?"

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Well, actually, there was another impending new contract. "It's been fasttracked, they want to go live with a pilot."

Salomon Brothers in its heyday received five hundred job applications a month. Office Tiger sometimes receives fifteen hundred applicants a day, many of them accompanied by parents who pray as their sons and daughters take one test after another in the hope of earning an interview with the beautiful, ruthlessly efficient human-resources executive in black pajamas, who does her work in the reception area, behind a thin glass wall. As Joe returned one more phone call--a cautious executive from Germany, which is experiencing an outsourcing backlash, too--the narrow hallway outside the firm's door grew crowded with the survivors of that testing. They sat in plastic chairs, heads in hands, awaiting their face-to-face encounters.

"Mercy, how do you think you did on the proofreading test?" the human-resources goddess, whose name is Sudha, asked one such survivor, who was perched on the edge of her seat.

"I found it quite easy," responded Mercy, fatally. Her score was eighty-five. Joe and Randy seek workers like themselves--the type haunted fifteen years later by the single question botched on the college aptitude test, and game to perform even dull tasks with, to use the local term, "full sincerity." A minute later, another applicant was warming the chair.

"Hindu culture tends to be gentle, forgiving of shortcomings, which is not exactly the Wall Street ethos," Joe said. Though he trains his workers intensively, cultural miscommunications remain. Not long ago, Office Tiger accidentally hand-delivered to the American consul Joe's underwear, which had been sent to him by his mother. Soon after, during a fast-turnaround project, Joe offended his staff by waving rupee notes--incentive--in front of their noses. He has given up trying to reprogram the hotel coffee-shop pianist, who, having realized that Joe is perhaps the only Jew in Chennai, routinely serenades him with "Hava Nagila" when he sits down to lunch, even when his companion is a Kuwaiti investor. But after Joe and Randy hired a former Coast Guard petty officer named Lonnie Sapp--a veteran of semi-pro football, a graduate of Connecticut's Trinity College, and almost certainly Chennai's only six-foot-four-inch African-American--to manage the workforce a smoothness settled over the operation, even without the grease of government bribes. (The Princetonians say that they won't pay them.) Cost-saving improvements percolated up from the production level. Satisfied clients begat more clients. And, by the time Randy and Joe turned thirty and outsourcing

had become a term of art, they were undermining many of the assumptions that Americans try to nurture while watching their nation's jobs go overseas.

One false assumption had been that only the manufacture of goods, not the provision of services, could be exported. Another, supported most recently by the U.S. Department of Labor, is that the number of American jobs lost to outsourcing is minuscule. But Labor statisticians rely on the corporations to link their domestic downsizing to work they now send abroad--a connection that some corporate leaders are loath to make. Other analyses suggest that the number of American jobs lost to this phenomenon will soon reach a million, as the Indian and Chinese back-office sectors expand by thirty per cent a year. Indian analysts foresee outsourcing in biotech research, pharmaceuticals, architecture, and the law. Although many economists believe that this global transition is mutually beneficial--that an economy is better off specializing in areas where it is relatively more productive and importing in areas where it is not--a study by the University of California at Berkeley identifies fourteen million American jobs at risk in the near term. The latest consolation is that, since many outsourced jobs are low-end and mechanistic, Americans are now being liberated to use their exceptional skills as innovators and entrepreneurs. Being tactful, the Tigers pretend to agree. What is the advantage of pointing out that the country of Salman Rushdie and Amartya Sen may not, in fact, be creatively impaired? The resumes and credit-repair leaflets spewing into the copy shop from Texas are less diplomatic. They intimate that some Americans have been "freed up" to do nothing productive whatsoever.

An Office Tiger manager concluded a phone call that required an American accent and began to help one of his document specialists decipher a five-page scrawled submission. "The supervisor called plaintiff gay, child molester, pedophile, and other malicious things": he slowly made out the words. "'Pedophile' misspelled here," the typist noted quietly, in order not to disturb the concentration of her colleagues. "It's not 'p-h-e-d-o . . .'"

"And he obviously didn't mean to write 'viscous,'" the manager said. "It should be 'The vicious rumors that were spread . . .'"

"And in the next sentence that's 'hostile work environment.'"

"Hostile work environment" was not a concept that Joe and Randy had thought to introduce in cultural training, but the document specialists quickly learned it on the job. The phrase evoked very little recognition.

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As Joe prepared to leave for the airport, a worker appeared at his office door--a slight twenty-six-year-old with a wispy mustache and a smile half the size of his face. In Indian-run workplaces, hierarchies are often too strict for such unannounced visits. Here, employees drop by constantly; they are mesmerized by Joe. As Joe greeted him, his eyes settled on the younger man's collar. "Harish," he admonished. "That's why they put the buttons there--for you to use them." In his boss's wake, Harish stood buttoning and beaming, as if he'd been named employee of the year.

Seriously behind schedule now, Joe skipped to the front of the security gantlet at the entrance to the firm, where the pocketbooks and backpacks of departing workers were being searched to prevent the theft of Western corporate secrets. (The investigations that day turned up "Who Moved My Cheese?" and the Indian edition of *Cosmopolitan*.) "The outsourcing backlash?" Joe was saying. To him, it was political entertainment, music for Presidential campaigns. "In the real world, it's inexorable. This is radical global change, and it is going to happen more and more, not just because the labor in developing countries is cheaper but because the work is often done better. Businesses will have to outsource to stay competitive, and eventually the American public will get used to it. Look, that's what a free market is all about."

Joe passed the applicants awaiting interviews, lost time in a balky elevator, and recovered that time by racing through the twilight to the Taj Hotel, a few hundred yards from Office Tiger, where he has been living for the past five years. His route was through a back alley, where he dodged a succession of two-wheelers, three or four passengers astride. Some of the riders were his employees, hastening to work at the start of the American business day. "It kills me," he said, shaking his head. "Their brains are their careers, but I can't get any of them to wear a helmet." He stopped momentarily in his hotel room, where the liveried workers who deliver his meals often petition him, sometimes successfully, for jobs. At the airport, flight attendants were waiting to hand him his ticket and escort him onto the plane. Despite a philosophical commitment to what he calls "lavatory class" travel, Joe is regularly bumped to first class. The flight attendants, it recently dawned on him, might want to be Tigers, too.

His collar properly buttoned now, the cheerful worker named Harish Kumar, who not long ago took pleasure in sewing his own clothes, stood in the front of a white-walled classroom. The room's chief decoration was a flyer stating the criminal consequences of insider trading. Ten middle-aged students wearing electronic-security cards around their necks held their fingers over computer

keyboards; they did not want to miss a word. The students were known as Office Tiger "candidates"--the two per cent of applicants who had been, provisionally, hired. The job of Harish (known as Harry to American clients and Employee No. 489 to electronic security) was to teach them the Western business tools and mores they would need to survive a six-month probation period and become full-fledged Tigers. Much of the previous week had been devoted to the consequences of revealing proprietary information and engaging in securities fraud--subjects that Joe and Randy had instructors teach until they saw fear in candidates' eyes. Now, following a vigorous discussion of spreadsheets, Harish turned to a practical problem. "Let us ready ourselves," he told his students, "to make an organizational chart using PowerPoint."

Leaning his gaunt frame over the keyboard, Harish tapped until a giant green box was projected onto a white wall. He tapped the keyboard again: two smaller boxes materialized beneath the large one, and then four more boxes, smaller still. Then he laid out the problem to be solved. In most organizations there is one "boss box" and many subordinate ones. "Now, can you make all of them perfectly align?"

When New Yorkers like Joe apologize for speaking quickly, Indians smile. They speak faster--especially when working for companies like Office Tiger, where a third of all work assignments must be sent back to the United States within an hour. Harish's speech is truly rapid, because before his candidates graduate to permanent status they're expected to master two dozen subjects--among them securities regulations, Western manners, and Manhattan investment-banking slang. "Very good, very nice," Harish now complimented one of the classroom's better box-aligners, allowing his "r"s to roll in his enthusiasm, though it violated the conventions of American pronunciation. "And, of course, you can draw the connectors this way, drag-and-drop," he said, demonstrating. "But is it the most efficient way? No. It is too slow. Remember, very often the banker is going to make all sorts of changes. You will want to accommodate him, and quickly."

In his curriculum, Harish wastes no time discussing wage differentials or the asymmetry of the power relationship. Among his students, the colonial resonances are not ignored; they're understood. Upon consideration, the students will argue that, since America is globalization's great hegemon, it's an advantage to work for Americans directly, instead of for Indian-owned companies like Infosys or Wipro, where U.S. work is also done. Tigers can learn from Joe's perfectionism, from his preference for J. C. Penney ties, from his imperviousness to fatigue, and

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from his wry self-deprecation--useful, they note, in softening the effect of a command. On the rare occasion that Joe gets angry, his workers sometimes forget to register the cause, engaged as they are in studying the technique. "Joe is our Harvard Business School," Harish says. "We watch his energy and aggression and try to learn."

To explain the yearning that brought them to Office Tiger, Harish and his students invariably use the same word: "exposure." In its Indian sense, "exposure" means not publicity or vulnerability but contact with the world beyond Chennai. After three years at Office Tiger, Harish is still occasionally jarred by dislocation. When Wall Streeters call and say, "Hey, Harry, what's up?"--as they do, often--the wrong picture always pops into his mind. What's up is a rotating metal fan on the low Styrofoam ceiling of the room where he sleeps, on the floor, beside his father, mother, brother, and grandmother. The ceiling fan's hum is a baseline to Harish's latenight puzzling about the virtual world he now inhabits.

"I am afraid I was born a quirky and curious boy," Harish says. "Like Harry Potter, you could say, without glasses." Globalization has given him a work life rich in riddles. Why do Americans speak of the "end" of a show called "Friends," when in India it runs in perpetuity, serving as a more effective instructor than anyone at Office Tiger on the subject of the American vernacular? Is it really a compliment to say of someone, "She is dynamite"? The words themselves make Harish shudder. "We'll have to pay through the nose" and "He jumped down my throat" make him wince. More pleasant in its mysteriousness is "couch potato." There was, when he first came to Office Tiger, the expression "just hang loose until tomorrow," but he hasn't heard that one in a while. In the outsourcing business, a sudden surge in clients is called an "escalation"--a word that warns of seven-day workweeks. Office Tiger has been escalating for nearly two years now, the growth of its Wall Street research operations fuelled by regulatory reforms that came (along with criminal actions and billion-dollar legal settlements) when United States banks were caught manipulating their research in order to boost the profits of favored clients. Companies now send junior-analyst and research jobs to Office Tiger not just because it is cheaper but also because it is nine thousand miles from Wall Street temptations. Harish has been granted full exposure. Now it's home with which he struggles to make contact.

The neighborhood where Harish has lived all his life is named Triplicane, and was once an ancient fishermen's village. It is today so densely populated that some travel guides mistake it for a slum. Harish's house is off the main

road, in an alley of jasmine peddlers, Muslim shop workers, and Hindu priests. He rises around 5:30 a.m., mounts his rusted bike, and rides to work, startling the neighborhood parrots and the buffalo that lug the milkmen's wares. His passage doesn't rouse the beggar children, who have learned his recently acquired belief that direct handouts to the poor encourage sloth. At work, he trains his candidates, takes ten minutes or so for lunch in the office pantry, and trains some more. At seven-thirty in the evening, when it's 9 a.m. in New York, he confers with the American banking clients for whom he tailors his training, to insure that he is emphasizing the right skills. And then he turns to a slew of computer-programming challenges that may show management his greater gifts. He often goes home after midnight.

On his concrete threshold in Triplicane, as on others in the neighborhood, is an intricate chalk design known as a kolam. His grandmother, who is seventy-nine, draws it there each morning, in the Hindu hope of keeping catastrophe safely out in the streets. At night, from her mat, she listens for her grandson, sometimes cupping a hand around an elaborately bejewelled ear. The ear adornment was the custom in the village where she was born, a place where the tigers were real and said to devour boys in one go, not bit by bit each workday. She is the first at the door when her grandson rings the bell. He leaves his new square-toed lace-ups at the threshold, swallows a few spoonfuls of rice to silence protests about his declining weight, and joins his extended family on the floor. It is then that his grandmother, if not Harish, can sleep.

"Harish? There are a hundred here like him," the human-resources goddess once observed in passing. To Harish, that's no slight, it's heaven. The office is crammed with smart young people who speak freely and are as open to ideas as he is. It is what he imagines an American college dorm might be like, and in it he has shed the shyness of childhood. Though the money he earns is welcome, he is sometimes at a loss as to how to spend it. "For instance, when I wanted a computer for my parents' home it was simpler to gather discarded parts and make it myself," he said. Since becoming a Tiger, he has made a single significant outlay: to help his parents retire. Every month now, he hands them his paycheck, and when he needs another button-down shirt he has to ask them. Usually, they say yes.

In Hindu families, to acknowledge the gifts of a child too early is to put him at risk--to provoke the evil eye. So Harish's father put away an accidental tape recording he had made of his firstborn and did not listen to it for years. Harish's parents had been trying to record Hindu devotional songs from the All India Radio station when

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their son, eleven months old, grew incensed at their inattention. He began to shriek, and in their exasperation at the now-botched recording the parents didn't immediately recognize the content of the baby's cries. In Tamil, he was saying, "I want my ABCs."

As smart as the child might have been, they worried how he would intersect with the world. The family was of the education-revering Brahmin caste, but the parents were too poor for the mother to fulfill her expected role of staying home and tutoring Harish and his younger brother and sister. She worked instead as a clerk in a government office, her intelligence never rewarded. Her husband worked across town, in another government office, and Harish grew up in his own imagination--a world of Isaac Asimov and astronauts and the ships that he could see dropping anchor in the Bay of Bengal, if he chose a certain seat by a certain window in his schoolroom and trained his peripheral vision just so.

In that schoolroom, he was a failure, flunking math, science, and geography year after year. In sports, he was fast but too small. His solace was "The Harish Book of Records and News": a brown-paper chapbook in which he drew intricate sketches of Gandhi and pasted newspaper clippings. Like other boys, he was drawn to cricket stars and advertisements for films like "Godzilla Fights King Monster." He also collected reports of improbable talent. There was the Delhi boy who set a record by belching ninety-one times in a single minute, and a legless man who swam from Italy to Sicily, and a Chinese dentist who popped his patients' teeth out by pressing his fingers on their necks. Harish longed to find his own unconventional ability, because by the time he reached the age of twelve his teachers had concluded that higher education was not in his future.

His parents, anguished at their own child-rearing deficiencies, couldn't summon the anger to beat him for his academic failure. So he exacted his own punishment. He ran to the Bay of Bengal marina, where he regularly played cricket with the boys he called his "batch." Sitting apart on the sand, he made a stark accounting. Having squandered advantages that his parents had sacrificed to give him, he would try to accept his mediocrity with grace. At sixteen, he left school. After a stint as a magician for children's parties--"Of course, there was no magic to my mind reading," he said, "just the tricks of psychology and logic"--he enrolled in a computer-training course.

A society with far more bright aspirants than promising jobs inevitably becomes an over-credentialed one. The institutions from which the young amass certificates and ribbons are sometimes rigorous, sometimes fraudulent, but

all have rousing names. Harish's school was called, simply, Brilliant. There were programming languages to learn and independent explorations to launch, and, when his curiosities took him beyond the lesson plan, his new teachers did not object. Some days, there were no teachers at all. On one such morning, Harish rose to help his classmates get through an exercise in accounting. An administrator happened by, registered a smart, coherent presence at the head of the classroom, and hired the boy, age seventeen, as faculty.

"My colleagues were much older and more learned than I, but it was such a rich time, sitting there like a pet, being fed what they knew," Harish said. In turn, he enriched seven years' worth of subsequent Brilliant scholars. Now, after insuring that no other Tiger will see him being "over-prideful," he will tap for a second on his keyboard and bring up an American Web site that lists the holders of Microsoft Office Master Instructor certification. The site reports that the United States has seven hundred master instructors, Yugoslavia has five, and Oman and Botswana three each. India has just one: Harish.

In the classrooms of his childhood, he had tried to imagine what it would feel like to be on one of the ships moving out of the bay. When a colleague at Brilliant made the leap to Office Tiger and encouraged Harish to come, too, he saw himself as finally aboard. For other Tigers, there were other metaphors, but the sense of movement after decades of socioeconomic stasis was the same. Harish's friend Vidhya, who is twenty-five, heady with her rise from reception to well-salaried senior management, bought her parents not just freedom from their jobs but a house--a gesture so expansive that her parents chose to overlook her new stilettos. Other parents cringed to hear the children they had raised on Gandhian notions of national self-sufficiency faking American accents into their cell phones. But most accepted the air-conditioning units nonetheless, and few could help feeling pleasure. Those parents had had dreams of ships themselves.

Harish, usually lighthearted, was sobered by the fact that the hopes of some trainees would be thwarted in his classroom. The ultimate goal of his teaching was something that Joe and Randy called "foolproofing." In a company that offered judgment-dependent services, clients needed to believe that those judgments were routine, culturally uninflected, idiosyncrasy-free--that ten people confronted with the same data set would rank ten different utility companies the same way. As adroit as Harish was at the front of the classroom, it was after class that he excelled. That's when he studied data from intricate programs he'd invented that analyzed keyboard strokes in training and alerted him to students falling

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behind. These tools were an extension of his peripheral vision--a means of discerning the person sitting in the corner, miserably lost. Alone with his data, he was excited to find consistent error: those who made the same category of mistake repeatedly were the ones he knew how to help. But wild variations in performance depressed him. "The data analysis is convincing on this point," he said. Erratic, unfocussed students, the ones like him in his pre-computing days, were those who would not make the cut.

When Harish tried to explain his inventions, he made them sound modest, self-therapeutic--fiddlings of a restless wit. There was something else at work too, something that resisted both old-fashioned Hindu acceptance and his new peers' enthusiasm for meritocracy, with its bright distinctions between those who are capable and those who are not. Improbability was, after all, his stock in trade. If he wrote the right programs, taught his classes in the clearest and most effective way, he wondered, why shouldn't all his batch win?

On a sweltering March evening, the glass doors of the inaptly named Breeze Hotel grew opaque with the smudge-prints of noses. One by one, impoverished locals were risking the hard swats of doormen to catch a few seconds of the final game of a historic India-Pakistan cricket match, which was being broadcast onto a vast fabric screen in the lobby. Not long before, at the Indian government's behest, tailors had stitched together four hundred square metres of green-and-black cloth, in order to cloak the Taj Mahal, up north, in case of bombing raids. Now a public fatigued by perpetual nuclear threat was investing in the promise of sports. The real unifying mechanism, however, appeared to be the logos of Pepsi and Samsung, plastered on every available swag, signpost, and cap. On the pumped chest of Indian and Pakistani batsman, country identification came second to corporate branding.

This ranking of company over country suited many of the Chennai elite who had assembled that night in the Breeze Hotel's upstairs banquet room. The city's Rotary Club was honoring an entrepreneur named Ranjini Manian, whose firm, Global Adjustments, had settled the families of thousands of multinational executives into the city. Just as Nostradamus had predicted the toppling of the World Trade Center, the Rotary governor said, he had prophesied that India would be a superpower. He gleefully reeled off the names of Global Adjustment's prominent clients, but then his mood darkened slightly. Hollywood--"a multibillion-dollar industry, you know"--was not on the list. Reach out to American film moguls, he urged Ranjini and the other attendees. "Tell them that they can film in India

for ten per cent of what they're currently spending."

The Rotary governor's interest was not wholly public-minded. His day job was in the film industry. For decades, many of Tamil Nadu's leading citizens have been movie stars. The state's highest office, chief minister, has been held in turn by an action hero, the action hero's widow, and now his mistress, individuals with that electoral essential--name recognition. The mistress, a clever, voluptuous ingenue named Jayalalithaa, turned to politics two decades ago, when her measurements began to exceed the requirements of feature films. As Chief Minister, she had backed new businesses like Office Tiger, and had become the subject of corruption investigations so bitter and complex that few citizens retained the stamina to follow them.

Easier to absorb were the vivid, twice-life-size paintings of her agreeable face which virtually coated the city. The fact that most were thickly streaked with the residue of urine streams was not a political expression but, rather, a reflection of the fact that, multinationals or no, forty per cent of Chennaians live in slum dwellings, where latrines are few. In Chennai, such deprivations provoked only intermittent political concern. Although national and regional elections were just two months away, the biggest Jayalalithaa sign--a monumental billboard looking down from the highway--promoted not jobs or political programs but "Jaya TV": a twenty-four-hour channel that plays, among other entertainments, the romantic-comedy hits of the Chief Minister's svelter days. Jaya TV does not cover such irony-rich events as the one last fall when she called for the arrest of five journalists from one of the country's most respected newspapers, after they editorialized about her capricious use of power.

It is a civic mystery--albeit one that few people are laboring to solve--why the swelling number of businesses has failed to correspondingly improve Chennai's municipal finances and access to health care and education. The same was true of Bangalore until a few years ago, when Ramesh Ramanathan, one of Citibank North America's most successful derivatives traders, quit, went home to India, and dedicated himself to empowering Bangalore slum dwellers. He promptly discovered that city bureaucrats had no accounting system in place, and that tax money was disappearing; he set to educating the government himself. But Chennai had yet to produce a civic saint. It baffled Tigers to learn that Joe and Randy hoped eventually to enter Republican politics, as Michael Bloomberg had done--after making so much money that he was, theoretically, beholden to no one. The meritocrats, who believed that their own hard work was extricating India from a Third World past, were glad to leave public policy to

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erstwhile movie stars--a detachment that in turn increased political inefficiency and histrionics. Government would do best, Tigers liked to say, by getting out of the way. At times, this seemed already the case. Though Tamil Nadu had a devastating HIV-infection caseload and nearly a hundred thousand children died annually of preventable diseases, the health-care topic of greater local interest was the progress of a Chennai-based hospital chain named Apollo. Apollo was aggressively recruiting ailing Westerners who were willing to outsource their hip replacements or chemotherapy. Thanks in part to reasonably priced postsurgical sightseeing tours, the chain's hospitals were now treating twenty thousand foreign patients a year. Meanwhile, as Chennai's population surged on the prospect of good new jobs, rents in Triplicane and other middle-class neighborhoods doubled. Electricity prices jumped, too. But by far the greatest problem was the fact that although residents now had Cosmopolitans and Red Bull, they had no water.

In front of the main local reservoir, there is a sign in Tamil that reads "No bathers and washers," and this spring there were none. Instead, there were men, women, dogs, and Brahma cows walking across the reservoir's bed, which had become an inter-village shortcut, and upon which wildflowers bloomed. Before Chennai's hot season had even begun, water reserves were lower than they'd been in fifty years. Harish's home, like most others, had little or no running water. Inoperative water pumps outside houses and apartments were covered with dust, and were attended by dry troughs for rainwater harvesting--a conservation technique mandated by the government three years ago, just as the drought began. Residents spent hours queuing for emergency water rations that tankers brought in from the hinterlands. In Triplicane pawnshops, fathers sold pieces of their daughters' dowries to buy bottled water to give those daughters a drink and a wash. In nearby Poonamallee, where a century-old pond evaporated, hundreds of homeless turtles wandered onto a thoroughfare, where their search for an alternative water source ended badly.

The gods' will, residents said of the drought. But to follow the water tankers out of the city in their search for a place to refill was to glimpse a human factor, too. In Chennai, as in most of India, groundwater is not a public good; it's a private, barely regulated commodity. Thus, for decades, corporations and individuals have bored deep into fossil water, which is not replenishable--a pell-mell water mining that has left what remains as brackish as the sea. Some could afford to drill deeper than others. Just past a village where the price of watermelon had tripled and sheep had died of dehydration, there emerged the shining signage of two soft-drink bottling plants--Pepsi, first, then the bigger,

glossier Coca-Cola, which sits on the greenest plot for miles around.

There is a Tamil proverb, "When someone suffers, offer water first." Villagers say it with irony now. As the water tankers rattled farther and farther into the hills in search of unspoiled lakes, other trucks were rumbling back toward parched Chennai. Their flatbeds were stacked high with yellow-green bottles of Sprite, shimmering in the midday sun.

The beach where Harish wandered one Saturday night contained roughly the same number of kite sellers and beggar children as it had when he was a twelve-year-old failure, but neon signs promoting bank loans and washing machines had altered the quality of the light. The quality of the air, too, was appreciably different, owing to a traffic jam fifty yards away. Harish would have mourned this transformation more if he hadn't been rethinking the concept of place. Lately, he considered community less a function of roads and roofs and tea shops than of imagination. Even the solid presence of his grandmother could dematerialize at the late-night ring of his cell phone, the urgent summons of American clients. And while his parents rolled their eyes at the constant needs of the world beyond Chennai, Harish saw the calls as tidings of cultural integration, more niches for curious boys.

He had just seen the film "The Lord of the Rings," which had prompted him to reflect on Asimov and the rest of his science-fiction and fantasy canon. "Now I can hardly think of those books as fiction anymore," he said. "So many new things have been happening, and what just last year seemed impossible is now not. What I think instead is how lucky I am to have been born into this strange, right time. In these last years, we've found that New York and Chennai can do the same things--that we almost are the same thing. Already, we are half of the time in New York, just our bodies are left behind." In such hybrid lives, he knew, some parts of one's culture disappear. But among the vanished elements might be caste discrimination and religious bigotry--things Harish longed to see go. "So much of globalization is, I think, mischaracterized and misunderstood. It is because of this trend that there will come a day when there are no boundaries, no castes or divides between Muslims and Hindus or Christians--a day when, indeed, there will be no nations at all! Indian time? New York time? They are passing phenomena, in my opinion. Soon we will all share one time zone--or, really, there will be no time at all."

There was already, in his life, no time. He had been working like mad for his American clients. There was a programming job that outside contractors had said they'd

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need three months to complete. Harish did it on his own in sixty hours. "It was just intuitive, a three-day stunt," he said, modestly. "I have no big theories, but some problems I can solve from the bottom up." Such efficiency-minded innovation was a Tiger trademark, and helped explain why, over five years, only a single American company had, after a trial run at Office Tiger, opted out. (The exception was a New York firm that, battered by the events of September 11th, decided not to traumatize workers further by sending their jobs offshore.)

The constant expansion required new macros, databases, quality-control systems, and information systems--so many inventions, so urgently needed, that Harish didn't always consider their implications. For instance, the system he'd created to help candidates see and correct their data-entry errors had now mutated into a tool that helped executives identify and remove imperfect "permanent" workers. But, at the end of long days of inventing and foolproofing and universalizing the judgments of others, Harish preferred to dwell on his own recent performance evaluation, which described his contribution as "phenomenal."

"Whatever I accomplish, I forget, because I am thinking about the next thing," Harish said. So he focussed not on his employers' praise--"a source of inspiration," "role model," "strong intellectual curiosity," "loyal to O.T."--but on future possibilities. If he worked to improve his communication skills and written English, he would be "groomed to handle supervisory activities." This faith in his future as an employee was particularly welcome, as he was feeling a bit inadequate at home.

Southern India is a place of euphemism, and so the contagious cultural disease infecting firms that do American business is known simply as "susceptibility." Susceptibility explained why Harish's colleague Mike wouldn't even turn around now if you called him Mohan, the name his parents gave him. It explained why the foreheads on which women wore caste markers of sandalwood paste were now being inoculated against worry lines by Botox. Harish had stood out, among his colleagues, for his genial resistance to some of the American values that were pouring into ears and e-mail in-boxes. Though he celebrated the notion of a boundaryless world, he noticed the inflationary prices in the Triplicane bazaars and the loss of protections for clerical workers, like his mother. He rejected the late-model cell phones his colleagues coveted, and, on the Office Tiger intranet, he began to intersperse the mix of Wall Street news bulletins with the verses of an ancient Tamil poet, Tiruvalluvar. He wanted to remind his Britney-emulating, whiskey-drinking colleagues of their native culture of civility and humility.

"I worry that nowadays anything near us seems unimportant, while anything we can't see becomes larger than life," he said. "We don't see relevance in our great poet, our mother tongue. It is not the tongue of work and money. But hidden inside these simple verses are great meaning and complication--concentrated understanding of how to live."

There was, however, one verse of the Tamil poet he now skimmed through quickly. To read it would be to hear not his own voice but his mother's:

With a good wife, what is lacking?, Lacking that wife, what is good?

Most of Chennai's young professionals, modern as they are becoming in myriad material ways, still honor a great cultural expectation: to marry by arrangement of their parents. Those parents' methods of identifying future partners have, inevitably, evolved: now many use the Web site tamilmatrimony.com to seek brides and grooms on their children's behalf. Prospective mates are often expected to have compatible castes and horoscopes, "guileless, clean habits," and "glasses--if at all--with negligible refractive errors." But, increasingly, parents ask as well for "career-oriented, internationally minded M.B.A.s." Harish was, from guilelessness to business prospects to good eyesight, a more brilliant catch than his parents had once anticipated. They were eager to marry him, and he had wanted to be married--until the moment was upon him, and he balked.

His grandmother sought solace at the temple, next door; his mother and father were more hurt than they wanted to show. "It was just our wish and will," his mother said, and left it there. She and her husband were still in love, thirty-two years after the match their parents had made. Did Harish doubt their ability to choose well? He seemed to cherish his family, but he had not seen his younger, married sister in more than a year, and she lived right in Chennai. Perhaps his heart had been freelancing? Harish almost wished that were the case. The truth was, he wanted to be left alone to work.

He had somehow thought that holding the line against Americanization would make it simpler to submit to his Indian duty. But, whether or not he bought the Dockers or the Florsheims sold in the shopping mall next to the office, it seemed that his work was changing him more than he had realized. "It's a cat's cradle," he said unhappily. "I don't want to force myself into differing from my parents. I have told them I do not need a love marriage, but I'm not ready. There are so many expectations--for the marriage, first, and then, a year later, for the child--and my goals for

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now are different. . . ." He trailed off. "What to do? So much of one's life is an accident."

Harish might have taken comfort from knowing that his venerated boss felt similar pressure. Back in Staten Island, Joe's mother lamented the unmarried state of her handsome, funny, successful son--thirty-three already and decamped in a hotel in a far-flung city that likely contained not one unmarried Jewish woman. If he lived in New York, Joe's mother suggested, Emma Bloomberg, the Mayor's daughter, would be an agreeable choice.

Great, sure, Joe said--just not yet. He envied Randy his wife, a ballet dancer who recently finished Cornell medical school with honors. Randy, who is tall and brooding, sensibly fell in love with her at Princeton, before the company had become a preoccupation. They had been married for six years, and she was by now accustomed to his asceticism; their apartment in Jersey City suited her fine, and her schedule was as brutal as his.

Joe couldn't say with certainty the last time he'd been on a date, but it didn't trouble him as much as his mother wished it would. He found more than compensatory pleasure in building the business. After five years of intellectual challenge and cultural escapade, Randy and Joe's company had become first respectable, then profitable; someday soon it might make them quite rich.

Joe took pride in how few employees left the company even when presented with more lucrative offers. A whiteboard in the office listed points for Tiger executives to emphasize when recruiting: "Hi-end / Hi-tech--Office family." Workers like Harish keenly believed in the latter. It distressed them to imagine professional lives in which they weren't Tigers. Joe and Randy, though, saw Office Tiger, Chennai, as a particularly meaningful episode of their ever-evolving lives. They were contemplating acquisitions now, maybe a merger later, and then wealthy-enough-not-to-be-beholden political careers.

Ambitious plans, Joe knew, "and I worry that talking about them makes me sound like a jerk. But Randy and I were raised on the premise that, if you work hard for something, most of the time you will get it. You know, that's the single greatest thing about America, and, if that's what Americanization of the world means, I'm all for it. Neither Randy nor I was born rich; Randy's mother raised him by herself. But when we decided we wanted to build something close to a perfect meritocracy, where workers got recognized for what they did, not for whom they knew or how much money they were born with, we committed ourselves totally, and it happened--it's not perfect, but it's real, and our workers' lives have been changed for the

better."

One Saturday night, after ten, he ran from a working dinner to Chennai's Sheraton hotel to say goodbye to visitors from an American publishing firm that had increased its Office Tiger contract more than tenfold over a three-year period. As a matter of frugality, Joe does not own a car, relying instead on the shabby auto-rickshaws that line the streets. "How much to the Sheraton?" he called to one of the waiting drivers. Twenty rupees, the driver responded--forty-three American cents.

Too much, Joe said, moving on.

"But you can afford it, boss," the driver protested bitterly to Joe's receding back. Such comments gave Joe no pause. Equating what a person can afford to what he is willing to pay--a classic starter capitalist's mistake.

As the heat rose and astrological predictions of late-March rain turned out to be wrong, the southern outskirts of the city began to look like the inside of a snow globe. Under clouds of white dust, outcaste laborers were hectically crushing stone to supply the foundations of the new Chennai. Infosys, having overgrown its current campus, was expanding it to a hundred and twenty-nine acres; a Teaneck, New Jersey, firm was erecting its second "techno-complex." To support these and other corporate enclaves, a public-works effort was widening roads and building new ones--meticulously landscaped, the government promised on one of its corporation-luring Web sites, "and cattle-free."

The road improvements had begun a strange gavotte. Poor families were setting up households in sections of drainage pipe that were about to be laid beneath the road. City authorities, conscious of the vistas presented to business travellers, regularly expelled them, after which the pipe dwellers returned, only to be dispatched another day. The stone crushers, inside their white-dust world, were too busy to discern, day to day, who in this dance was actually leading. On hundred-and-ten-degree days, in more than forty makeshift camps, they used pickaxes to break up huge rocks that had been delivered from nearby quarries. They wore no masks, just rags on top of their heads to soften the freight of the stone chunks they ferried to pulverizing machines. When they had crushed their daily quota, they headed home, to dust-coated thatched barracks a few steps from the machinery.

The silica by-product of the stone crushers' livelihood had long ago eradicated most plant life in the vicinity, and made it hard to see, on some days, more than a few yards in front of one's face. Occasionally, though, clouds of

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siliciferous dust resolved themselves into barefoot children, laboring alongside their parents. At least five people, a five-year-old boy among them, had recently been killed in accidents at the stone-crushing camps. Officially, the stone crushers' children are in school. "No labor for them," one resident explained, "at least until they are seven."

Tamil Nadu was among the first of India's states to attempt to close its opportunity gap by setting aside government jobs for lower castes. After this opportunity was bestowed upon the poor, however, the elites began to realize that government work wasn't the work they really wanted. Today, at private corporations like Office Tiger, the official stance on caste is "Don't ask, don't tell." This scruple excuses executives from acknowledging what impolite inquiry makes clear: Brahmin and other upper castes dominate the supervisory class, while untouchables still clean toilets. They're lucky to have jobs at all.

More than 5.6 million people in Harish's generation alone are unemployed in Tamil Nadu, a depressing answer to the question that Randy and Joe are occasionally asked by New York executives. After so much outsourcing, are there still Indians to be hired? Given the pervasiveness of need, the state literacy rate of seventy-four per cent is impressive, and indicative of the breadth of faith in education. For the poor, however, such faith is unlikely to be rewarded in the new meritocracy.

In one stone-crusher camp, silica settled into the tea and home-brewed liquor that laborers sipped one day after work. They coughed up what they could while contemplating the news that played on a black-and-white television inside one of the huts. The volume knob had been turned high, because the stone-crushing trade is, literally, deafening. The workers learned that Infosys was about to have its first billion-dollar year. They wanted their children to get into the "software trades," too. But English is now, as in colonial times, the sine qua non of Indian opportunity, and neither the stone crushers nor their children can speak it. The government-run schools that serve the camps still emphasize Tamil and require the purchase of shoes, textbooks, and supplies that few can afford. Meanwhile, tuition at private schools that stress English has spiralled, in response to parental demand. And so the stone-crusher children work, while there is work to be had.

Academics who study the future of world labor see, in the middle distance, a divide so stark that the term "division of labor" will no longer apply. Poorer societies will work, they say, while the richer ones will invest and consume. But the stone crushers can sense a third category fast emerging.

At a camp a few yards from this one, there has recently appeared a highly automated stone-crushing apparatus. Even illiterate laborers can grasp the economic function: more capital for technology means, at least in the short run, less capital of the human kind. One benefit of the dust was that, except on the stillest days, they did not have to look upon the engine of their obsolescence.

In April came the Hindu New Year and the final campaigns before the national and local elections, which pro-business candidates were expected to dominate on the strength of an 8.1-per-cent increase in G.D.P. In Harish's neighborhood, Triplicane, a crucial issue was joblessness--a matter that gained urgency when Chief Minister Jayalalitha fired a hundred and seventy thousand government workers who had gone on strike. In the villages and the countryside, people organized behind the candidates whom they felt best understood the ruinous economic and human implications of the drought. In downtown office buildings, though, the preoccupation remained American work. Joe had just leased a large building, whose sleek reception area would be redone in Princeton colors--a fitting complement to Office Tiger's new Manhattan office, which had green glass, Italian lighting, and a view of the New York Public Library's marble lions.

Joe was travelling now--meetings in London, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco that would soon bring more work to Chennai. In his absence, Sudha, in human resources, felt freer to fret. Though Joe seemed only sharper after weeks of missed dinners and nights with three hours of sleep, some of his subordinates weren't. But the outdoor cafes and game rooms that other companies offered didn't comport with what Joe called his "keep your head down and keep working" style.

"Maybe we can talk him into yoga classes during the lunch break," Sudha said one Friday evening, at the end of an eighty-hour week. A colleague mentioned Ayurvedic neck massage. If masseuses came around to workers' cubicles, the two concurred, productivity would be only briefly impeded.

A little later, in the dark bar of the nearby Taj Hotel, Tigers finishing their own workweek evaluated the efficacy of other treatments. Some had been experimenting with Prozac--not for depression but because it seemed to help them concentrate despite sleep deprivation. Red Bull was agreed to be another reliable, short-term fix, while opinions differed on whether cigarettes packed a stimulative wallop. "But even if they do give you a little rush," one worker cautioned, "Joe's going to smell them on you, and then you're in for the lecture of your life." This discussion

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ceased when two Filipina singers in shiny plastic boots, fringed halters, and spandex miniskirts climbed onto the stage to suggest another alertness enhancer now available in Chennai.

"When your day is done and you wanna run--co-caine." The singers' voices were high, employing differing and indefinable keys, but they were nothing that whiskey couldn't mellow. Soon the Tigers were joined in the bar by jet-lagged Western and South African businessmen, sent by their companies to investigate the Indian outsourcing landscape. On a sofa lay an abandoned newsweekly whose cover story described the lack of youth interest in the elections, which were now only a month away. "It is alarming that the biggest segment of the Indian electorate has utter contempt for the political establishment," the article said. "It's time the 'it's my life' generation stepped out and said 'it's my country' and cast a vote!" Two sunburned American businessmen tossed the magazine aside and sat down. "He's to the right of Attila the Hun, so I hired him," one said to the other, laughing, but soon they turned silent, too, as the waiter delivered a third round of Johnny Walker Black.

The Filipina singers, Sheri-lyn and Rhea, had eight days left on their contract at the lounge. Between sets, they cornered a manager to ask for an extension. "Please, boss. Boss, our visas expire June 1st," one of them begged. "This is home for us now, and for my sister, too. I don't even know where home is, if not here." But Boss was learning wage arbitrage, too. He had in mind a cheaper act, whose performers promised less offstage whining. Sheri-lyn and Rhea eventually returned to the stage and the Tina Turner cover next on their list--"You're simply the best, better than all the rest"--but their shimmies did not fully recover.

Office Tiger had been scouting for new talent, too--forum-shopping, as it's called in the offshore trade. In addition to his Western travels, Joe had been to the Philippines and Sri Lanka, which was offering multinationals tax holidays of four years, as well as cheap labor and streets that a drought had not filled with water queues and dying sheep. This summer, an Office Tiger facility will open in Colombo. Manila next, Joe said, though Randy had his eye on Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, beseeching presentations from the government of Calcutta--a government of Marxists who were undoing labor protections and actively discouraging strikes--went unrequited. This spring, the rupee reached its highest level in years against the dollar. Wages were inching up across India, and in Chennai more than anywhere else.

If outsourcing was "inexorable," as Joe argued, it wasn't

quite a *deus ex machina*. It was driven by human beings who wanted to capitalize on global economic opportunities, and made choices to that end. Joe and Randy loved Harish and their other Tigers, perhaps even as much as the Tigers loved them. Still, as they argued to their clients on Wall Street, judgments uninflected by personal alliances are the most reliable kind. The Tigers often wondered why, after five years, Joe still lived in a hotel. But he, better than they, understood that conceptual attachments are necessarily fungible ones--able, when provoked, to move elsewhere.

In May, India's incumbent political class was thrown out of national and local office by citizens who had been excluded from globalization's spoils. In Tamil Nadu, in a demonstration of unprecedented consensus, voters delivered all forty legislative seats to Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's opposition, the "pro-people" party. Although election day was an Indian national holiday, many offshoring professionals, including Tigers, worked straight through it, needed, as they were, in the West. Within the week, the Indian stock market crashed--the biggest one-day drop in the institution's hundred-and-twenty-nine-year history. Like most of the country's meritocrats, Harish was stunned. "Perhaps we cannot have leadership for a modern world until our country has fewer millions beneath the poverty line," he wondered on the evening that the results began to come in.

Joe and Randy, who had no money in the Indian stock market, emerged better off from the political turmoil than their deeply invested Indian competitors. Moreover, Randy had just that week negotiated twenty-five million dollars in financing, after which the firm acquired a British outsourcing rival. Joe and Randy will soon be operating in three more countries. Joe explained, "You've got to diversify your geopolitical risk."

Competition is good, Harish told himself, and change, too, whether or not it feels so at first. He tried to concentrate on a new class of trainees--men and women who were just beginning to learn the meaning of "What's up?" and other American puzzles, and all of whom he wanted to see win. It was far too early for them to learn that their yearning word, "exposure," had another, disquieting definition.

He was tired and had developed a wracking cough--Chennai's polluted air, he said, though family members gently suggested a work schedule antithetical to human health. "I know, it is unlike me," he said on the Friday of election week. "But I am in need of a break." He left his cubicle at eight instead of midnight, waiting patiently in a queue for his backpack to be searched and

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reassurances made to American businesses that, populist politics notwithstanding, the corporate omerta was intact.

Riding his bike home, he could smell the sea but did not stop. Fewer Chennaians were coming to the beach these days. Many of those with televisions were at home watching soap operas, like "The Bold and the Beautiful." Some without televisions had recently been deprived of the shore as well, the government having increased parking fees from five rupees to fifty. The beggar children were left with few prospects to importune.

Amusement-park workers turned the handcranks of empty Ferris wheels as much out of habit as of hope.

On a previous evening's visit, Harish had turned away from the calls of venders and children to stare into the expanse of the bay. It was the most beautiful time of the evening--the light faint enough to obscure the empty Coke cans and cigarette butts yet sufficient, still, to cast a shine on the sea. "The perfect time and place for thinking about one's life and future, the moment when a person feels free," he had said. But, by May, free thinking about the future seemed less appealing than a spell of thinking nothing at all. This was the burden of trained peripheral vision: sometimes a man noticed what he might have been happier to miss. There were ships that anchored in the bay only briefly, and other ships that sailed right through.