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Indians Find They Can Go Home Again

By [SARITHA RAI](#)

BANGALORE, [India](#) - Standing amid the rolling lawns outside his four-bedroom villa, Ajay Kela pondered his street in the community of Palm Meadows. One of his neighbors recently returned to India from Cupertino, Calif., to run a technology start-up funded by the venture capital firm Kleiner, Perkins, Caufield & Byers.

Across the street from Mr. Kela is another Indian executive, this one from Fremont, Calif., who works with the outsourcing firm [Infosys Technologies](#). On the other side is the top executive of [Cisco Systems](#) in India, who returned here after decades in the Bay Area and New York.

Also on the block is a returnee from the United Kingdom, who heads the technology operations of [Deutsche Bank](#).

Mr. Kela's neighborhood is just a small sample of a reverse brain drain benefiting India. The gated community of Palm Meadows in the Whitefield suburbs, and many others in the vicinity, with names like Ozone and Lake Vista, are full of Indians who were educated in and worked in the United States and Europe, but who have been lured home by the surging Indian economy and its buoyant technology industry.

"Nothing unusual about this lane at all," said Mr. Kela, 48, who moved from Foster City, Calif., to Palm Meadows last year and is president of the outsourcing firm Symphony Services, which is based in Palo Alto, Calif.

Nasscom, a trade group of Indian outsourcing companies, estimates that 30,000 technology professionals have moved back in the last 18 months. Bangalore, Hyderabad and the suburbs of Delhi are becoming magnets for an influx of Indians, who are the top-earning ethnic group in the United States. These cities, with their Western-style work environment, generous paychecks and quick career jumps, offer the returnees what, until now, they could only get in places like Palo Alto and Boston.

And now they offer something else: a housing boom. Homes have tripled in value in Palm Meadows over the last 12 months, and rents have quadrupled. "Expatriates are returning because India is hot," said Nandan Nilekani, chief executive of Infosys Technologies, India's second-largest outsourcing firm, which recruited 25 returnees from top American schools for its 100-seat summer internship this year. "There is an increasing feeling that significant action in the technology industry is moving to India," he said.

While most returnees are first-generation expatriates, second-generation Indians living in the United States are also returning, said Lori Blackman, a recruitment consultant in Dallas. "Among them I sense an altruistic pull to return to India to help build their home country to a greater power than the country had ever hoped to achieve," she said.

But the trend is raising fears among American specialists that it could deplete the United States of scientific talent and blunt its edge in innovation. "The United States will miss the talents of people of Indian origin who return to India," said Brink Lindsey, vice president for research at the Cato Institute in Washington, adding, that the moves could create greater possibilities for trade between the two countries.

For many returnees, the newly challenging work environment in India has tied in neatly with personal reasons for returning, such as raising their children in Indian culture and caring for aging parents.

"When I left India 25 years ago, everybody was headed to the United States," said Mr. Kela, who pursued a Ph.D. at the University of Rochester and stayed two decades, working for companies like [General Electric](#) and AutoDesk. For India's best and brightest, a technology or engineering career was an irresistible draw to the United States, even until four or five years ago.

"But now they all want to get on the plane home," said Mr. Kela, who returned with his wife and two children. Once a regular at Silicon Valley job fairs, trying to woo Indians back home, Mr. Kela no longer needs to sell India. He receives 10 résumés a month from people with decades of work experience in the United States yearning to relocate.

With globalization, many Americans of Indian origin in the high-technology industry are looking at India as a "career-enhancing move," said Anuradha Parthasarathy, the chief executive of Global Executive Talent, a search firm in Menlo Park, Calif., who is swamped by such job-seekers. Many technology companies - multinationals and Indian outsourcing firms as well as start-ups - are eager to hire returnees with Western managerial experience or technology specialization.

Companies based in the United States, like ipValue, a company in Palo Alto that commercializes intellectual assets for large technology companies like British Telecom and the [Xerox Corporation](#), are helping accelerate the trend. When ipValue recently decided to expand its operations, it chose to do so in India.

"We are really betting on the Indian diaspora returning home," said Vincent Pluvinage, its chief executive. The firm just hired a top executive from Oracle to head its Indian operations and expects a third of its 20-member team in India to consist of returnees by January 2006.

The passage back is no longer an ordeal, because much has changed in India. Whereas watching a movie in a dingy hall was once a weekend high point, now fancy multiplexes, bowling alleys and shopping malls offer entertainment, and pizzerias and cafes are ubiquitous at street corners. Indians who once could choose between only two car models and fly a single airline find they have returned to a profusion of choices.

Even as the lifestyle gaps between India and the West have narrowed rapidly, salary differences at top executive levels have virtually disappeared. Annual pay packages of a half-million dollars are common in Bangalore, but even for those taking a pay cut to return home, the lower cost of living balances smaller paychecks. Starting salaries for engineers are about \$12,000 in India, versus \$60,000 in Silicon Valley.

But relocating is not without its challenges, as Venki Sundaresan, 38, discovered a year ago when, after 15 years abroad, he moved to India with his wife and twin daughters to be the information technology director of [Cypress Semiconductor](#).

In atypical fashion, Mr. Sundaresan scorned the "soft landing" that many returning Indians seek by living in gated communities. Instead, to have the "true Indian experience," the family opted to live in the teeming Indiranagar neighborhood. For his 5-year-old twins, he spurned upmarket international schools popular with other returnees and enrolled them in a neighborhood school. Mr. Sundaresan owns an Indian-made car, a Maruti Baleno.

"We've already driven the Mercedes and the BMW in the United States," he said. "What is the point of dodging around Bangalore's potholes in a limo?"

Living in Palm Meadows, Mr. Kela and his neighbor Sanjay Swamy, 41, who heads the Indian operations of Ketera Technologies, face very little transition anxiety. Mr. Swamy bought and moved into a Palm Meadows villa with his wife, Tulsi, a financial consultant, and 8-year-old son, Ashwin.

The communities buffer returnees from Bangalore's bumper-to-bumper traffic, unpaved sidewalks and swarming neighborhoods. Mr. Kela; his 9-year-old daughter, Payal; and 6-year-old son, Ankur, enjoy riding

bikes on weekends, and they often play cricket, which Mr. Kela is passionate about. His daughter is learning the classical Indian dances of Kathak and Bharatanatyam. For Halloween this year, Mr. Kela led his children on a trick-or-treat walk.

Mr. Kela says he misses the freedom to drive anywhere or go on long hikes. Yet, life is comfortable, with two live-in maids, a full-time driver and another on call, all of whom are "outrageously affordable."

His neighbor Mr. Swamy is immersed in building a Silicon Valley-style team in Bangalore, but with some local adjustments. When he learned that the company routinely received calls from prospective fathers-in-law of employees, asking to verify their ages, titles and salary details, Mr. Swamy wrote a memo titled "HR Policy on Disclosing Employee Information to Prospective Fathers-in-Law."

"While I want to be entirely supportive of ensuring that our confidentiality agreement does not result in your missing out on the spouse of your dreams," Mr. Swamy said, "I don't want competitors to use this as a ploy to get at sensitive information."