

The New York Times

Some Indians Find It Tough to Go Home Again

By [HEATHER TIMMONS](#)
Published: November 27, 2009

NEW DELHI — When 7-year-old Shiva Ayyadurai left Mumbai with his family nearly 40 years ago, he promised himself he would return to India someday to help his country.

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Candace Feit for The International Herald Tribune

In June, Mr. Ayyadurai, now 45, moved from Boston to New Delhi hoping to make good on that promise. An entrepreneur and lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with a fistful of American degrees, he was the first recruit of an ambitious government program to lure talented scientists of the so-called desi diaspora back to their homeland.

“It seemed perfect,” he said recently of the job opportunity.

It wasn’t.

As Mr. Ayyadurai sees it now, his Western business education met India’s notoriously inefficient, opaque government, and things went downhill from there. Within weeks, he and his boss were at loggerheads. Last month, his job offer was withdrawn. Mr. Ayyadurai has moved back to Boston.

In recent years, Mother India has welcomed back tens of thousands of former emigrants and their offspring. When he visited the United States this week, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh personally extended an invitation “to all Indian-Americans and nonresident Indians who wish to return home.” But, like Mr. Ayyadurai, many Indians who spent most of their lives in North America and Europe are finding they can’t go home again.

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About 100,000 “returnees” will move from the United States to India in the next five years, estimates Vivek Wadhwa, a research associate at Harvard University who has studied the topic. These repats, as they are known, are drawn by India’s booming economic growth, the chance to wrestle with complex problems and the opportunity to learn more about their heritage. They are joining multinational companies, starting new businesses and even becoming part of India’s sleepy government bureaucracy.

But a study by Mr. Wadhwa and other academics found that 34 percent of repats found it difficult to return to India — compared to just 13 percent of Indian immigrants who found it difficult to settle in the United States. The repats complained about traffic, lack of infrastructure, bureaucracy and pollution.

For many returnees the cultural ties and chance to do good that drew them back are overshadowed by workplace cultures that feel unexpectedly foreign, and can be frustrating. Sometimes returnees discover that they share more in their attitudes and perspectives with other Americans or with the British than with other Indians. Some stay just a few months, some return to the West after a few years.

Returnees run into trouble when they “look Indian but think American,” said Anjali Bansal, managing partner in India for Spencer Stuart, the global executive search firm. People expect them to know the country because of how they look, but they may not be familiar with the way things run, she said. Similarly, when things don’t operate the way they do in the United States or Britain, the repats sometimes complain.

“India can seem to have a fairly ambiguous and chaotic way of working, but it works,” Ms. Bansal said. “I’ve heard people say things like ‘It is so inefficient or it is so unprofessional.’ ” She said it was more constructive to just accept customs as being different.

Sometimes, the better fit for a job in India is an expatriate who has experience working in emerging markets, rather than someone born in India who has only worked in the United States, she said.

While several Indian-origin authors have penned soul-searching tomes about their return to India, and dozens of business books exist for Western expatriates trying to do business here, the guidelines for the returning Indian manager or entrepreneur are still being drawn.

“Some very simple practices that you often take for granted, such as being ethical in day to day situations, or believing in the rule of law in everyday behavior, are surprisingly absent in many situations,” said Raju Narisetti, who was born in Hyderabad and returned to India in

2006 to found a business newspaper called Mint, which is now the country's second-biggest business paper by readership.

He said he left earlier than he expected because of a "troubling nexus" of business, politics and publishing that he called "draining on body and soul." He returned to the United States this year to join The Washington Post.

There are no shortcuts to spending lots of time working in the country, returnees say. "There are so many things that are tricky about doing business in India that it takes years to figure it out," said Sanjay Kamlani, the co-chief executive of Pangea3, a legal outsourcing firm with offices in New York and Mumbai. Mr. Kamlani was born in Miami, where his parents emigrated from Mumbai, but he has started two businesses with Indian operations.

When Mr. Kamlani started hiring in India, he met with a completely unexpected phenomena: some new recruits would not show up for work on their first day. Then, their mothers would call and say they were sick for days in a row. They never intended to come at all, he realized, but "there's a cultural desire to avoid confrontation," he said.

The case of Mr. Ayyadurai, the M.I.T. lecturer, illustrates just how frustrating the experience can be for someone schooled in more direct, American-style management. After a long meeting with a top bureaucrat, who gave him a handwritten job offer, Mr. Ayyadurai signed on to the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, or C.S.I.R., a government-financed agency that reports to the ministry of science.

The agency is responsible for creating a new company, called C.S.I.R.-Tech, to spin off profitable businesses from India's dozens of public laboratories. Currently, the agency, which oversees 4,500 scientists, generates just \$80 million in cash flow a year, even though its annual budget is the equivalent of half a billion dollars.

Mr. Ayyadurai said he spent weeks trying to get answers and responses to e-mail messages, particularly from the person who hired him, the C.S.I.R. director general, Samir K. Brahmachari. After several months of trying to set up a business plan for the new company with no input from his boss, he said, he distributed a draft plan to C.S.I.R.'s scientists asking for feedback, and criticizing the agency's management.

Four days later, Mr. Ayyadurai was forbidden from communicating with other scientists. Later, he received an official letter saying his job offer was withdrawn.

The complaints in Mr. Ayyadurai's paper could be an outline for what many inside and outside India say could be improved in some workplaces here: disorganization, intimidation, a

culture where top directors' decisions are rarely challenged and a lack of respect for promptness that means meetings start hours late and sometimes go on for hours with no clear agenda.

But going public with such accusations is highly unusual. Mr. Ayyadurai circulated his paper not just to the agency's scientists but to journalists, and wrote about his situation to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. India is "sitting on a huge opportunity" to create new businesses and tap into thousands of science and technology experts, Mr. Ayyadurai said, but a "feudal culture" is holding the country back.

Mr. Brahmachari said in an interview that Mr. Ayyadurai had misunderstood nearly everything — from his handwritten job offer, which he said was only meant to suggest what Mr. Ayyadurai could receive were he to be hired, to the way Mr. Ayyadurai asked scientists for their feedback on what the C.S.I.R. spinoff should look like.

To prove his point, Mr. Brahmachari, who was two hours late for an interview scheduled by his office, read from a government guide about decision-making in the organization. Mr. Ayyadurai didn't follow protocol, he said. "As long as your language is positive for the organization I have no problem," he added.

As the interview was closing, Mr. Brahmachari questioned why anyone would be interested in the situation, and then said he would complain to a reporter's bosses in New York if she continued to pursue the story.