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Power / knowledge in postcolonial settings: The case of IT Bangalore

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Abstract [English]

Based on Foucauldian notions of power and postcolonial theory, this article shows how inequalities of knowledge and power influence modern cross-cultural field. According to Foucault, any process of transferring knowledge demands for renegotiation of power. Postcolonial theory asks whether those receiving knowledge are enabled through this process. These perspectives are applied to the Indian city of Bangalore, often called the Indian IT capital. Data is based on ethnographic fieldwork; the field is the Indian offshore site of a German high-tech company. In this field, highly qualified Indian employees are partly enabled, yet underperform consciously in order to not create fears at the German site which they are dependent upon.

Keywords: Ethnography, Anthropology, India, Bangalore, Germany, HighTech, Foucault, Power, Agency, Postcolonial Studies

Abstract [Deutsch]

Basierend auf dem Foucault'schen Machtverständnis und auf postkolonialen Theorien zeigt dieser Artikel auf, wie Wissens- und Machtungleichgewichte moderne interkulturelle Felder beeinflussen. Nach Foucault erfordert jeder Prozess des Wissenstransfers eine erneute Aushandlung von Macht. Diese Betrachtungsweise wird auf das indische Bangalore angewandt, eine Stadt, die oft als die IT Hauptstadt Indiens bezeichnet wird. Die Daten basieren auf ethnologischer Feldforschung; das Feld ist der Nebenstandort einer deutschen High-Tech Firma. Hochqualifizierte indische Arbeitskräfte in diesem Feld sind teilweise ermächtigt. Trotzdem halten sie sich in ihrer Arbeit bewusst zurück, um keine Ängste am deutschen Standort freizusetzen, von dem sie abhängig sind.

Stichworte: Ethnographie, Ethnologie, Indien, Bangalore, Deutschland, HighTech, Foucault, Macht, Agency, Postkoloniale Theorien

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication and cross-cultural management in and across organizations can either be studied based on subjective or based on objective paradigms (Primecz / Romani / Sackmann 2009). The subjective paradigm leads to qualitative and in-depth research of single cases, whereas the objective paradigm leads to quantitative and comparative research of multiple cases (Primecz / Romani / Sackmann 2009).

The main perspectives on the object of study – culture – are the etic (outside) and emic (inside) perspective (Mahadevan 2011).

Quantitative studies try to define culture and cross-cultural difference across many fields based on the objective paradigm. They aim to compare etic (outside) categorizations such as power-distance or uncertainty avoidance (e.g. Yeganeh / Su 2006). The most prominent studies of such kind are Hofstede (1980, 2003), Hall (1976), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) and the GLOBE study (House et al. 2004). These cultural constructs might explain standardized relative difference on a collective level, yet, they fail to explain individual sensemaking in context (Bjerregaard / Luring / Klitmøller 2009).

To close this gap, qualitative studies search for emic (inside) categorizations based on the subjective paradigm. They aim to uncover individual and collective sensemaking in interaction and in context (Mahadevan 2011). Their basic understanding is:

- What people do must make sense to them - otherwise, they would not do it (e.g. Weick 1995, Van Maanen 2006).
- Culture is the collective sense that people give to their actions in a certain context under certain boundary conditions and in interaction with an antagonistic group of 'the Other' (e.g. Ricoeur 1992).
- Collective sense-making is based on shared emic meanings (e.g. Mahadevan 2011).
- Any collective sense-making process of such kind shapes and is 'culture'. Therefore, 'culture' equals 'collective identity' (e.g. Mahadevan 2009).

This means firstly: Only if the sense that people make out of themselves and out of the world is understood, has their 'culture' been uncovered. Deep understanding of such kind requires uncovering emic categories of culture. Secondly, boundary conditions and context fundamentally influence collective sense that people give to their actions. Therefore, boundary conditions and context have to be included into cross-cultural theory and practice.

Inequalities of knowledge and power are an important boundary condition of modern cross-cultural fields: Many companies outsource or offshore part of their activities to low-cost sites; their employees work together in transnational networks or virtual teams; their value-chains are dispersed. A feature of this modern corporate world would be offshoring of technological knowledge to high-tech clusters such as the

Indian city of Bangalore, often called 'IT Bangalore'. Yet, what does this development mean for cross-cultural theory and practice? Two theoretical perspectives on power / knowledge in management and organization studies are of importance here: Firstly, Foucauldian approaches to power and knowledge, and secondly, postcolonial theory.

According to Foucault (Foucault / Gordon 1980, Foucault 2001, Barratt 2008) knowledge and power cannot be separated. Any process of transferring knowledge might lead to the creation of new power at the receiving end and less power at the giving end. This calls for renegotiation of collective sense. In this way, power relations are constantly changed, renegotiated, reversed or at least changed.

Postcolonial theory looks back at centers of power and knowledge from the perspective of those ruled (e.g. McLeod 2000, Ashcroft / Griffiths / Tiffin 2009). It wants to show how those receiving knowledge are enabled through this process. Furthermore, it wants to find out what sense those who receive knowledge make out of these new influences and how this sense might lead to renegotiation of power and knowledge.

In the given context of IT Bangalore, the application of both schools of thought leads to questions such as: How is this IT development perceived in Bangalore? What is the public discourse on local change that is induced by global influences? How will the Indian IT engineers' power change through the knowledge they gain from the Western headquarters? How will the sense that Indian IT engineers make of themselves, of Bangalore and of the Western headquarters change? How will they be enabled? How will their enabling change and subvert the system? Will inequalities of power be reversed?

These sense-making processes and renegotiations of power / knowledge will fundamentally influence intercultural communication and cross-cultural management in this field. Still, most comparative mainstream theories of cross-cultural communication and management fail to take power into account. Furthermore, they tend to apply etic perspectives to emerging fields such as IT Bangalore: Instead of looking for the sense that actors in this field make out of themselves and the world, they focus on how these actors are perceived from a Western managerial perspective and apply Western managerial *thought* onto them.

This article intends to close this gap by linking Foucauldian perspectives on knowledge transfer and postcolonial thought to the fields of intercultural communication and cross-cultural management. It highlights these aspects through the example of local modernity in the Indian city of Bangalore, a worldwide IT cluster. In doing so, the main focus lies on the Indian

offshore site of the German company ChipTech. Data from this field was collected through two years of ethnographic fieldwork.

This article is structured as follows: In the following section, I will discuss postcolonial theory and Foucauldian notions of power. Next, I will present the field of ChipTech India and its highly qualified Indian employees who are dominated by the German headquarters. The field's relationship with the ethnographic researcher will be made clear as well. Then, I will elaborate upon how these highly qualified Indian employees view themselves as representatives of local modernity and are seen as modern elites by local public discourse. Finally, I will show that they are well aware of their organizational dependency and choose their organizational counterstrategies accordingly.

The main aim of this article is to show the difference that this perspective can make. The contribution of this article is to introduce postcolonial thought and the Foucauldian notion of power to intercultural communication and cross-cultural management.

2. Theoretical background

Knowledge transfer has received widespread attention in management and organization studies (e.g. Mir / Mir 2009, Sahlin-Andersson / Engwall 2002). Yet, it is dominated by headquarter views on those who receive knowledge. Any failure to implement headquarter strategy at offshore sites is often explained with traditionalist culture of local managers or employees who simply do not understand better (Frenckel 2008). This view on those ruled as being inferior and fully limited by local culture is a classic neo-colonial topos (Said 1993, Banerjee / Linstead 2004). It often results in calls to "take up the white man's burden" (Kipling 1899:21), i.e. to bring modernity to the unenlightened through the colonial project (Cooke 2004).

In contrast to this dominant view, postcolonial theory focuses on the 'view back' on dominant discourses (e.g. Gandhi 1998, Loomba 1998, McLeod 2000 and 2007, Ashcroft / Griffiths / Tiffin 2009). It looks back at the rulers from the perspective of those ruled (Chaturvedi 2000) and tries to uncover asymmetrical relationships of power.

From a postcolonial perspective, management itself is biased, as it is solely based on Western assumptions and theory (Banerjee / Prasad 2008). In this sense, cross-cultural management is also an instrument of colonization, for the major part of its theory has been generated in the Western world. Fur-

thermore, the major part of its practical work is based on the assumption of 'Western' managers managing 'Eastern' subordinates (e.g. Martin / Thomas 2002). Practical guidelines tend to only look at cross-cultural interaction from the 'Western' superior manager based on data that was solely generated from this perspective as well (Martin / Thomas 2002). Topics are chosen based on the assumption of clear hierarchy between 'West' and 'East' and make visible the assumption of inferiority of the 'Eastern' world. For example, Martin and Thomas (2002) promise to explain why Indonesian employees sometimes do not execute tasks that have been delegated to them.

Postcolonial thought wants to deconstruct these dominant discourses, e.g. the discourse of the 'East' as seen through the superior eyes of the 'West' (based on Said 1978). Applying this thought to specific contexts, Gopal, Willis and Gopal (2003) have shown that today's multinational companies that offshore knowledge but still try to maintain control can be viewed as a quasi-colonial system. As a result, it can be expected that transfer of MOK to high-tech offshore clusters such as the Indian city of Bangalore are of quasi-colonial process (Cohen / El-Sawad 2007).

Based on Foucault (Foucault / Gordon 1980, Barratt 2008), power in such a hierarchical setting does not exist as such but is performed discursively (Foucault 2001). Following this school of thought, I view discourses as "systems of thought that are contingent upon and inform material practices (...) practically through particular power techniques" (Alvesson / Deetz 2006:266). This means: Those ruled also create power in their doings; power relations shape interactions, yet, interactions inform power relations as well. If power is created discursively, knowledge and power cannot be separated. Hence, any process of transferring knowledge will result in the creation of power at the receiving end and less power at the giving end. In this way, power relations in any given organizational field are constantly negotiated, contested, changed and reversed.

Fundamentally, this means: Those ruled have agency (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1991), i.e. interpretative power, to change, subvert or stabilize the system. Therefore, being colonized, i.e. ruled through foreign systems of power, can be conceptualized as an "enabling concept" (based on Chaturvedi 2000). Hybrid cultural identities and local modernities might arise in the process (Bhabha 1994, Appadurai 1995). They might create local power / knowledge and local modernities (Bhabha 1994, Appadurai 1995). An historical example of such a process would be the appropriation of cricket by Indians through colonialization: In the process, the meaning of

cricket has changed; foreign influences have been localized. Ultimately, Indians have made their own sense of this English upper-class activity and have converted it into an Indian mass-spectacle and national sport (Appadurai 1995).

3. Field and researcher in interaction

3.1 Details to the field

The above mentioned theoretical lens was applied to the field of the Indian site of a German high-tech company that was researched upon by means of ethnographic fieldwork. During the time of research (2004 to 2006), ChipTech had approximately 8,000 employees in Germany and 35,000 worldwide. The main field of study was an internal Research & Development (R&D) unit of ChipTech, to be called Unit in this article. In 2005, Unit consisted of approximately 450 members at the German central headquarters (approximately 250 members), a site in France (approximately 60 members) and a new site in India (approximately 140 members at peak). For confidentiality reasons, the German site will be called "Stadt" in this article. The location of the Indian site, Bangalore, can be safely revealed as there are not many alternative locations.

Unit was further divided into several departments (led by department managers). Departments were sub-divided into groups (led by group managers). In summary, the managerial levels as Unit were (top-down): Unit management (at the German site), site management (at the French and Indian site), department management and group management. Technical experts were further classified into project-leader and plain engineer. The task for all three sites was to develop a complex and interdependent technological system that was to be used by internal customers all over the globe for improvement of microchip design.

During the time of research, the Indian site was in its formation phase. First members had been employed in 2002 and had been sent to initial training to the German site. Indian managers who had previously been working in the U.S.A. or for US-American companies were chosen as site managers. When research started in 2004, the Indian site consisted of approximately 85 software and hardware engineers. The aim was to hire up to 140 engineers at the Indian site. This was accomplished at the end of 2005.

Most Unit employees in India were between 25 and 35 years of age, compared to a median age of about 45 at the German site. Managers were the only ones in their late-30s and mid-40s. About one fifth of the Indian employees were women, compared to nine percent at the German site. One out

of six Indian managers was female, compared to only male managers at the German site. Compared to their German counterparts, Indian engineers were thus younger with a higher percentage of female engineers and managers. However, the role of female Indian employees is not the focus of this article; therefore, this aspect is not to be dealt with any further.

The ramp-up of the Indian site was a top-management demand on Unit management in Germany and France (who can be classified middle management). At the German and at the French site, Unit was not allowed to employ more employees; the only chance was to employ them in India.

The decision on how to organize and structure employment and knowledge-transfer to India was left to middle management. Passing on decision making down the ladder, department managers left this decision to their group managers, the lowest level of management. In the end, all groups chose to further sub-divide work-packages which led to further structural differentiation into 'global' and 'Indian site' positions.

From a postcolonial perspective, two issues remain:

Firstly, despite delegation of work-packages, management responsibility was not delegated: The now global group leader was located at the German site with an Indian group manager as subordinate at the Indian site. Likewise, the now global project-leader was located at the German site, with an Indian project-leader as subordinate at the Indian site. It is important to note that line management responsibility for global groups was exclusively located at the German site. In India, even though department head positions were created, they did not have line management responsibility. Likewise, the Indian site manager did not have line management responsibility. Sole line management responsibility remained with the global unit manager, the global department managers and the global group managers in Germany.

Secondly, technological ownership of technical projects and of specific technologies remained at the German / French site as well. Ownership can be understood as an engineer's organizationally institutionalized technical expertise. As Metiu (2006) has stated, it is of paramount importance in distributed engineering groups that separate ownership exists in order to mediate headquarter fear brought about by knowledge-transfer to the offshoring site. On the other hand, a lack of ownership at the offshoring site might result in under-performance due to lack of context knowledge and related learning (Metiu 2006)

These two aspects mean that the whole Indian organization was dependent on the German organization both from a managerial and technological perspective. This is a classic postcolonial scenario of knowledge transfer to and dependency of the offshore site.

In summary, forced organizational change from above led to the creation of an organization in India that was fully dependent on the German site. From a German perspective, knowledge-transfer was forced but essential for accomplishing Unit objectives. The main reason was the restriction to further employment in Germany or France. From the perspective of Unit management at the German site, the main challenge during time of research was to manage organizational growth and change, especially at the new offshore site, yet at the same time maintain technological excellence and deliver in time. From the perspective of technical experts at the German site, the main challenge was to manage change within the technical system and transfer knowledge to new engineers while at the same time maintaining technological excellence. From a German perspective, Indian engineers and managers thus brought about the risk of technological and managerial instability.

3.2 Field-researcher relationship

Ethnographic fieldwork based on the principles of interpretative anthropology (Van Maanen 1998) was conducted mainly at the German site (18 months), with additional time spent at the Indian site (six weeks in May / June 2005). A longer period at the Indian site was intended but higher management at the German site feared that such a research visit might harm productivity of the Indian employees.

As the main method of interpretative anthropology, long-term participant observation, is holistic and deductive, researcher and 'data' can never be separated (Van Maanen 2006). Hypotheses are deduced from the field and not vice versa (Van Maanen / Soerensen / Mitchell 2007). Data collection and analysis go hand in hand; they have to be discussed with the field, and lead to deeper interpretation and focus (e.g. Weick 1995, Whetten 1989). To make this process visible, this section focuses on critical stages of ethnographic research such as: getting in; interaction; establishing role; data collection, interpretation and writing; and getting out.

In 2002, I developed the idea to study 'intercultural cooperation' in a company – favourably Indo-German cooperation. Through a friend's recommendation, I gained access to a ChipTech middle manager. After a first proposal via e-mail, I was invited for a first meeting. From October 2003 until April 2004, I negotiated access. I was granted a two-year full-time

research contract by the company. Full-time research lasted from October 2004 until October 2006, mainly at the German site. Therefore, it is likely that I was seen as an outsider by the Indian site.

Interaction with Indian employees took place during the following occasions: Firstly, all new employees of the Indian site were sent to Germany for approximately three months of initial training. Secondly, Indian managers visited the German site frequently. Thirdly, within projects, weekly telephone conferences took place. Fourthly, I visited the Indian site for six weeks in May and June 2005.

In establishing researcher identity, I could benefit from a personal resource, i.e. my own perceived dual or hybrid identity as a child of Indo-German parents. Consecutively, my role became one of "someone who knows about India / Germany". As demanded for in every action research (Greenwood / Levin 1998, McNiff / Whitehead 2000), I was careful to reflect upon myself when giving advice.

After approximately three months, I had become well known at the German site. At the Indian site, my name was known through those Indian employees who had visited the German site. Furthermore, I had established first contacts to about 35 employees who had visited the German site. Interaction continued via e-mail and phone. Those who knew me would by now often approach me to tell new stories, send me e-mails with information on what they considered to be 'culture' or phone me with questions.

After four months, I had identified key actors in cross-site work who were then formally recognized by management. The strategy to mirror back first results and therefore to influence the field was a conscious strategy for my part. Its purpose was to convince organizational gatekeepers of the usefulness of the research project and to establish myself firmly in the organization. While doing so, I took care to follow ethical guidelines of anthropological research (e.g. Bate 1997). Having established a cross-site forum, I then started focus group sessions with key actors at the German site. Actors from other sites were integrated in person when present or via net-meeting and included in e-mail distribution. For me, these focus group sessions were another opportunity for interaction, analysis, and interpretation.

During research, I treated the German and the Indian site as conjoint fields, as is common in multi-sited ethnography (e.g. Hine 2007). Therefore, the actual ethnographic period for the Indian site was longer than the mere six weeks of presence there might suggest. Prior to visiting the Indian site for six weeks, I had talked to all Indian managers and project-leaders

at the German site. At the Indian site, I was introduced by the site manager during a staff meeting. It was announced that I would “talk to people about working together with the German site”. Over the period of six weeks, I conducted interviews with employees, most of whom already knew me. Topics focused on organizational roles and responsibilities and engineering. Besides that, I had the opportunity to observe organizational life at ChipTech India and interact informally. As part of my Indian extended family lives in Bangalore, I furthermore had immediate access to daily life. I had visited Bangalore several times before this fieldwork (in 1984, 1988 and 1995) and could therefore relate the current situation to my own experiences.

Most conversations and interactions at all sites were informal and therefore not recorded. They were written down as memory protocols several times a day or in the evenings at the latest. Throughout fieldwork, I kept a field diary that was reread and commented at in weekly intervals. During meetings, too, I usually kept my notes to a minimum to not influence interaction. Once a week, I typed the handwritten notes of the field diary into a word document, ordered according to topics and supplemented with additional e-mails, corporate information, screenshots and photographs. Every month, I printed the typed word document. At the end of two years of fieldwork, I had compiled 24 field books, each of them consisting of 200-350 pages. Through a circular process of writing, summarizing, re-writing, discussing interpretations with the field and reflecting own experiences, I tried to identify common meanings in the field (Van Maanen 2006). Through rule violation in the field and looking for exceptions from the rule, I tried to define the boundaries of these shared meanings (Van Maanen 2006).

Full-time ethnographic research ended in October 2006. Thereafter, I no longer had access to the company.

4. Postcolonial perspectives on the field

4.1 Public discourse on IT Bangalore

Besides conducting own fieldwork, I also placed the field within the context of public discourse in Bangalore. The Times of India (ToI), Bangalore edition, April, 17th, 2005 to Sunday, June, 5th, 2005, provides ample examples for public discourse on what ToI calls “IT capital Bangalore”, IT being the abbreviation for “Information Technology”.

The Bangalore edition of the Times of India is one of the five “Metro” editions of this newspaper (Bangalore, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai). Not only the cities themselves but also

their inhabitants and their lifestyle are being called “metros”. Individuals are categorized into the multi-local category “metro”, e.g. through phrases such as “says metro xy” – without any further explanation on which city this metro actually lives in (Tol 0417/2005:15). It is assumed that metros are “techies” as well, i.e. individuals who are employed in computer-related jobs. Both terms are used as synonyms (Tol 04/172005 – Tol 06(05/2005)).

According to Tol, Bangalore metros / techies originate from all over India, English being their lingua franca on the job (Tol 05/21/2005:12). On the one hand, Tol portrays them as a hard-working and very much sought after corporate elite (e.g. Tol 05/19/2005:1). On the other hand techies / metros are described as style-conscious yuppies (Tol 05/11/2005:1) who like to party (Tol 05/11/2005:3) and to spend money (Tol 05/11/2005:1), for example on bungee-jumping in the city (Tol 05/21/2005:12). Advertisements, too, focus on both aspects of metro / techie life.

Out of 30 to 40 pages, the Tol dedicates eight to ten pages to job opportunities alone. Very often, these advertisements are combined with the invitation to a ‘walk-in interview’. During such an event, companies advertise themselves in a hotel suite; applicants walk-in without an appointment. According to Tol, sometimes more than 1000 applicants are channeled through such an event on a single day (Tol 05/01/2005:3).

Twice weekly, the special interest pages of “Times Property” and “Education Times” are included. “Times Property” promotes apartments that are being built everywhere in the vicinity of the city’s technological centres (Tol 05/08/2005:12). The newspaper concludes: “It’s raining money in real estate” (Tol 05/09/2005:13). The “Education Times” focuses on how to get into IT. According to Tol (Tol 07/05/2005:4) “it’s easier to get into Oxford than into the IITs [Indian Institutes of Technology, the author]”. According to Tol, an increasing amount of rejected applicants commit suicide (Tol 05/04/2005:7).

Even after having completed a degree, these so called “freshers” have to fight hard to secure a job in Bangalore (Tol 05/05/2005:4). According to Tol, this pressure has consequences (Tol 06/06/2005:1): “IT lifestyles are causing young techies to show premature signs of ageing”. Tol summarizes (Tol 05/05/2005:1):

„Bangalore may not be the right place for youngsters who didn’t get picked up during campus recruitments. It is much tougher for them here than in cities like Pune, Chennai or Hyderabad.”

Bangalore is portrayed as a changing environment. Tol (05/07/2005:2) comments: “This is not a debate that is going

to go away. The question is not whether we need to change but what we need to change to." Regarding negative aspects of change, Tol focuses on traffic-jams (see e.g. 05/01/2005:2; 05/03/2005:1,3; 05/06/2005:1; 05/12/2005:3; 05/13/2005:1); environmental pollution (see e.g. 05/03/2005:2) and crime (see e.g. Tol 05/01/2005:1; 05/02/2005:1,3; 05/06/2005:3).

The so called "IT boom" is given as the root cause for all change. Due to IT, for example, population density had increased from 2,408 people per square kilometers in 1991 to 10,710 people per square kilometers in 2005 (Tol, May, 20th, 2005:2). To put this data into a personal perspective: People I know [details hidden for review purpose] live in a four room house in the city district of Domlur. In 1991, Domlur was located on the outskirts of pleasant, lush, green Bangalore, the military then being the sole major employer. In 2005, it took at least 45 minutes by car through newly-built city districts to reach the municipal border from there.

Without IT, so much the essence of public discourse and personal experience, Bangalore would not be what it is today, techies / metros just being the personification of this change. Yet, the positive outcome of this IT project is still assumed to be unclear for it also results in quick changes that might lead to deterioration.

4.2 Hybrid middle men

Indian employees at ChipTech Bangalore are part of this change. They are an internally diverse group: Firstly, those who have never worked outside India and secondly, those who used to work in the U.S.A, earned themselves U.S. citizenship and "NRI-status", i.e. "non-residential Indian status", overseas and went back to India afterwards. NRIs could only be found at management level, mainly senior management (above group level). All but two out of ten male managers had gone to the U.S.A. for a Master's degree after having completed their Bachelor's degree in India, and had come back to India with NRI-status. On average, group managers and engineers were 10 to 15 years younger than senior management.

This means that the younger generation started their work-life under different labour market conditions. Prior to market liberalization in 1991, highly-qualified Indians had to leave the country for job opportunities. Since 1991, the possibility of foreign direct investment in India has created ample job opportunities within the country. A senior manager, himself an NRI, said during an interview:

"Suddenly, there are job opportunities in India itself for the first time. People do not have to leave the country anymore: The big companies and

the jobs are right on their doorsteps. Even without having been to the U.S., you might become someone.”

Another senior manager, also an NRI, said during lunch:

“In India today, we have the first generation of engineers who remain within the country. I was ahead of them because I had the luxury that my father himself was already a civil engineer. At those times, the best students from the best universities went to the U.S. I was 48th at state level, thus I went to the U.S. [with a scholarship, the author].

But nowadays, that has started to change: The opportunity is in India. If I look at my former colleagues who stayed in India, what they have achieved when I was gone: It is incredible. India today is great at [high-tech work, the author] – who would have ever thought of that ten years ago?”

In India, returners are much sought after, which might be exactly the reason for them to come back. As the head of Human Resources at ChipTech India told me during a formal interview:

“If you come back to India with U.S.-experience, companies will pay you whatever it takes. At ChipTech, we pay NRIs double, and this is not unusual in the industry. Especially foreign companies in India specifically ask for managers with U.S.-experience. It is assumed that an NRI will overcome the difference between headquarter management and Indian employees.”

As this quote shows, NRIs have come to symbolize the new Indian manager who can bridge ‘Western’ headquarters and ‘Indian’ site requirements and who will be paid double for this ability to translate strategy made by foreign management to Indian employees.

The Indian site manager of ChipTech, aged 45, can serve as an example for this new class of hybrid and translating middle-men and their living style. He had done his Master’s degree in the U.S.A., got married to an Indian and had worked in the U.S.A. for twenty years. He came back to India in November 2004 for site management at ChipTech. Now, he lives with his wife and two sons in Palm Meadows, a gated community in Bangalore that has been built specifically for local top management NRIs and foreign expatriates.

In 2005, the rent for an average house in Palm Meadows amounted to 60,000 – 90,000 Indian Rupees. Indian group managers, project-leaders and engineers could not afford this rent; all of them lived in one of the new apartment buildings that are featured in the “Property Times”; the hippest district among the young engineers at this time was Koramangala. Yet, all senior ChipTech managers lived in Palm Meadows. The ChipTech guesthouse for high level visitors from other sites was located there, too. The cook there earned 4,000 Rupees per month. The alternative guesthouse for lower level visitors was located in a flat in an apartment building near the ChipTech office.

Despite the clear hierarchy even among the new elite, all these living estates can be considered far above average living conditions in Bangalore. To give some comparisons: The office entry clerk lived in a one-room house near the airport. The company driver who was assigned to me lived in a three-room flat with two other colleagues.

Palm Meadows with its approximately 400 houses is separated from the rest of Bangalore through a concrete wall of three meters height topped with barbed wire. Lush green trees block the view of the wall from the inside. To enter Palm Meadows, the visitor has to stop at the entry gate where an Indian guard wearing a uniform asks for the purpose of visit. Only if a satisfactory answer is provided, is one allowed to pass. Residents' cars are recognized by the guard and waved through.

As soon as the visitor has passed a gate, they might feel transferred to suburban California: White mansions with lush green front gardens; huge SUVs parked in front of them; roller-skating kids wearing Tommy Hilfiger; middle-aged women walking golden retrievers. Even the streets are different here: broad, well-maintained, without any litter, lined with palm trees of the exact same height and width and pedestrian side-walks on either side. Palm Meadows features an evening club for gentlemen and various tea-time events for ladies, a spa, a gym, tennis courts and a swimming pool. It has a supermarket of its own. Here, visitors tend to forget that they are in India. Or, as ChipTech employees from the German headquarters used to say when they intended to leave the compound: "Let's go to India again". The Indian site manager says:

"Personally, I would not have minded living in Bangalore itself. But for my sons, it would have been difficult. They are American. It is hard enough for them to get accustomed [...], so I tried to make it as easy as possible for them."

For hybrid middle-men, Palm Meadows serves as an environment in-between that is not considered to be part of Bangalore or India by its residents.

4.3 Bangalore engineers on the rise

Those living in Palm Meadows have achieved something. Yet, those who are still on the rise have to work hard. As an engineer told me:

„The pressure in India is enormous: Everybody wants to get into a good engineering school, and when you are in it, everybody talks about the good high-tech-companies, and when you have found a job, everybody expects you to climb the ladder. [...] And they are not used to working globally.“

A common saying in Bangalore was: "German industry is not cutting-edge anymore." An engineer told me over lunch:

"Most of us here in Bangalore, we were with American companies, you have a very competitive spirit there [...]. What I see in Stadt is: They are not raising the bar anymore, it is 100 percent cooperation. They look backwards at the good old days, and Stadt-people refer to them mainly with nostalgia."

As these statements show, Bangalore employees think of themselves as having a superior attitude due to higher motivation. They perceive 'the West' as saturated, hence inferior. It can also be seen that their motivation is not self-chosen: They perceive themselves as under pressure to climb the ladder against competition.

To them, Stadt is an old and backward-looking environment, whereas Bangalore is young and forward-looking. And indeed, as the previous pages have shown, Bangalore employees are much younger than their German counterparts. The typical Bangalore perspective on Stadt was as follows (to quote a group manager):

"[In Germany, companies like] ChipTech [are] already at saturation level, so not rewarding people would create no issues. People would not leave – in India they will. When I was in Germany in 2003 I also observed that the country was just recovering from recession (...). I assume Stadt-people won't find another job even if they want to quit because the company treats them badly. In India, a company cannot afford to treat engineers badly."

This statement shows a source of power for Indian employees: Due to ample job opportunities in Bangalore, they have the power to quit. Indeed, according to ChipTech HR data, 12 percent did so in 2005, which HR deemed to be average for IT Bangalore. A common saying in Stadt was: "First, we train the Indians, and then they quit." This means that employees in Stadt are well aware of the Indian engineers' power to quit.

5. The view back on power / knowledge in the field

Indian employees who decided to stay with ChipTech faced typical problems. In particular, fear at the German site was an important boundary condition of all strategies chosen at the Indian site: As has been said before, transfer of knowledge was forced upon Unit Germany by higher management. A common saying at ChipTech in Stadt during this time was: "First, I train the Indians; then I lose my job." This fear of training one's successor was expressed by a representative of the workers' councils during an all-hands meeting in Stadt as follows: "If you look around the campus, you have the impression that we have become a training camp for Asian

employees.” During an interview, an Indian group manager reflected upon the last year of working together with Stadt as follows:

“For eight months, we were doing pretty basic stuff, even though we could have done more, so as not to make them [the German site, the author] afraid of us.”

Another Indian group manager says:

“They [the German headquarters, the author] only give us the basic, boring stuff. They don’t want to lose their [technological, the author] ownership [...] and I consider this in my demands.”

These statements make clear that Indian employees are well aware of the fear that they create and that this influences their strategies and work-practice. These managers have consciously decided to be perceived as ‘non-threatening’ by the German site – even though their team could have performed better. This is an interesting thought for it shows that the root cause for low performance at a developing site might not be lesser abilities but a conscious decision based on headquarter-induced inequalities of power.

The case of an Indian engineer, aged 28, having worked at ChipTech for 18 months, provides a good example for this view back on headquarter fears. During an interview, he reflected upon a failure in the current project:

“See, if they do not transfer knowledge, there is nothing I can do [to prevent such a mistake from happening, the author]. Stadt people have to enable me – if I do not have this background information, I cannot think in the right direction.”

Back in Stadt, I asked the German global project-leader (GPL, aged 53, with 21 years of corporate history) some questions about the project. He told me: “First, he [the Indian engineer, the author] has to prove himself; then, he will get more.” Clearly, the established German engineer doubts whether the young Indian engineer is capable of reaching the same level of expertise. In contrast, the Indian engineer had said about the demands of his GPL:

“This project is not rocket-science (...). Yet, whatever I do, it will be wrong. If I merely implement his specification, I will be a stupid computer-wallah who does not think on his own. If I try to improve his specification, I will be a pushy know-it-all who endangers Stadt-people.”

To the Indian engineer this is not a question of capabilities (he feels fully capable) but rather a question of how to mediate headquarter fears while at the same time proving his knowledge.

Two phrases are of importance here: firstly, the term “computer-wallah”. In Indian English, a wallah is a person who does something with something, mostly low-skilled labour,

for example washing clothes (dhobi-wallah), delivering food (dabba-wallah) et cetera. A computer-wallah is thus a self-degrading term for a highly-qualified computer engineer. It was used at the Indian site whenever engineers referred to inequalities of ownership in technical work. This shows that they perceive themselves as being degraded to an inferior position by headquarter engineers even though they are capable of more.

Secondly, from a technological perspective, implementation follows specification; yet, very often it is only during implementation that flaws in the specification, i.e. the description of how to implement, are found. To find flaws is an essential part of R&D engineering work (Mahadevan 2009). Therefore, the specification – implementation process in R&D always requires a feedback-loop, and it is commonly understood that the specification – implementation relationship can never be one-way even though it is formally planned as such. This means: If the German engineer does not grant the Indian engineer this right to feedback, the Indian engineer can never prove himself technically. Rather, he will be reduced to a mere executer ('computer-wallah') who cannot be perceived as an equally qualified R&D engineer who rethinks the specification.

This decision might have local consequences: Another group manager who followed the same strategy told me of the local consequences over lunch: "Basically, I had a riot on my hands, because my engineers wanted more." Furthermore, appeasement might mean not getting technological ownership quickly. In times of downsizing, this might be dangerous. As the Indian site-manager told me during a one-to-one meeting:

"You have to be careful with Stadt. As long as we are dependent on them, we cannot win. To get ownership, we have to appease them first. Yet at the same time I have to think about my people: What happens in times of crisis? Those who don't have ownership don't have expertise. Those who don't have expertise are replaceable. Those who are replaceable will be laid-off first."

In summary, all Bangalore employees who I talked to described similar situations of holding back despite being able to do more. As the previous statement shows, the German site had the power to withhold knowledge, herewith impacting the Indian site's ability to perform well. The Indian site had to find ownership, i.e. build up knowledge / technical expertise, to gain organizational power / ownership, yet could not pressure the German site for more. At the same time, it becomes clear that from an Indian emic perspective, it is the Indian site which makes decisions: They are not the ones who are being ruled by the 'Western' headquarters. Rather, they

have a full understanding of inequalities of knowledge / power and choose their cross-cultural strategies accordingly in order to enable themselves.

6. Summary and outlook

This article viewed the Indian offshoring site of the German high-tech company ChipTech from a postcolonial perspective. As has been shown, Bangalore Techies are the local elite in public discourse. Their identity between global influence and local modernity has become hybrid. Yet, this group is divided by internal differences in power, too. Returning non-residential Indians are the status-highest sub-group and are viewed as hybrid middle-men between 'East' and 'West'.

Yet, despite their internal difference, all Indian employees struggle with organizational dependency. This dependency is firstly structural as the Indian organization is dependent on the German headquarters. Secondly, it is technological, as the Indian site implements what the German site specifies without being granted the required feedback-loop. Within this organizational context, the highly-qualified Indian techies, who have done everything that it takes to succeed in IT Bangalore, are comparably powerless.

Yet, they have an important power when compared to their German counterparts: They can quit. If they decide to stay within the company and perform what they consider to be basic tasks, they hold back consciously. Through mediating headquarter fears they intend to gain knowledge / power in the end. Cross-cultural theory and practice needs to take their sensemaking into account in order not to construct them as inferior and powerless.

As this article has shown, any analysis of cross-cultural management or intercultural communication between West and East, between headquarters and subsidiary, is impossible without taking inequalities of power / knowledge into account and looking back on them from a postcolonial perspective. Further research on similar fields should follow processes of power / knowledge transfer in similar fields long-term.

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