“I am kind of a nomad where I have to go places and places”. . . Understanding mobility, place and identity in global software work from India

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Abstract

Mobilities, encompassing the movements and ‘flows’ of people, objects, capital, images technologies and information across the world have been strongly implicated in the context of contemporary globalization processes. Globally distributed software development work across boundaries of time, space and place undertaken by global software organizations (GSOs), can be seen as a microcosm of such processes, reflecting a multiplicity of mobilities, while situated in a particular context. An in-depth interpretative case study of a GSO located in Mumbai, India, was used in order to understand the nature and kinds of mobilities and their interactions with place, space, selves, and identities of Information Technology (IT) workers within the firm. Three kinds of interrelated mobilities – geographical, social and existential – were identified through an interpretive analysis of the empirical material. The construct of mobility–identity is proposed for analyzing the dynamic interplay between mobilities, place, selves, and identities of the workers. An understanding of mobility–identity is seen to have both theoretical and practical implications, and contributes more broadly to the development of our understanding of a “sociology of mobilities”.

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1. Introduction

In the millennium issue of the British Journal of Sociology, prominent sociologist John Urry (2000) proposed the agenda of a ‘postsocietal sociology’ which would seek to elaborate how contemporary flows and mobilities undermine traditional forms of stability associated with endogenous social structures that have “historically provided the intellectual and organizational context for sociology” (p. 186). Some of these flows and mobilities that Urry described as being at the heart of these transformations include imaginative travel, movements of images and information, virtual object, and corporeal travels. His belief was that, in the process of thinking ‘beyond society’, sociological analysis should recast its subject material by focusing on ‘mixtures’ or forms of heterogeneously composed networks, commodity chains, fluid social spaces and global institutional forms.

In this paper, we contribute to the development of Urry’s agenda of a sociology of mobilities through an empirically informed analysis of mobilities that constitute and are constituted by global software work (GSW). As compared to traditional service or manufacturing activities, GSW is intangible, heterogeneous and mobile (Sahay, Nicholson, & Krishna, 2003). An analysis of mobilities, inherent in GSW, is appropriate and urgently called for due to a variety of reasons. Such work is inherently distributed, where parts of software are developed in diverse locations and information and communication technologies (ICTs) are used to coordinate tasks (Sahay et al., 2003). The coordination of these activities involves the movement (physically or electronically) of diverse pieces of code, developers, methodologies, technologies, and documentation. These mobilities are at least three interconnected levels of the work, the organization and the individual. These movements are by no means seamless and unproblematic since they involve the interaction of different and sometimes conflicting linkages between people, technologies and practices across different time, space, and cultural conditions and boundaries. For example, people moving across countries have to constantly cope with different physical, social and cultural contexts. As compared to traditional firms, GSW has created new forms of organizational boundaries (both local and global) which become conflated as actors continually shift between evolving work, technological and social contexts. Such shifts and interactions are fundamentally intertwined with the notions of self and identity (Sahay et al., 2003). We propose that analysis of these mobilities can provide a unique arena for the study of the interrelation of self and identity.

Prominent authors like Giddens (1990) and Castells (1997), have argued for a central role of identity in understanding transformations in contemporary society and the interconnection between groups and individuals with institutions and broader globalization processes. Walsham (1998) argued that an analysis of identity helps to improve our understandings of the relationship between ICTs and processes of social transformation. These arguments have been further developed by Sahay et al. (2003) who argued that GSW metaphorically represent ‘models-of’ and ‘models-for’ globalization processes, which are understood and engaged within particular situated contexts.

In this paper, our focus is on understanding the conceptual relationship between mobility and changes in identity in the context of GSW, specifically seeking to answer the following two key questions:
What is the nature of mobilities that characterize IT workers and organizations engaged in global software development work?
How do these mobilities interact with the individual selves and identities of IT workers?

These two questions are analyzed through an intensive empirical analysis that draws upon semi-structured in-depth interviews of IT professionals in a software development firm in Mumbai, India, as well as interactions with other consultants in this industry. This material has been supplemented by extensive participant observation and analyses of different kinds of secondary data. Furthermore, the prior experience of one of the authors as a Human Resources (HR) manager in the organization studied has helped to develop a richer and historical contextual understanding of the phenomenon.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, we present the theoretical framework outlining the relationship between mobility and identity. In Section 3, we describe the case context. In Section 4, we present the research approach and methods. In Section 5, the case is analyzed. In Section 6 we suggest some theoretical and practical implications of this research followed by conclusions in Section 7.

2. Theoretical framework: place, identity and mobility

The theoretical basis for our analysis rests on three foundational concepts of place, identity and mobility and their inter-relationships. Within the backdrop of this conceptual frame, this section has three main subsections. The concept of place, discussed in Section 1, helps to understand how social meanings and existential significance of humans are related to places (physical, social and electronic). In the second section, titled ‘Place and Identity’, we discuss the notion of identity that draws our attention to how these sources of meanings and identifications contribute to and are constituted by an individual’s sense of identity. Finally, in the third subsection titled ‘Mobility and Identity’, the notion of mobility is discussed with a view to analyzing the identity-place relationship and its implications for understanding identity. In this way, the theoretical basis for our analysis is developed.

2.1. Place

Place and space have been viewed as the two central contours in the time-space configuration of modernity (Giddens, 1990). The concept of place has typically been theorized in contrast to that of space, which is associated with the sense of an abstract and infinite expanse through which people and ideas freely move offering possibilities for newness and growth (Casey, 1997; Schultze & Boland, 2000). Place has been related to a person’s sense of boundedness and particularity, belonging, or emotional attachment, and where tradition holds sway (Giddens, 1990; Harvey, 1989; Tuan, 1977). Place is also associated with security, subjectivity and situatedness, while space is associated with movement, freedom and expansiveness of possibilities (Schultze & Boland, 2000; Tuan, 1977).

Place has also been argued as becoming irrelevant when social and work-related transactions can be carried out in spaces. For example, Harvey (1989) argued that, with globalization, novel technologies of transportation and communication increasingly ‘compress’
time and space eliminating many characteristics of place, while space is increasingly unified. Giddens (1990) has described how space is separated from place. Social practices are ‘disembedded’ from local contexts and rearticulated across indefinite spans of global spaces (and time). Castells (1996) argues for a dialectical relation between the ‘net and the self’ metaphorically representing space and place respectively. He notes that in contemporary capitalism, while organizations are located in spaces, their components, people and processes are place dependent.

Rejecting geographical essentialism and emphasizing the social, Massey (1998) views space as constructed out of multiple social relations ranging from trans-global trade, finance and telecommunications. These nets of social relations, which are inherently dynamic, are constructed, laid down, decayed and renewed. They either are contained within a particular place or stretched out beyond a specific locality. Given the nature of social relations and place, Massey (1998) argues that they are more like processes that are fixed with a bounded internalized history. Rather, she posits that “places are a construction of a particular assemblage of social relations interacting or meeting at a particular location… imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings…” (p. 154). Further, given that locations are geographically differentiated, and globalization does not have homogenous influences, places retain their uniqueness through a peculiar mix of wider and local social relations. In a similar vein, the notion of ‘space of flows’ (Soja, 1989) with global cities as nodal points has been proposed to highlight the increased interconnectivity between places and large global flows of people, money, services and information.

Many have argued that the space–time compression in our contemporary world coupled with new ICTs have resulted in fragmentation, disorientation and a sense of placelessness. Giddens (1990) claims that global flows create an unsettling change whereby places become increasingly ‘phantasmagoric’. Places or locales are “thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them” (pp. 18–19). Here, people and things are simultaneously ‘now here’ and ‘nowhere’ (Friedland & Boden, 1994). Similarly, Casey (1993, 1997) applies the idea of ‘dromocentricity’ to describe the state of being somewhere and nowhere, which creates a sense of disorientation and a consequent search for stability through a sense of place (Harvey, 1989).

Drawing upon research in Sociology and Human Geography, Sahay et al. (2003) argued that in GSW, places (both physical and social) are far from being irrelevant and to the contrary are very much emphasized at the levels of the individual organization as well as in inter-organizational relationship. Given the emphasis, individuals project ‘compulsions for proximity’ (Boden & Molotch, 1994) and an organization, an image of its local rootedness. Sahay et al. (2003) argue that these needs for place are in constant dialectical tension with the imperatives for space-based work.

In summary, place and space are metaphors with contrasting characteristics and globalization processes have varying influences on them (see Table 1).

We now turn our attention to discuss the place–identity relationship.

2.2. Place and identity

The place–identity relationship has been studied by human geographers, environmental psychologists and phenomenologists who locate ‘home’ in a physical, social and cultural place that provides psychological comfort as well as a sense of identity (Hayward,
Rather than just an inert setting which space symbolizes, place is seen to interact dynamically with identity construction processes (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). It is not surprising, that, along with transnational flows of people, there is an increased preoccupation of researchers with identity and people's personal and collective roots or cultural moorings (Harvey, 1989).

Massey (1998) challenges the idea of places as stable and questions the notion that a ‘sense of place’ provides one with security and an unproblematic identity. Similarly, others (e.g., Usher, 2002) have called for more malleable notions of place, meaning and identity associated with the unbounded de-territorialized flows of goods, technologies, capital and people. Individuals moving across national borders are seen to hold diasporic or hybridized and multiple identities that are not bound by the notion of a stable place or homeland or ‘one true national self’ or identity (Brah, 1996; Sheller & Urry, 2003; Urry, 2003).

In traditional societies, where life revolved around pre-defined social roles and norms, the notion of the ‘bounded’ self or stable identity with an ‘essential’ unchanging inner core was very much tied to bounded notions of place and community with established rich, co-located interpersonal connections (Kellner, 1992). ICTs tend to undermine this stable and unitary conception of place as well as identity, by enabling relations across regions and continents. Technologies are seen to ‘unglue’ selves, identities and relationships from geographical or spatial confines providing possibilities for varied alterations to emerge (Gergen, 1991). Thus, in contemporary society, identity is construed as fluid and flexible giving way to a multiplicity of selves (Gergen, 1991). The self is seen to be redefined as relational, constructed within social networks of relationships as a reflexive two-way process, through interaction and relationship (Baldwin, 1986; Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1994), as well as different practices and various sites of experience (Sarup, 1996).

So paradoxically, while globalization processes and ICTs build relationships between places and locales through processes of time and space compression, these very influences tend to undermine a stable and unitary conception of place as well as dislocate selves and identities. This aspect is especially relevant in the context of GSW whose landscape is inherently characterized by ICT mediated mobilities of shifting social, geographical and organizational contexts. These mobilities raise the need for a re-conceptualization of place–identity relationships in the context of ICT enabled work and in the next section, we elaborate upon this relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bounded</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologically meaningful</td>
<td>Offers growth possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situated and subjective</td>
<td>Expansive and objective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3. Our theoretical lens: place, identity and mobility

A common understanding of mobility is the movement of a body between locations in a primarily geographical space. Contemporary sociologists and anthropologists have argued for a broader conceptualization of mobility. For example, Appadurai (1990) has proposed five interrelated ‘scapes’ conceptualized as fluid, flowing and amorphous, as an alternative spatial rendering of the traditional global order. Similarly, Urry (2001) using the metaphor of ‘travel’ as a journey crossing process states argues, “people can indeed be said to ‘dwell’ in various mobilities” (p. 157) which are diverse yet intersecting, creating a ‘networked’ pattern of economic and social life. Giddens (2002) has used the term ‘Runaway World’ to represent the out of control nature of ‘mobility’ that characterizes contemporary society.

In Information Systems (IS) research, the focus has been primarily on the technologies that enable mobility such as mobile phones and Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), rather than the processes of mobility itself. Kakihara and Sørenson (2003) describe locational, operational and interactional mobility of mobile professional work. In such studies, social and existential realms are often ignored or taken for granted. Arguments of sociologists such as those presented above raise the urgent need to address these research gaps in IS, especially in the context of GSW which is fundamentally characterized by different forms of mobility, such as highly mobile career trajectories of IT workers who are seen to have strong, individualized professional attachments (Sahay et al., 2003). Furthermore, volatile changes in technologies and platforms demand that workers possess current and updated knowledge and skills that are required by the firm and the industry, both nationally and globally. Diverse time zones and tight project schedules necessitate IT workers to consistently work late hours, often in a crisis mode, and to rapidly switch between projects, technologies and countries.

In this paper, we argue that in the context of GSW, mobility fundamentally influences the place–identity relationship in at least three ways. First, as people constantly move back and forth across different locations, they experience what Beck (2000) calls a “place polygamy” (p. 72) implying potential identification with a multiplicity of places. Secondly, in GSW, place (or work) occurs in ‘electronic places’ as well as in social, national and existential domains, influencing career trajectories, inner selves and social relations, all of which have implications on identity constructions. Finally, besides the spatial, temporal and contextual mobility, social and personal or existential mobility also influences the place–identity relationship. GSOs represent sites embodying the fluidity of mobilities (both of place and selves) contributing to multiple paths and socio-spatial trajectories. These paths and trajectories are seen as the means by which individuals and collectives reflexively construct a sense of identity and secure a ‘psychic place’ for themselves in the organization, market and memberships in various social groups (Knights & Murray, 1994).

To conclude, place and space are socially constructed configurations whose meanings and importance have shifted over the years. In a highly mobile and volatile work environment, such as in GSOs, the construction of identity by both individuals and organizations becomes a challenging project. Our theoretical lens seeks to understand firstly the nature of mobility in GSW, and secondly how this shapes the place–identity relationship.

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2 These include flows of people, technologies, money, images and information and the spread of ideas such as democracy and freedom.
3. The case context

3.1. The IT industry

A myriad of interconnected technological, geographical, demographic and socio-cultural shifts and movements characterize the IT industry in India. The country’s centuries old history of scholarship and tradition of educational institutions has provided a fertile ground for the burgeoning of the software industry. In the early 1980s, under the dynamic leadership of the (late) Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, globalization unfolded in the context of ‘new economic policies’ of liberalization. This encouraged imports while promoting an ‘export orientation’ in science and technology as a critical means to become self-reliant (Heeks, 1996). Nehruvian icons of a modernizing Indian nation, such as dams, steel and power plants and the rhetoric of economic poverty reduction, were replaced by images of goods and commodities available through multinational and Indian corporations directed towards the middle classes (Fernandes, 2000, 2004). In parallel, the software industry picked up momentum. Today, India is a major destination for global industries sourcing software and IT-enabled services.

While in the early years, almost 75% of the export-related work was carried out at the client’s location overseas (labeled onsite) (Heeks, 1996), today, a similar volume of work takes place ‘offshore’ in India (Sahay et al., 2003). The global economic downturn, which lasted for three years (2000–2002) and brought in its wake pink slips and massive retrenchment, is now over and the Indian IT industry is now surging ahead, clocking an annual growth of nearly 28% over 2005–2006 (NASSCOM, 2006). The industry’s contribution to the country’s GDP has steadily increased from 1.2% in 1999–2000 to around 4.5% in 2005–2006 with software exports accounting for a lion’s share of the industry (NASSCOM, 2006). Up from 770,000 employees, in March, 2004, the IT and IT-Enabled Services Industry now directly hires 1.3 million workers (NASSCOM, 2006). Over time, most large IT players have transcended the domains of software coding and maintenance and moved up the ‘value chain’ into higher-end IT consulting, systems integration, infrastructure management, package implementation, enterprise applications and product development realms (NASSCOM, 2006). The challenges facing the Indian IT industry today, include relevant industry-ready manpower, rising salaries, new competition (e.g. China), gaining expertise in new technologies and new business models, as well as cultivating new markets (Europe and Asia) to reduce the risk of ‘putting all the eggs in one basket’ arising from an over reliance on North America (Sahay et al., 2003).

3.2. The city

IN-Sync, the focus of the case study, is located in Mumbai city, the economic and financial capital of India, and is ‘home’ to around 60% of IN-Sync employees. A teeming metropolis of around 18 million people, Mumbai became the hub for software activities in India from the late 1970s until the mid-1980s, attracting large numbers of migrants from other states. Persistent issues such as high prices, infrastructure problems, limited labor availability (due to the overseas brain drain and a history of labor strife), and commuting challenges plagued Mumbai based software firms (Heeks, 1996), which started seeking alternative destinations like Bangalore.
Mumbai is a city of paradoxes. Renaissance-styled skyscrapers stand cheek by jowl with sprawling slums. Its urban landscape is dotted by billboard advertisements, multi-storeyed matchbox like residential buildings, newly constructed controversial flyovers, ‘heritage’ monuments, opulent shopping malls, ethnic restaurants selling fusion cuisine, multiplex theatres, and innumerable bustling cybercafés. The peninsular geography of the city has limited its expansion, creating a shortage of commercial, residential, public and private space (D’Monte, 2002), and making real estate extremely expensive.

Mumbai city celebrated as ‘a metaphor of Indian modernity’ (Patel, 1995) is seen as an arena for opportunity and growth. Laxman (a 33-year old project leader in IN-Sync) who had come from a small town in south India to Mumbai, commented: “Coming to Bombay was a culture change. It was a fast moving life and I was not used to it. I used to come in Hawaii (bathroom) slippers to my first job. I never thought a shoe was a pre-requisite for a job. But Bombay has changed me!” The purchase of a vehicle, especially two-wheelers like motorbikes for the males and a car perhaps a few years later, was referred to as promising mobility and comfort for travel in the city, in addition to being an important symbol of status. The acquisition of personal vehicles was seen by many as immediately affordable, given the profusion of low-interest loans offered by banks. One informant, a 23-year old developer, proudly stated that while his retired father could never afford a vehicle in his career, he was able to own a motorbike very early on in life. Informal conversations with IT workers suggests a high level of brand and price consciousness of vehicles in the Indian market and their performance on the crowded and pathetic roads of Mumbai. While the purchase of a flat was certainly an objective, in the context of Mumbai where housing is very expensive, this decision was often related to long term questions of domicile, city preferences and proximity to parents.

3.3. The company

IN-Sync, a publicly held IT software applications outsourcing company with an annual revenue of 150 million USD in 2005, was established in 1980 and is headquartered in Mumbai, India. It offers business solutions in insurance, financial services and government as well as application management outsourcing services. In two decades, IN-Sync has grown worldwide from three individuals to over 2300 professionals. Initially catering to only domestic customers, IN-Sync has since aggressively moved into the export market. Once housed in the living room of one of the directors, IN-Sync now has offices in the US, UK, Germany, Austria, Japan, Singapore and Malaysia, along with several offices in Mumbai city and its customers are distributed globally. It is assessed at Level 5 on the Capability Maturity Model for its software as well as its people processes and has several partnership arrangements with companies in the UK and USA. Currently, over 90% of its revenues are from repeat business. Over the years, IN-Sync has restructured itself several times, changed its vision and mission, merged functions, and shut down or opened new units in response to broader market changes both globally and locally.

3 In Mumbai, this term is used to refer to an apartment.
4 Capability Maturity Models are frameworks for improving software development (as in SW-CMM) or people management processes (as in PCMM) developed by the Software Engineering Institute (SEI) in the USA (NASSCOM, 2006). Internationally recognized as standards for quality, companies use these to enhance their efficiency as well as their market image in the international marketplace.
4. Research approach and methods

4.1. Research approach

Our interpretively inspired, ethnographic research approach was aimed at developing an in-depth understanding of identity-related processes among software professionals in the situated context of GSOs in India. An ethnographic approach was seen to be appropriate to the study of identity and mobility processes, since it remains close to ways people experience and make sense of themselves and others (van Maanen, 1979). The case study method (Stake, 1994; Yin, 1994) was used to create ‘thick descriptions’ of the context as well as the actors. The case of IN-Sync was selected for the following reasons:

1. It is a mid-sized company with a lengthy history and has a known presence in the Indian IT industry.
2. The company has restructured itself and changed its business focus several times to meet shifts in market demands. Simultaneously, it has also revised its vision and mission as well as various software related and HR processes. Employees are expected to move easily across platforms, projects and countries where customers are located. Several employees have left the firm for work elsewhere or entered higher education and then re-joined the firm. In these ways, mobility characterizes the work of the firm and its employees. These features are seen to relate to the firm’s identity and image as well as influence its employees.
3. The first author was associated with the company as a Human Resource manager for 7 years. Although she had resigned from the company, her previous position facilitated access to people within the company across the various business units and office locations. Her long stint in the firm and the varied roles she held as a HR functionary (such as Training and Development, Business Unit HR manager) enabled a rich understanding of the context. This was in the form of her first-hand experience of how the vicissitudes of the global marketplace, government policies and IT industry turns, both globally and locally were entwined with the changed structure, processes and policies of the firm over time. Her close interactions with IT employees on a range of HR issues provided a detailed understanding of how these shifts influenced their daily, lived experiences, both within and outside the firm. The second author also had previous research contact with the same firm.

Data was collected mainly through semi-structured interviews conducted in English. In all, 50 employees (16 women and 34 men) in the roles of Developers, Module Leaders, Project Leaders, Project Managers, and Unit/Function Heads were interviewed. Interviews were conducted over four intensive periods from December 2002 to July 2004 as follows: December 2002–January 2003; July–August 2003; December 2003–March 2004; July, 2004. At the time of the interview, the average tenure of informants at IN-Sync ranged from 4 months to 4 years. Features of interviewees that are relevant to career mobility (an important consideration in our analysis) are presented in Table 2.

Each tape-recorded interview lasted 60–80 min. Some informants were followed up either in person or by e-mail to understand certain issues in more detail. Face to face repeat interviews were attempted with informants to track their movements over time and understand their responses to their role and personal shifts. Finally, seven such
interviews (1 Trainee, 2 Developers, 1 Module Leader, 3 Project Managers) were conducted. Several informants were relocated overseas, some were on training, some on personal leave while others had resigned from the company when followed up. E-mails were exchanged with eight other informants (2 Trainees, 2 Developers, 2 Module Leaders and 2 Project Managers) who were physically unavailable in the Mumbai office.

The interviews usually began with sharing the aim of the research project, a promise of anonymity, and a request for the interview to be tape-recorded. Most informants agreed for the interview to be recorded, as they felt they were contributing to a broader research agenda of creating new knowledge about the Indian IT context. Informants were also most often happy to contribute to research involving their professional group as they thought it would enhance their visibility in the international academic field. The questions usually began with asking the informant to describe how he/she became a software professional. Other questions related to their work and personal commitments, their views on industry and company-related shifts, their professional growth trajectory and career-related aspirations. Questions more directly related to mobility were around travel schedules to and from work in the city, traveling and living overseas, professional and personal growth milestones, their thoughts, feelings and experiences around shifting jobs, platforms, projects and age related changes. The questions asked were generally open, aimed to invoke individual reflection and sharing of personal experiences, and leaving the possibility to diverge into areas that the informants wanted to emphasize. For example, one informant shared his experience of simultaneously juggling role changes, a shift of platform on a new project, relocation to the UK and also getting married and renting a house in Mumbai, all within a span of 2 months. Issues discussed in follow up interviews related to changes in roles, jobs, projects and also life changes that informants had made over time (such as marriage and having a child) and their thoughts and feelings about these changes.

Other sources of data included notes and observations from ‘hanging around’ workstations, the cafeteria, commuting in the company bus to the office and back home, attending team meetings and company gatherings, and reviewing some of the company’s promotional materials and its website. Several ex-employees were also contacted and met either personally, or through e-mail, as most of them had moved to another city in India or overseas. The researchers have also drawn extensively on their prior experience with various GSOs as researchers or employees. Some interviews were done with opinion leaders in the industry as well as some spouses of employees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level in company</th>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
<th>Range of previous IT work experience (prior to IN-Sync)</th>
<th>Average number of previous firms</th>
<th>Average tenure in IN-Sync when interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trainee</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0–6 months</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2–4 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module Leader</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3–6 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Leader</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5–8 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7–11 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit/Function Head</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12–16 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support functions (public relations, human resources, quality, technical training)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, the two researchers (the authors of this paper) independently analyzed the transcripts and identified recurrent themes and sub-themes in the data. This analysis helped to identify various kinds of mobilities observed in the empirical material and describe their features from the patterns reflected in specific examples. These were then interpreted in relation to theoretical concepts such as that of space, place and mobility drawn from Sociology and Human Geography (Massey, 1998; Urry, 2000, 2003), and from Information Systems (Kakihara & Sørenson, 2002, 2003). Some examples of this extraction process and their linkage to specific themes and theoretical concepts are illustrated in Table 3. The multiplicity of mobilities observed were arranged under three categories relating to place, space and the shifts by workers, necessitated by the distinctive nature of this industry. In each category, characteristics of mobilities observed were reviewed, analyzed, and their possible linkages to identity were described. Responses of informants that represented issues related to these mobilities and also highlighted their features, were selected as quotations from their transcripts and used for the writing process. Thus, rather than adopting an a priori theoretical framework, a set of themes was inductively evolved through an ongoing process of engagement with the data, discussion with each other and other colleagues as well as the ongoing reading of relevant literature.

4.2. Case study: multiplicity of mobilities

We now describe the three kinds of mobilities – geographical, social and existential – that were analyzed from the empirical material. Each of the mobilities and their features are described and analyzed separately below, sometimes in terms of analysis of ‘from’ and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sample quotes based on which themes were derived</th>
<th>Relation to theoretical concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs about how professional growth takes place</td>
<td>Project Manager: “Initially I got stuck to one company. But what happens in the software industry is that growth does not happen if you stick to one organization. So I moved organizations and I believe that I have grown because I have moved organizations. This is my 8th or 9th organization”</td>
<td>Geographical and social movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends and social networks; job information flows</td>
<td>Trainee: “I have a large network of friends and, yes, we exchange information. They are all personal friends. Like some of my seniors who left this company and joined other companies… then we write everyday mails. About opportunities. Which company pays higher. Then we analyze that. There is nothing to hide as everyone keeps changing”</td>
<td>Relations as social networks that are constantly mobile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working overseas</td>
<td>Project Manager: “Having lived abroad, and traveled quite a bit, my standard of living has changed because of earnings. My value system has not changed. A certain amount of quality, professionalism has improved. Values in terms of relationships, family… nowhere that is changed”</td>
<td>Place based identification related to geographical relocation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
'towards' movements. While listed separately, the three mobilities and their features are seen as intersecting, mutually shaping and, sometimes, in tension with each other.

4.2.1. Geographical mobility

By geographical mobility, we refer to physical shifts of various sorts across space and place of the industry, firm and individual workers. For individual workers, geographical mobility is represented in moving to and from the office, across cities, projects, technologies, organizations, and countries.

Industry shifts. The 1991 national economic policy changes significantly improved the climate for economic reforms for IT production by jumpstarting the mobility of the IT industry and resulted in a rapid expansion in outsourcing firms. Software Technology Parks (STPs) schemes now provides software companies to be located in tax-exempt, designated zones with guaranteed access to high-speed satellite links and reliable electricity (D’Costa, 2004). These reforms also contributed to a sharp increase of IT educational institutes and skill-oriented training centers in India. They further contributed to large numbers of young people from other Indian cities as well as small towns ‘migrating’ into this career stream as well to cities like Mumbai for employment opportunities in this sector.

City travel. In Mumbai, the physical travel required by an IT worker in a given workday, is enormous, transcending home and family contexts and representing an urban landscape which literally assaults one’s senses. IT workers typically leave home by around 8 a.m. and return home by around 9 p.m. on a daily basis, including Saturdays. With imminent software deliveries, these timings are stretched even more and Sundays too are often spent at the office. Working in an IT exports company in Mumbai, usually implies traveling to software export parks or campus-like zones housing a large number of companies. IT workers in Mumbai spend hours commuting on poorly maintained and polluted roads in humid weather to the Santacruz Electronics Exports Processing Zone (SEEPZ)5 in the north of Mumbai, where IN-Sync is located. SEEPZ offers a relatively calm and relaxing ambience with wide roads, lush greenery and even a lake but after office hours transport connections, either public or company provided, are not very reliable.

The physical layout of the SEEPZ location, with common cafeterias located strategically and crowded with people from various IT companies during lunch hours, illustrates a place that functions like a node in the network of flows. Serving both ‘Jain pizzas’ as well as ‘American burgers’, informational and social flows are apparent. Here, apart from job possibilities, ‘inside’ stories about companies and teams circulate freely and are used strategically to make career moves. Firms, afraid of losing staff, have responded to the threat by starting cafeterias within their office premises.

Office places and spaces. IT office spaces in Mumbai are centrally air conditioned and aesthetically designed, housed in large buildings whose facades vary from plain whitewash to polished gleaming glass. At one IN-Sync location, each floor of the building has a theme such as sports, nature, play where the colors, furniture and wall hangings all mirror the

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5 Export Processing Zones (EPZs) were created by the Government of India to provide an internationally competitive, duty free environment at low cost for export production. These zones provide infrastructure facilities like developed land, factory buildings, roads, uninterrupted power, optic fiber lines for high speed worldwide communication facilities, water supply as well as fiscal incentives by way of customs, excise and tax exemptions (D’Costa, 2004).
theme. Granite and marble are generously used in the construction, both inside and outside the office. Security men with pinstriped uniforms guarding the entrances to ensure that employees display their identity cards also assist in reception and other administrative tasks. In the elevators, an American accented voice announces the floor. The language of most corridor and elevator conversations among employees is Hindi, English or Marathi. Employee seating is open, to maximize space, reduce hierarchy and increase opportunities for social exchange. IT employees (typically at developer levels) rarely ask for permission to use a seat or desktop, and their workstations are rarely decorated with personal photographs. In wider workstations, managers sit along with the developers but with more phones on the table and more corporate or personal memorabilia adorning the space. The Head of the unit sits in a spacious cubicle with a semi-transparent glass door. From the windows, cloudy hills in the far background are juxtaposed with views of the road outside the secured complex which is dotted with shanties, piles of uncleared garbage, large cement pipes, children running around, family members near their dwellings and sleeping, stray dogs.

On each floor, there are self-service cafeteria facilities, with plentiful supplies of (free) tea and coffee. The building also houses training rooms, a library and meeting rooms (mostly equipped with telephones, computers and white boards or projector screens). Conference rooms are equipped with state-of-the-art videoconference facilities. Inside the office, it is easy to lose one’s sense of time. However, the work pressures are enormous and time is always a constraint.

Home at work. The company tries to create a home-like environment in the office in various ways to enable employees to feel a sense of place, to be at home in work. Use of the family metaphor is often invoked by the CEO of the company in his address to employees. Employees are free to express their religious beliefs through screensavers of deities, tiny idols placed on the monitor or hard disk and pictures pinned on the soft board in the workstation. New offices are inaugurated with a traditional pujā ceremoney. Prayers or religious mails are freely circulated among some employees. Among some of the men in the workplace, tikas on foreheads, red threads around a wrist or a tonsured head signify religious ceremonies they have recently attended. Socialization practices and events organized by the company also bridge relations between home and work. Major religious festivals in India such as Holi, Diwali, Ganesh Chathurthi, Christmas and Id are all celebrated in the office by decorating the office, distributing sweets, wearing specified dress codes and exchanging greetings. Cake cutting, lighting diyas, singing Christmas carols and reciting shlokas are regular ceremonies and practices in the office space. Valentine’s Day is also celebrated with red balloons and a reimbursement for single employees for a treat with their Valentine. Major company events include the annual company sponsored 3 day picnic at an outdoor location for employees and their families, monthly meeting gathering, celebration of the company’s anniversary as a birthday ‘bash’. IN-Sync management views such “business mixed with pleasure” events as a glue to hold together a youthful and mobile workforce within the firm.

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6 A Hindu religious ritual.
7 A vermillion or red dot, usually put a on the forehead, after a puja.
8 Earthen or brass lamps with oil and a cotton wick, lit at Diwali or auspicious occasions.
9 Sacred Sanskrit verses to invoke protection, abundance and prosperity.
Working overseas. Overseas work, particularly in the West, holds the promise of material success and an opportunity to gain ‘exposure’ in terms of more ‘professional’ work styles and holiday travel. This comes with its own set of tensions and issues. Informants reported feelings of vulnerability (and often loneliness) associated with living in a new country, particularly in cold and dark winter conditions where one does not speak the local language. While they found professional relations easier to establish, relating at a personal level was difficult due to cultural differences. For example, ‘rules’ relating to ‘small talk’ or what is understood as ‘personal’, differs across geographical places. Not knowing these rules onsite, particularly those traveling overseas for the first time, made it difficult for them to easily ‘fit in’ socially.

Most often a project team would be at one customer location, with the members sharing the same house and socializing with each other. Few ventured to join any local interest groups thus resulting in their mixing only with their colleagues or other Indians in the locality. Spouses (mainly females) of employees, who came to live onsite, would make friends with each other since they were generally unable to work due to their visa status. Their husbands would be relieved because they would otherwise be bored with the limited household tasks (as compared to India) and the absence of relatives. An ex-employee, now a resident in the UK, noted how this group enjoyed “doing potlucks and playing antakshari”\(^{10}\) amongst themselves. Another employee stated that watching Bollywood movies on Zee\(^{11}\) television helped to reduce his homesickness and “longing for India”. At one of the customer sites, a large global corporation in the UK, one of the Indian employees started an unofficial ‘Hindu’ club while another started a ‘Muslim’ club. These clubs were reported to organize informal social gatherings and philanthropic activities, as well as collective visits to temples or mosques. In these ways, members attempted to create a sense of place in a foreign space.

We wondered how workers negotiated cultural differences when posted onsite with their families. Responding to questions around this, Ramesh, a 33-year old Project Leader with a 2-year old child said, “I found it is very easy at 25–30 years to integrate into society there [UK]. But I have found problems with kids growing up there… on the one hand, one may say ‘I will adopt the country’s culture’ which creates one set of problems. Then, there is another set of people who become ultraconservative and everyone, for example, learns Indian music and dance. Very few have a balance going around”.

Rajan, a senior Manager in his mid 40s with two children, said, “Having lived abroad, and traveled quite a bit, my standard of living has changed because of earnings. My value system has not changed. A certain amount of quality, professionalism has improved… Values in terms of relationships, family… nowhere that is changed”.

We saw some differences in how men and women experienced their onsite stint. Sulochana, a 30-year old Module Leader, was the only woman in a UK location in a team of 35 males. She often felt alone and marginalized. Very independent and outspoken, she was labeled by them (rather disparagingly) as a *Jhansi ki rani*.\(^{12}\) She had wanted to

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\(^{10}\) Antakshari is a musical game based on songs from Hindi films. This game is immensely popular in India and is also played at company events or social gatherings at IN-Sync.

\(^{11}\) Zee TV, a channel of one of India’s satellite broadcast network, provides ‘Indian’ entertainment specifically catering to the Indians abroad market in the form of drama series, television movies, Bollywood films, children’s programs, game shows to millions of overseas viewers across the world.

\(^{12}\) A well-known courageous, rebel Indian queen.
return home earlier from her assignment because her house had been burgled and she felt unsafe to continue living in that locality. Her request to return back home was not immediately granted as a replacement was hard to find on such short notice. She then asked her manager what he would have done if his daughter were in her place. Her manager said that he would have got his daughter married before sending her alone onsite – a response that shocked and angered Sulochana since she interpreted it as an adverse remark to her own upbringing. She returned back home and was reluctant to travel out again. So while the work, as well as the onsite locale, created a new situation demanding a shift in mindset, a place-based chauvinistic response transcended it. This incident emphasizes the tensions between the social and geographical mobilities of the IT person with the immobility of norms and values.

Although, today, travel abroad does not carry the high prestige and value that it did some years ago in India, IT people report pressures to travel overseas from family, peers and friends when they join an IT company. Amit, a 26-year old Developer said, “When an IT person meets someone else from another industry, people ask is onsite kya gaya hai tuh [have you gone onsite]? In India, an IT company is equated with you going onsite as soon as possible. So if you have not gone outside there is some serious problem with you. If not then kabh jaa raha hai onsite [when are you going onsite]?” Earlier, saving potential was a major factor in travel abroad but now, with higher salaries and annual increments, employees are more choosy about the kind of assignments they prefer or where and for how long. However, the act of going overseas, was widely seen as a critical rite of passage for IT workers. Amit made the point that “as an IT person I was quite uncomfortable until my ghost of going abroad was exorcised”.

Attrition of IT workers. Geographical mobility also contributes to job-hopping particularly of young male developers. Attrition of employees is an evergreen challenge for IT firms in India, given the industry-related particularities where demand exceeds supply (D’Mello, 2005, 2006; Sahay et al., 2003). There have also been downturns in this trend, for example, the economic downturn after September 11th, 2001 resulted in overall attrition rates plummeting from around 35% in the 1990s, to almost 15%. It was a ‘boom time’ for GSO managers and HR staff who no longer felt held to ransom by this new and ‘special’ breed of individuals. They had a larger pool of people to choose from. Companies could actually ‘grow’ qualities of loyalty and commitment as well as retain key staff for a longer duration, and yet neutralize the monetary benefits that acted as the ‘golden handcuffs’ of previous years.

Mobilities of the market and technological demands reverberated with the IT worker’s constant attempts to assess his/her marketability and career growth prospects by learning new skills and, consequently, ‘adding value’ to oneself. For example, Roy, a 25-year old Developer, who had already changed jobs three times in four years, said, “See, ultimately all IT companies are almost the same. They are young. They have open cultures, and there are lots of celebrations and events in the company for the families of employees. So the main thing is to get what adds value to me. And, if in the process, I can also enjoy the other things then that is what I call a good working environment.” Echoing a similar sentiment, Asha, a 29-year old Module Leader, stated, “It is all a learning process, adding more skills. There is never any end. I can never say I am a master or expert. And if I feel I need to grow more and this organization cannot take care of this need, I will quit”.

While within a company, IT workers were expected to shift tasks and responsibilities as well as locations and projects on a regular basis. This naturally placed a stress on
traditional structures of support. For example, accommodation is expensive and hard to find in Mumbai city which often makes it difficult for aging parents to live with their children (as is common in India). Frequently, the onsite posting duration was not known. The uncertainty affected family life with interruption of children’s schooling or the spouse’s job, as well as housing contract extension decisions. Such uncertainties are inherent and inextricably tied up with the mobility of the individual, and their sense of well being and stability.

4.2.2. Social mobility

We use the term social mobility to refer to shifts within and across various groups of belonging such as work relations, caste and regional affiliation, and family and one’s social group.

Social networks. Socialization, for IT people, was closely intertwined with work demands. Shakuntala, a senior Manager in her late 30s, with two teenage children said, “Because of inevitable long hours at work, IT people build up strong social networks within the company. Outside the office, apart from family members, there is little time and energy to socialize. This phenomenon, along with overseas travel impacts family relationships... On the one hand, my family can be with me overseas for short vacations which are great. However, my family seems to have found other support systems in my absence and sometimes I wonder about my place in the home!” Social networks at work were noted as providing leads for subsequent career moves, as well as forging friendships.

Increasing affluence. The IT industry was commented on by informants as the most visible ‘face’ of India’s liberalization policies, further emphasized by the media as well as the government’s favorable policies for export of software. An IT industry opinion leader attributed, what he called the “nomadic” and “opportunistic” nature of the Indian IT professional, to the large number of “tempting job opportunities” in this industry in India as well as media-influences. Emphasizing this, Arnaz (Quality Manager at IN-Sync) noted, “People come to the software industry because of the money involved and travels abroad. For that, he is willing to sacrifice things like staying away from the family, going to remote corners, staying in different places... This is a place where, if you are successful, you can just rise to any limit... You see the success immediately. You don’t have to wait”.

When comparing IT professionals with others like those in manufacturing, Romila (a 33-year old HR Manager) noted that they were more affluent and occupied a place of pride in their ‘sasurall’.

13 While family members did not really understand what exactly the ‘IT animal’ did, she commented that they felt proud that this member would travel overseas frequently and enjoy the material and professional benefits of such ‘exposure.’ Several IT employees echoed Romila’s view which suggested the pride and shifting social status engendered by this industry. Aman, a 36-year old Project Manager said, “Despite higher salaries, IT people are not really satisfied. The urge to earn more is unsatiated. Twenty years back, one would feel grateful to God if one could have one’s own flat in Mumbai at the time of retirement. Now, at the age of 35, unless you have a fancy car and a nice house, you have not arrived”.

Shifts were noted in attitudes too. Romila commented, “I would say IT people are a lot more liberal in their views. If they see their colleagues working late night and if their wife is in IT they understand much better. Also, husbands, parents and in-laws did not want

13 Term in Hindi to refer to extended family as a result of marriage.
women to go abroad. Now women want to go abroad and also make money... There is a change, especially in the younger group coming in now’.

**Changing dress codes.** Attitudes towards dress was seen as having shifted over time. In the early years of the industry, IT people were referred to as ‘geek’s, or nerds. Dressing up for work, was incompatible with the social image of this ‘intellectual’, ‘high tech’ profession for both men and women. This has dramatically changed today. Several informants in their early 20s, emphatically stated, “Appearances are an important part of the job scene today and IT work is very international. Dressing up smartly does not mean anymore that we are flighty or not serious software engineers. That era is gone”. Mirroring the upsurge in fashion events in the country and Mumbai city in recent years, company celebration events at IN-Sync now feature more professionally choreographed fashion shows with IT employees as participants. This was earlier unheard of or labeled as frivolous!

**Changing caste relations.** In cities like Mumbai, forces of secularization, urbanism, and consumerism are seen to increasingly erode the influence of the traditional caste system where one’s place is ascribed and determined at birth and kinship relations. Previously, Sanskritization was a means for groups to move up the caste hierarchy. Today, individual agency, acquired knowledge and competence are the means for individuals to move up skill-based meritocratic hierarchies, which are typical in the private sector run GSOs. At IN-Sync, it was anathema to speak of caste in public within the organization even though tacitly, it could be inferred from surnames. While kinship still operated at the entry level, where qualified relatives could be recommended, this factor was seen as diluted or altogether mitigated for senior level positions. Ashok, a 34-year old Project Manager, and also a member of a recruitment interview panel, emphatically stated: “You end up reading the caste and religion from a resume and beyond that it is just a data point among others of no consequence. See, in this industry I am in desperate need of a good person. And it just doesn’t matter if he is Hindu or Muslim, male or female”. In selecting a spouse for marriage, however, many informants expressed a preference for a traditional ‘arranged’ marriage. Here caste, kinship belonging, and religion were implicitly factored in, as opposed to ‘falling in love’ seen by many as a matter of individual choice.

While this new system holds out a promise for individuals to carve new social spaces for themselves, the fact remains that caste is still inferred indirectly from Hindu surnames. The recurrent national debates, relating to reservation of seats for Socially/Economically Backward Classes in educational institutions, and also private organizations, suggest that caste, religion and social positioning in Indian society is still a contentious issue. There is also the influence of small town origins reflected in the demeanor and behaviors of several IT workers. The Head of HR, Nandini observed how those from small towns were seen to be more ‘doers’ and ‘order takers’, which prevented them from being firm with American or European customers and impeded the distinctive communication processes required in this industry. In contrast, the younger generation (early

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14 This term was introduced by Srinivas (1997), an anthropologist, to refer to mobility processes of groups within the caste system. When a local, endogamous unit of the caste system acquired political power or became wealthy, they moved up the caste system by Sanskritizing themselves i.e., by imitating the customs, rituals and life-style of a higher caste. Over time, noble origins of the caste could be claimed.

20s) at IN-Sync was commented on as being aggressive and outspoken in such interactions as well as more westernized. These qualities were seen to be positive generally in outsourcing relationships.

4.2.3. Existential mobility

By existential mobility, we mean the thoughts, feelings and responses of the IT worker that relate to their experiences of fears and hopes, insecurities and successes primarily in relation to shifts in career trajectories and work contexts.

Juggling the personal and the professional. Employees speak of how stressful it is to juggle family and work, coupled with the pressure of commuting in Mumbai. Pursuing hobbies is also adversely impacted. For example, Mohan, a Project Manager in his mid 30s, with a 1-year-old child said, “I feel torn... I am not adept at balancing these. People outside Bombay are luckier as they don’t spend time and energy in traveling... Presently, I don’t have any projects so I don’t get calls at home... I have started taking some meditation classes once a week. But, as software professionals, we are very bad at managing our time. If someone can do a good job of it, he is an exception. Work takes a priority”. Later on Mohan said, “There is a thin line between professional and personal life. In personal life I sing, I deal with my family. When I come here, I am a business person. This keeps pushing that line. The area occupied by family and others keeps reducing. I measure my own importance based on my value on the other side. As an Indian male I am supposed to be the one earning bread and butter... If I have to work for 12 hours a day, I have to work, to earn the roti”.16

Echoing a similar view, Rajan (a Senior Manager) said: “The IT person stops enjoying their life compared to the others, because of the extended working hours and odd timings. Sometimes you start at 8 am and then finish at 10–11 pm, five days a week. And anytime you can be called... Also you don’t develop any hobbies. You see, life IS beyond the office. That realization comes to you only at forty. Till such time you will run, be busy climbing things... it is an early retirement job”.

An article circulated among some employees at IN-Sync entitled ‘Stress Kills 6 IT Geeks’ (Srinivas, 2005) reported the results of a study showing that the number of suicides, divorces, heart ailments, blood pressure, diabetes and mental depression were highest in the software industry. The article cited the lack of routine, constant deadlines, weekend working, lack of physical exercise and new food habits (such as the ‘pizza culture’) as contributing factors. Aman, a Project Manager in his mid 30s responded to that article in an e-mail as follows: “When some incident takes place, people are stunned and shocked but life flows on. I think the community is still young and these incidents are isolated. Many people think it is a matter of individual’s choice and how much risk they take. Besides, I think the need to earn more and more, and pursue new lifestyles is driving people mad. Where do you have time to think about health and peace of mind?”

The changed employment contract. One of the striking differences of the current market that informants noted was the absence of a job for life. At IN-Sync, after the re-structuring of the firm in 2003, a message to employees from the management was that rather than ‘employment security’, the firm would promote ‘employability opportunity’. As one developer said, “In the IT industry, secured employment is extinct”. Arvind, a 31-year old

16 Hindi word for bread.
Project Leader said, “In IT today, there is no job security as such unless you as an employee are performing and performing and performing. In spite of this you can be shown the door, as we saw in the company located a floor below in our building. It is very insulting. You can literally feel the insecurity. The question mark is always there, like the sword of Damocles”.

GSOs in India were seen to have an expanded their range of employment contracts with employees thus reflecting the ‘flexible’ and dynamic shifts characteristic of this industry. For example, demotion policies, retrenchment and downsizing became increasingly common in Indian IT companies after September 11th (D’Mello, 2005). In an attempt to decrease the high salary cost-to-company, and improve productivity, IN-Sync had fine-tuned and made more stringent its performance monitoring, reward and recognition, and competency assessment systems. Even if the reason for a downward shift was market factors rather than individual performance, employees spoke of feeling embarrassed and losing their favorable position in various social groups. These feelings were accompanied with a sense of existential anxiety and a loss of security.

From ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ skills. During the initial years of the industry, technical skills referred to in IT firms as ‘hard skills’, was key to success in the firm. In recent years, greater importance is increasingly given to what is called, both in the industry and in the academic literature, as ‘soft skills’ (Gilleard & Gilleard, 2002; Nicholson & Sahay, 2004). Rajan opined: “Earlier if the IT professional knew COBOL or any specific technology, they could survive. If they were technically brilliant, they could shine. Today, now softer skills like socializing, communication, learning ability and cultural adaptation to the country is required. . . Nowadays adapting to a culture is not an issue as you watch a lot of TV. . . Youngsters nowadays are more tuned into the culture than 15–20 years back”.

Notions of professional growth. The ‘growth imperative’ was a common thread running though responses of employees at all levels along with the constant threat of obsolescence. For developers, shifting jobs and technologies was a sign of growth. Alma, a 23-year old Developer, (who had been with the company for sixteen months) spoke about this trend. Suddenly gesticulating very strongly with her hands and shoulders, she said, “People just want to move. One is technology. If the person does not have work for a month or so he starts looking for another job. You get frustrated, not enhancing skills. What is my value in the market after three years? Software people get frustrated very fast. It is different from manufacturing. . . So you see people are just moving”. Alma expressed her fear of being laid off by the company and how that propelled her to keep on learning, moving and growing and relating this growth to the industry demands by saying, “The more skills you have the more valuable you are in software. . . even within the same company”. Reinforcing this view, a Project Manager, unhappy that two of his team members quit to join another company (with a hint of pride in his voice) said, “I believe that I have grown because I have moved organizations. This is my ninth organization. My smallest stint is one day, the longest is 5.6 years”.

A few module leaders expressed career growth in terms of moving up the value chain into project management. A Solution Architect spoke of assignments becoming bigger and more complex or time critical, shortening his learning curve. Yet another spoke of the “challenges of influencing business growth and profitability by technology”. Others took pride in being a ‘techie’ rather than a project manager, which was associated with technological obsolescence and a more boring job.
While career growth conjured up different meanings for individuals, IN-Sync also has re-defined its notion of career. From a paternalistic notion of ‘taking care’ of employees’ careers, the notion of ‘employability’\(^{17}\) has helped to redefine the rhetoric of ‘employment security’. This shift has propelled individuals to actively chart their career paths and seek support from the company in the form of training programs or sponsored certifications. Employees, as well as recruitment agents, constantly use the term ‘value addition’ and ‘deliverables’ to refer to tangible contributions individuals can make to the organization.

**Returning back ‘home’**. Living overseas also created another lens by which practices in the home country were viewed. Ramesh (a Module Leader who had recently returned from a year long posting in the UK) said, “After being abroad, we become generally more intolerant to sloppiness... Look at the way the banks deal with you now compared to even ten years ago... Rather than asking you to do thirty forms in triplicate, they now fill in the forms themselves... No more of a *chalta hai*\(^{18}\) mentality”.

Some IT professionals may eventually choose to become residents in another country (typically the UK and US) as a means to settle down and ‘enjoy’ a stable family life. This stability, however, comes with its own set of destabilization forces such as the weather, the limited or complete absence of family or social nets, unfamiliar schooling system and the experience of more expensive living conditions. Often, this destabilization was dealt with in various ways — conscious consumption of goods, food and media from ‘home’, pot-lucks and social gatherings with other Indians. Some IT workers may return back from overseas postings, to settle down in their homeland where they can now combine a comfortable lifestyle with a sense of belonging. However, this return was often based on a nostalgic yearning for the past, which turned out to be problematic as people fond that ‘things have changed’. They are more intolerant of dirt and sloppiness and continuously compare the present ‘here’ with their more efficient and comfortable life experienced ‘there’, abroad.

**Changes in life cycle of the IT person.** Shifts were also seen across the life cycle of the IT person, referred to partly in jest as the “IT animal”. Nandini (Head HR) described it as: “I see 2–3 layers of IT people. The first layer is those who have just come out of school, bursting with energy and excitement, full of self-confidence and creative ideas, willing to work all hours and have fun at work even when they are slogging. They go out for movies in gangs, trekking, like an extension of college. Then they move to the Module Leader [ML] level and suddenly there is a change in their personality... they start thinking about getting married or having a baby or buying a car or house and so on. They are also suddenly expected to look after other youngsters who are out of college and most organizations do not provide them any tools or training, or any idea of how to handle others. So as MLs, the pressure increases and all the fun and joy comes down... And then he goes up to the PM or PL Level and it steadily gets worse... The tensions and stress increase... By then they have kids who are going to school. So there is additional expenditure and there is worry about, how will I make more money? Will it be enough? So those things, which they did not have to worry about, get aggravated...”. This description of the IT person’s life-cycle was seconded by several other project managers and unit heads that were interviewed, as they reflected on their own professional journey. One of the authors in her role as a HR Manager also reflected how she would often get invited for treks by the new

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\(^{17}\) Kanter (1995) has described this concept in her book ‘World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy’.

\(^{18}\) Easy going, let it be attitude.
entrants who were from college or just turned developers. Neeta, a Project Leader in her mid 30s, reflected on her work and the family-related adjustments she had made in her professional life cycle over a 14 year span. While describing her own shifts in the diverse roles, technology platforms and companies across this span of time, she said, “Somehow I feel I never settle down. I am kind of a nomad where I have to go places and places”.

5. Discussion

In relation to the first research question, we briefly discuss the multiplicities of mobilities analyzed from the empirical material. This analysis helps us to address the second question regarding the relationship of mobility to place, space and identity.

5.1. Nature of mobilities

GSOs can be seen as sites where multiple socio-spatial trajectories converge in the context of global capitalism. Given the intangible nature of GSW, we conceptualize these trajectories in terms of Massey’s (1998) notion of ‘nets of social relations’ that are inherently dynamic and in a state of flux, subject to diverse and sometimes contradictory temporal–spatial as well as cultural flows. On the one hand, these social relations are encased within worldwide business networks, exposed to intense competition with other vendors, both global and local, embedding GSW within the ‘space of flows’. At the same time, they are local places where people and influences assemble and continuously shift within multiple social networks across time and space. In this way, GSW is increasingly locked into complex and co-evolving cycles of continuous interaction with, as well as reacting to, the global forging of the everyday life worlds of IT workers and GSOs.

The three kinds of mobilities that were distilled from the empirical material were seen to cut across levels of individual, work and organizations. Table 4 provides a summary of the key features of the three mobilities, highlighting the differences between them.

While these mobilities fraught with multiplicities and ambiguities, are listed separately they also intersect, mutually shape and are sometimes in tension with each other. For IT workers, the experience of geographical mobility can be characterized by a constant ‘to

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Table 4

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and fro’ movement, which is intense and sometimes unpredictable but ever present. For example, the physical (or corporeal) experience of the journey to the office is juxtaposed with the experience of the workplace, which seeks to mimic an American office. In this space, an IT worker confronts the vicissitudes of GSW demands in the form of project pressures, stringent deadlines and varying customer expectations while balancing concerns from home relating to spouses and aged parents. Simultaneously, on a daily basis, the global nature of this work and workplace is punctuated by local meanings in material form such as religious celebrations and shared social contexts that sit side by side with daily software development involving global and local work routines and practices. The organization strives to balance the challenges of cross-boundary work by creating an existential sense of home at work by providing employees with a sense of rootedness, in what we might call ‘placed’ locality and socio-historical continuity for business benefit. This rootedness is often in tension with the individual’s aspirations and their need for growth and learning in a rapidly changing technological and business environment (D’Mello, 2005).

The inherent mobilities of GSW intertwine with various kinds of global and local risks. For the IT person, social mobility arising from economic affluence, a higher standard of living, and increased consumption choices, is coupled with the threat of existential anxiety and fear of technological obsolescence. Geographical mobility, promised through the array of job opportunities in the landscape of GSW, has to confront with the challenges of existential mobility arising from the risk of adaptation in a foreign land for the self and the family. While IT professionals have a wider range of choices, the technology and industry volatility has changed the nature of job profiles required by firms, re-configured employment contracts and introduced the demise of job security. These to and fro changes are accompanied by feelings of anxiety, stress, a sense of precariousness as well as anticipation of new challenges that stretches across both local and global contexts. IT workers at various points in their life cycle are seen to respond differently to these changes. In these ways, GSW serves as a crucible for capitalist work regimes where labor is a disposable commodity and where workers are in a constant state of preparation and alertness to move on. Notions of a plum job, a ‘hot’ platform or a prestigious project, is short lived, resulting in an itinerant state of existence that we refer to as ‘permanent transience.’

Furthermore, changes in technology and increased administrative (non-technical) work, typically accompanies the growth trajectory as developers evolve into project managers. Given this, the pride and fulfillment in an achieved professional success (for example as a techie or a project manager) is short lived. Replaced by anxiety and insecurity as the IT worker moves up the hierarchy, it is no wonder that they experiences a nomadic existence going places and places. IT workers can be said to ‘dwell’ in various mobilities (Urry, 2002, p. 157) which are diverse yet intersecting, to create a ‘networked’ pattern of economic and social life. The varied mobilities and their interactions reflect similar dialectical tensions with respect to space and place as the notions of the relation between the net and the self as proposed by Castells (1996). One place of ‘rest’ is, perhaps, the web of social relations in his/her personal life (such as family or an arranged marriage) where traditional social orders provide a context of relatively greater security and stability. However, these structures like that of the joint family too are under threat and challenge ongoing structures of existential mobility.

The typical professional life cycle of an IT worker, illustrates the intersections of the three mobilities. The IT person’s movements across the professional ‘life cycle’ are accompanied with shifting existential states of feeling ranging from passion and enthusiasm to
pessimism and resignation. Mobility, up the corporate hierarchy, enhances social mobility but the increased pressure to perform is in tension with the workers existential states. On the one hand, there is ‘glamour’ and social mobility associated with geographical mobility resulting from overseas travel, particularly valid for the younger members of this workforce. While on the other hand, these movements also intensify the sense of personal as well as professional insecurity, while disrupting family life. The increasingly conflated boundaries, between personal and professional spheres, can have adverse personal consequences, often ignored by a relatively youthful workforce, caught up in frenzied mobilities of all sorts.

5.2. How mobilities shape the relationship of place and identity

We propose the construct of ‘mobility–identity’ to emphasize the central role of mobility in shaping the identity of an IT worker in the context of the technoscapes of GSW. Rather than a permanent shift, such as geographical migration, the movement in mobility–identity is conceptualized as a constant ‘to-and-froing’ between cultural, technological, spatial and existential spaces and places. This construct highlights several inherent tensions.

Firstly, the to-and-froing between spaces and places was noted by Giddens (1990) to be the two central contours in the time–space configuration of modernity though hardly seamless or unproblematic for the IT worker. In addition to the actual physical movement, attitudinal, social, emotional and existential shifts are ever present. This suggests that while work and social practices, as well as ‘bodies’, may be geographically disembedded, the associated social and existential separation is far more complex to achieve. The ‘project of the self’ (Giddens, 1991) is linked up with the central role of career (Grey, 1994). The changing nature of the employment contract, in GSOs, implies a shift from paternalism and loyalty to performance and self-management where employees are expected to take charge of their own careers. In the trajectory of the IT worker, career then becomes a reflexive project (Beck, 1992) that is intentionally nurtured, grown, enhanced and revised. Through this reflexive project, the IT worker attempts to construct a sense of identity and secure a ‘psychic place’ (Knights & Murray, 1994) in the organization, market and the various social groups of membership. Social and work related notions, of achievement, success and upward mobility, are inextrically intertwined in these career trajectories that are typically catalyzed by the growth imperative. This intertwining is manifested in the IT worker’s curriculum vitae (Miller & Morgan, 1993), which is constantly embellished to present a successful narrative of the self and identity. This narrative needs to discount or delete time spent on the ‘bench’,19 an organizational space that is temporary and immobile as it signifies stagnation and non value-adding time. The bench represents the antithesis of work mobilities, informed and shaped within a capitalist framework.

The mobile and global nature of GSW makes identity construction a fragile process. On the one hand, some IT workers strategically seek to carve an achieved identity as a ‘techie’ or a ‘project manager’, and invest emotionally in these constructions. On the other hand, the dynamic nature of the GSOs can sometimes fast-forward as well as interrupt this

19 Due to business reasons, workers who are non-billable and unassigned to a project are temporarily placed in this space.
trajectory of aspirations. Knights and Murray (1994) also describe this state of fragility in organizations more broadly. They argue, “People make organizations but organizations also make people” (p. 245). Furthermore, they say, “Just when you think you are safe, home and dry, the world tilts – maybe only slightly but enough to throw into question that sense of identity, of completeness, so laboriously achieved” (p. 246). In the context of GSW, this statement points to a distinctive labor process in the construction of identities that are eventually quite precarious and easily toppled over by market, technological and social risks. An IT worker can thus be described as typical of those living in contemporary risk society (Beck, 1992) and characterized by discontinuous and unpredictable effects (Urry, 2000, 2001).

The notion of ‘self management’ (Grey, 1994) is also fraught with tensions. To the outside world, the IT worker has the luxury of a seemingly vast array of employment choices and an affluent lifestyle. However, this notion of ‘freedom of choice’, ‘global market’, and ‘self management’ typically associated with Western notions of autonomy and free will, operates within an economic context of the capitalist market and its set of institutional and social constraints (Sahay, 2004). For example, IT workers certainly have many more job opportunities than professionals in other work sectors in India which gives them a set of freedoms to ‘be all that you want to be’. However, in reality, they can be ‘disposed off’ relatively easily by the company without much advance notice.

This ambiguity of ‘temporary freedom’ has implications on how the worker bonds and engages with the company. Also, deeply impacted is the self in terms of feelings of low self worth and inadequacy, which have implications on both the work and home lives of the IT worker, including the process of identity construction. Although the Indian software industry has boomed in recent years, enabling workers to pick and choose jobs or roles, most of the growth is still driven by low value-added services (Arora, Arunachalam, Asundi, & Fernandes, 2001; D’Costa, 2004), with some customers preferring to keep the creative aspects of development work within their own national boundaries (Sahay et al., 2003). This reinforces the argument that first order choices are always made in contexts that second order choices frame the boundaries (Sahay, 2004) thus eroding the myth of free choice and individual agency.

We argue then that mobility–identity in GSW is constructed from elements within socio-historical, relational and temporal contexts of space and place that exist along the global–local continuum. In mobility–identity some sets of relations are mobilized, while others are deeply embedded, remaining untouched by what Castells (1996) calls the space or ‘power of flows’. These mobilities form almost an enclave where local continuities deeply grounded in place, thrive. While IT workers seek newness, growth and the pursuit of a ‘boundaryless’ career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) within the ‘placeless logic’ of GSOs, their mobilities are restricted by their identity construction processes which are “historically and biographically place-dependent” (Sahay et al., 2003, p. 39).

One enclave within mobility–identity, that reflected this place dependency, is the ‘home at work’ environment, which the IT workers attempt to construct a home in the office. This construction reflects what Massey (1998) describes as particular assemblages of social relations interacting or meeting at a particular location. These relations were framed in the context of a shared sense of national and regional identities that provided a sense of solidarity, reduced feelings of anxiety and vulnerability. The easy co-existence of the celebrations of diverse religious festivals and the mingling of the East and the West in languages that are both vernacular and American-accented English, suggest how increasingly place
and space boundaries are being conflated to merge the global and the local in a hybrid mixture and enable workers to be placed both ‘here’ and ‘there’.

Yet, while traversing multiple places, workers in GSOs are not seen to be influenced by the postmodern pastiche described by Gergen (1991). Nor are places increasingly ‘phantasmagoric’, as Giddens (1990) proposed. Neither are people and things simultaneously ‘now here’ and ‘nowhere’ (Friedland & Boden, 1994). The world of GSW is hardly a ‘Runaway World’ as suggested by Giddens (2002) as its workers (the primary producers of software) are still anchored in place based social relations and identities. Rather, the high mobility trajectories of IT workers, as well as that of the GSO calls for continuous, transcendent, reflexive monitoring promising newness, growth and prosperity within a dromocentric world (Casey, 1993) while simultaneously including a parallel search for belongingness and rootedness.

In the constant ‘to-and-froing’ between various mobilities, people are always ‘some-where in between’ using social networks of relationships as reflexive two-way processes in the context of mobilizing narratives of identity constructions. In their careers, while both notions of place and space circulate, workers use choice making processes shaped within capitalistic frameworks to mobilize a successful trajectory. Through the vectors of career and self-management, IT workers try to maintain a coherency between the past, present and future as well as various flows of mobilities within and between spaces and places, self and identity. The geographical context of Mumbai city, as a nodal point for the Indian IT industry, demonstrates Urry’s (2000) notion of global flows of money, images and risks. These move in an uneven manner within the interconnectivities of places, spaces and social relations. Combining processes of place-based identification (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), with the fluid metaphor (Kakihara & Sørenson, 2002), helps to emphasize mobility–identity as a process that is spatially unfixed and unfinished, formed by the discourses of mobile contexts and yet, one that also seeks moorings in place that provides socio-historical meaning and relevance for the individual.

In summary, the concept of mobility identity specifically conceptualized in the context of GSW, emerges through our inductive analysis of the empirical material. By emphasizing a ‘to-and-froing’ movement, this concept underlines the reflexive two-way processes implicated in identity construction processes of IT workers. These processes straddle multiple, interconnected levels of GSW, the organization and the individual while reflecting the dynamic relations of place and space in relation to identity construction. By delineating the macro and micro level dynamic interconnectedness, this concept differs from other ICT influenced constructs of identity such as Turkle’s (1996) descriptions of multiple identities and their construction and maintenance in cyberspace realms. This multi-level interconnectedness described in a specific transnational Asian work context, also differentiates mobility–identity from the various kinds of identities proposed by network theorists such as Castells (1997). Mobility–identity can be seen as a hybrid mixture that mirrors merging boundaries of place and space, both the global and the local, enabling individuals to be placed both ‘here’ and ‘there’.

6. Implications

Analyzing GSW, from a ‘mobilities’ perspective has both theoretical and practical implications that are now described.
Firstly, theoretically, this analysis contributes to Urry’s (2000) agenda for the development of ‘sociology of mobilities.’ We do this by creating a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the context (as well as various actors in GSW) and by providing rich insights into the nature and features of various mobilities in the every day of work. Earlier descriptions of mobilities in ICT mediated contexts, particularly in Information Systems research (e.g., Kakihara & Sørenson, 2002, 2003), have largely excluded social and existential realms of mobility and the implications of this on the geographical. By arguing for their linkage, with identity processes and the global–local dialectic, this analysis has elaborated on a theoretically richer construct of mobility.

Secondly, the lens of mobility–identity, developed from the empirical analysis, highlights how, while people are always situated in places, they constantly undergo a ‘to-and-froing’ between spaces and places at multiple levels of the geographical, social and existential. This lens also underlines the idea that, while some forms of work like GSW may operate with a placeless logic, individuals are always “historically and biographically place-dependent” (Sahay et al., 2003, p. 39). It reinforces Massey’s (1998) argument that places are more like formations of social relations interacting or meeting at particular locations rather than a fixed and stable bounded area that provides one with an unproblematic identity. Mobility–identity helps to understand the dynamics of construction of the dialectical relation between the ‘net and the self’ (Castells, 1996).

Thirdly, this analysis contributes to debates in the literature on globalized workplaces and their link to identity processes in the new economy in several ways. Both global influences, in the form of capitalist work regimes and local and national identities are simultaneously embraced within the GSO. The multiplicity of influences, mediated significantly by mobilities, contribute to uneven flows and the need for a continuous construction of identities. This reinforces the view (e.g. Giddens, 1990, 1991) that globalization is an uneven and dialectical process with multiple forms and does not create a level playing field or a ‘borderless world’ (Ohmae, 1990). The case further illustrates how place-based identification, such as based on locality and nationality, are simultaneously challenged and persistent. They can be seen to constitute a ‘symbolic resource’ mobilized by individuals to create belonging, reduce vulnerability, and reflexively respond to market shifts. Finally, this study highlights the set of risks constructed and constituted in mobilities in the new economy. Reflexive processes of identity construction both become a strategy to manage these risks, but in doing so also introduce new risks for the self and the organization.

Fourthly, we propose that mobility is a key feature that differentiates the IT industry from other industries such as the manufacturing and financial services sector and including other forms of co-located work. In this way, we extend our understanding of the distinctive features of offshore and co-located software development (Nicholson & Sahay, 2001). Software development work, which increasingly exists in a web of highly interactive relationships (Waterson, Clegg, & Axtell, 1997), places peculiar knowledge demands particularly arising from its embedded nature (Nicholson & Sahay, 2004). The notion of mobility–identity helps to understand the ‘why’ of this embedding in addition to the ‘what.’

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20 Earlier identified features include the nature of work; diversity of organisations and cultures co-involved in the development process; and the processual nature of the offshore relationship (Nicholson & Sahay, 2004).
Embeddedness of knowledge has been earlier discussed primarily at cognitive, organizational and societal levels (Dacin, Mark, Ventresca, & Beal, 1999; Lam, 2000; Nicholson & Sahay, 2004). Such research has included symbolic representations, specialized relationships, broader social institutions and structures such as education and labor markets and local gender norms as sources of this embeddedness. We argue that the mobility-identity relationship contributes to this understanding of embeddedness. For example, the fear of obsolescence that was seen to drive IT workers to change jobs rapidly deprives GSOs of both the formal and informal knowledge held by workers. The increasing importance of knowledge demands of ‘soft skills’, such as communication and cultural adaptation, tend to be tacit and embedded in socialization practices and cultural beliefs (D’Mello, 2006). The cultivation of ‘soft skills’ was seen to be related with place-based identities of workers. Being ‘spatially sticky’ (Gertler, 2001), they are embedded within a context they cannot be easily transferred or disembedded across boundaries of space and place.

Practically, understanding mobility-identity can potentially contribute to more effective management of knowledge and especially its tacit and embedded features. Specifically, the spatially sticky and place-based nature of tacit knowledge in soft skills makes it difficult for such skills to be explicitly articulated and communicated, and such skills also call for personal reflections by the worker (D’Mello, 2005). This feature is often ignored by HR trainers and managers who design and implement soft skills training programs, such as cross-cultural awareness and interpersonal relations typically according to standard formats. The construct of mobility-identity challenges HR managers to actively consider place-based local particularities in their training designs and design other interventions aimed at cultivating soft skills in a workforce that illustrates strong place-based identifications.

A second practical implication is the manner in which mobility-identity helps to better understand and deal with the attrition problem so rampant in the Indian IT industry. While IT firms increasingly seek to conform to international standards in their internal processes, mobility-identity points to the value of customization, in particular HR policies and processes that directly implicate the three mobilities described and address concerns about employability of workers. Such customization, particularly of rewards and awards, is seen as valuing individual differences of nomadic IT workers as well as the sense of community with project teams, while recognizing distinctive needs and aspirations of groups such as women workers, onsite employees, trainees, managers or returnees from overseas. Further, examining company policies, processes and corporate identification practices, with a mobility-identity lens, might point to subtle organizational features that directly contribute to both, workers’ dissatisfaction and their motivation. Finally, GSOs need to quickly and effectively build and sustain trust and credibility with new and existing employees. This challenges them to examine their daily behaviours as well as their disciplining and surveillance systems that might collide and/or collaborate with their espoused corporate values or organizational image and identity.

Thirdly, mobilities (particularly attrition of workers) also impact knowledge sharing in GSOs. Attrition hinders the development of strong enduring social ties, already limited as a result of ICT mediated interactions, and necessary for knowledge sharing. The volatile technological and mobile market conditions place distinctive demands on both GSOs and individuals to quickly acquire and master new forms of both technical and market-related knowledge. The various mobilities suggest that practitioners develop a sensitivity to the
importance of tacit local knowledge, and the difficulties of learning through practice when employees are spatially distanced as well as on the move within and across the firm.

The various ways in which mobilities influence GSOs implies that people or ‘HR issues’ are tightly coupled with productivity, motivation, retention, work-life balance and knowledge issues of the firm. This coupling of issues, in GSO work, underlines the value of a more synergistic working of HR personnel and project managers who are often seen to work in silos in IT companies. Such cross-functional working is expected to facilitate a more holistic and broad-based approach towards evolving strategies and measures to address people-related issues and risks in the GSO.

The study has two limitations which also help to identify further research directions. The first limitation relates to the fact that we did not get access to interviewing IT workers while they were overseas. While we tried to get access, it was denied because of the staff being extremely busy in the overseas customers’ locations. As a result, what we got information on was the IT workers constructions of their overseas experience, rather than being able to see them in situ, which arguably would have given us a richer contextual understanding of the issues. In further research, it would be interesting to trace some of the IT workers in their overseas stints, and more interestingly, also to follow them as they go to different locations.

A second limitation or area of future research, relates to our analysis of mobility being limited to the software industry. Given how the nature of work influences the kinds of mobilities, arguably the implications on identity in different settings would be quite different. Further research is thus needed to understand how the construct of mobility–identity plays out in other industries and ICT mediated contexts employing different groups of professionals. Further questions include: How is space and place implicated in identity construction processes for professionals in the financial sector and the business process outsourcing industry? What mobility–identity features differentiate (if any) these workers? Such comparisons might yield a more elaborate description and wider understanding of various mobilities relating to features of the specific firm and industry. Also, how do workers carve for themselves, a ‘psychic place’ in these dynamic contexts and how does this ‘place’ shift over time? A further area of analysis includes how tools such as cell phones and the internet as well as technology-enabled Panopticon-like surveillance and control mechanisms within IT firms, influence identity construction processes of knowledge workers such as IT professionals? Such research is expected to enlarge the construct of mobility–identity.

7. Conclusion

This paper strengthens the argument that GSW metaphorically represents ‘models-of’ and ‘models-for’ globalization processes (Sahay et al., 2003) that collaborate with, and also contest local processes, and are best understood within particular situated contexts. The ‘to-and-froing’ of mobility–identity between places and spaces in GSW, informs us that rather than the specter of a ‘runaway world’, individual workers simultaneously seek moorings in place that provide socio-historical meaning and relevance. While ICTs of contemporary life and typical in GSW, are described as possessing the capacity to free or ‘unglue’ selves, identities and relationships from geographical confines, this study suggests that self and identity constructions are situated in particular places or locales.
We propose that the construct of mobility–identity be extended to understand workforce issues in emerging business contexts such as the business-process outsourcing (BPO) industry that shares some features of the IT industry as well as its mobile workforce, global customer base and knowledge-intensive nature. It can also be applicable to understanding similar issues for other non-IT sectors and also other countries where similar demands are placed on the firm and the workforce, that pose new challenges requiring innovative solutions.

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