

## Introduction

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I remember pressing my face against the warm glass of the airport window as I watched the plane whisk my mother away. My father and two brothers stood with me at the airport in Bangalore, India. My mother was off to the United States to work as a nurse. I was ten at the time and my brothers were both younger than I was. As the *chechi*, or big sister, I tried to be brave. But I felt my heart breaking, and I remember that I could not stop crying. I cried so much that I fell sick with a fever for several days after my mother left.

We did not see my mother again until two years later, when we too emigrated to the United States. In the time spent away from us, my mother stayed with her sister and then a friend (both nursing professionals) as she prepared for, and passed, the licensing examination to practice nursing in the United States. She was then able to work as a registered nurse and save the money needed to bring us over.

As an adult, I have had the unusual opportunity of revisiting this significant childhood experience of immigration. In writing this book, I have begun to understand my family's experiences within a larger historical and sociological context of displacement and change. From a distance afforded by time, and with a set of sociological lenses, I have been able to interpret my family's postimmigration experiences as an attempt to find balance again at both the family and the community level. On the face of it, this story is no different from the typical immigration saga: It is about a group of people who leave home to seek better opportunities. In the process, their lives are irreversibly changed in unexpected ways.

However, a closer look reveals how a reversal in the usual gender order of immigration results in a unique immigration experience.

As immigration stories are commonly imagined, the primary male immigrant arrives first, to be followed by the wife and children after he is settled. Atypically, in this story we encounter an immigration wave made up of women who came first and then sponsored their families. In fact, many women, like my mother, left their village homes in the state of Kerala and migrated to the larger cities of India to study nursing. From there, in a step-migration process, they emigrated to different parts of the world, relying on mostly female networks. In this book, I study one immigrant community in the United States made up mostly of nurses. I ask the question of what happens to gender relations when women come first and are the primary breadwinners.

As my family began to settle down in the United States, we went through the typical challenges faced by immigrants adapting to a new society. While we children were not so aware of it at the time, it was particularly difficult for my father, armed with skills and work experience that did not easily translate, to find employment in a U.S. economy facing recession. My father, who had been a white-collar worker in a British company in India, found that his credentials and work experience were not recognized in the United States. I remember my father's presence around the house as he looked for work while my mother worked double shifts to meet our expenses. Finally, after many months, my father found a clerical job for which he was overqualified.

My family's experience was not unusual relative to the other immigrant families we knew. However, historically in the United States, it is unusual for women to be the first immigrants and primary breadwinners for the family. In most immigrant communities, when women have worked outside the home, typically they have had access only to secondary and tertiary labor market jobs such as service and domestic work. But immigrant nurses like my mother are skilled professionals who enter a labor market experiencing a consistent shortage in nursing staff, and who therefore have more of a say in setting the terms of their employment. Meanwhile, their husbands are unable to find jobs comparable to the ones they held before immigration. Consequently, this affects gender relations in the family. That women typically earn more than the men who initially depend on them raises difficult questions, particularly for the men. These issues, which run the gamut from definitions of masculinity and femininity to basic self-worth, affect both men and women individually, as well as the dynamics of the family. A second broad question I explore in

this book is how men and women deal with such changes in the delicate balance of gender relations after immigration.

Without relatives or friends nearby, my family found community and support in the immigrant Indian Christian church. The church service — which took place in rented halls in the early years — met both a religious and a social need for us. People drove many miles to attend the three-hour-long Sunday morning service and the potluck lunches that usually followed. There were frequent parties and regular prayer meetings in the homes of church members. I, as well as my contemporaries, found it difficult to distinguish between the parties and the prayer meetings. Every event began with lengthy Orthodox prayers — which were required to properly respect the priest's presence — and ended with food. Our social lives revolved around the church as church members became our extended family and community in the United States. The unusual dynamics in my own home made me aware of the tensions surrounding gender relations in the community.

I did not understand this at the time, but my parents were atypical in their gendered behavior. My father had always involved himself in child rearing and enjoyed taking an active role in our affairs even when nannies and others cared for us at home in India. By nature, he was — and indeed still is — extremely nurturing, and we three children gravitated toward him. My father was also a very creative person who enjoyed cooking and inventing his own concoctions in the kitchen. Consequently, even while we were in India, my father was not a stranger to the kitchen or to child-care. My mother often stayed in the background but participated in our care in a different way. Especially in the two years when our mother lived apart from us in the United States, our father became our sole parental caretaker.

After my family was reunited, my parents continued to behave as they always had. Without the help they had had in India, my parents both took part in the household and child-care tasks. However, I noticed many an occasion where other men in the community would tease my father for his ability to cook, and he would laugh it off. There were times when my mother made a point of cooking when we were expecting company, so that my father would not be teased. Even as a child, I sensed the underlying tension concerning this subject.

I remember thinking that my father's contributions to the household were unique, but since then I have found that it is not uncommon for men to take the lead in cooking and child care in the Keralite immigrant community. What was unique about my father was that, despite social

sanctions, he did not adhere to the prescribed gender norms and was open about his role in household affairs and child care. I realize now that I noticed the shift in gender relations after immigration only because my parents were atypical in their behavior relative to the rest of the community. The social pressure that made them hide this difference allowed me to notice it.

This social pressure manifested itself not only in gender relations in our home but also in the explosive politics of the immigrant church. While I did not understand this at the time, the heated debates in the meetings of the church's general body that sometimes led to physical fights and the threat of schism in the congregation were often artifacts of the radical postimmigration changes in gender relations and the marginalizing experiences faced by first-generation men. The women were mostly silent spectators in this arena.

In this book, I also examine immigrant gender relations in three spheres — work, home, and community — and the interrelationships between these spheres. How do changes in the lives of men and women and in the work sphere affect the domestic and communal balance of gender relations? At the community level, how do men and women work out these tensions? It is not unreasonable to expect that changes in gender relations in one sphere often affect gender relations in other spheres. But this cannot be taken for granted. Economic gains in the work sphere do not automatically result in gains in other spheres for women, as was evident in my church and community. As I discovered through my research, gender and class relations are at stake at the community level as played out in the ideological constructions of nursing and in the divisive politics of the immigrant church.

Despite having grown up in this community, I was truly surprised by a particular finding during what became a pivotal moment in my research. At an informal tea party with a group of immigrant nurses, I heard a chance comment by one of the women about how she was considered just a “dirty” nurse in her home state of Kerala (see chapter 5). Having grown up with a mother who was a nurse, and in the company of other nurses, I had never heard such a sentiment expressed. Pursuing the meaning of this statement led me to trace its roots to Kerala.

Of course this was not the first time I was going back to Kerala. My own family had strong ties to Kerala. After our arrival in the United States, we had eagerly planned our return visits, buying many gifts to take back to my grandparents and extended family. My parents had wrung their hands with worry as they helplessly heard about the troubles of old

age from their parents during their frequent phone calls home. Then there were the inevitable trips back for funerals, marriages, and other occasions, and the collective watching of videotapes of these events by everyone who could not be there. My parents also sponsored several relatives who came to the United States, including two aunts and an uncle and their families, who stayed with us for periods of time.

In this era of greater ease in global communications and travel, my family was not unique in this immigrant community for having many transnational ties to India. Particularly in the domestic and communal spheres, both the immigrant community and the sending community exhibit a mutual dependence, resulting in a flow of people and resources in both directions. Consequently, in this book I consider the question of how these ties affect the community, particularly with regard to gender and class relations. How is the sending community's stigmatization of nurses, who are considered "dirty" — a description attached, in Kerala, to lower-class and sexually deviant women — reproduced in the U.S. immigrant community despite the nurses' relative success?

## Research Sites and Methods

This project is the result of three years of formal ethnographic research (1994–97) that I initially conducted for my dissertation in a metropolitan area of the United States — in a city that I call Central City — and in Kerala, India. I spent eighteen months between 1994 and 1995 in Central City, where I began fieldwork at the immigrant Indian Orthodox Syrian Christian parish of St. George's Orthodox Church.

Using the church as a base, I conducted interviews with twenty-nine couples, interviewing men and women separately, employing a convenience sampling method. I also interviewed several priests, bishops, and other church leaders, either when they visited St. George's or when I met with them at national church conferences. I also volunteered as a patient visitor on a regular basis in a nursing home in Central City that employed a large number of Keralite nurses. I then conducted ethnography in Kerala for six months in 1997. There I carried out fieldwork in an Orthodox church, interviewed family members of those I had interviewed in Central City, and conducted focus group interviews with nurses.

When referring to the subjects of this study and their locations, I use pseudonyms, with some exceptions. Before interviewing them, I always reassured the members of St. George's that I would not reveal their names

or any other directly identifiable information they shared with me. While some said they did not care if they were identified by name, the majority seemed more comfortable not being identified. Consequently, it was important to disguise the name and location of the immigrant congregation as well, given the smallness of the community and my desire to protect the identities of those who generously shared their opinions. Where I have identified the actual names of bishops (Bishops Thomas Mar Makarios, Mathew Mar Barnabas, and Yuhannon Mar Milithios) and the retired dean of a well-known nursing school (Aleyamma Kuruvilla of the Christian Medical College in Vellore), it is because they are public figures who in newspaper articles and other research projects have spoken out on the topics discussed here (for example, see Williams 1996; and Abraham 1996). Revealing their real names is not a breach of confidentiality.

Whereas I began my research with the goal of focusing on nurses and their families at St. George's, I soon found another category of immigrants who did not come to the United States on the basis of nursing. This group, which I identify as "traditional householders," was made up of men who arrived on educational or work visas and then went back to marry women who, typically, were not nurses. Also in this group were couples who had arrived together and couples who had immigrated independently and married after immigration. Another significant difference about this group is that the men were not downwardly mobile after immigration. Rather, they tended to have professional jobs in the United States, being better educated than the men who came as dependents of their wives. Nearly a quarter of my sample (eight couples) were traditional householders.

Since most of the Keralite nurses in the United States are Syrian Christians, it is important to take a brief look at the history of Syrian Christianity in India. Syrian Christians from Kerala, the state at the southernmost tip of India, claim descent from the early converts of the apostle Thomas, who, tradition has it, was martyred in southern India in A.D. 72. These Christians of Kerala are called Syrian not because they have Syrian ancestry but because they use Syrian liturgy. The influence of Syrian missionaries starting in the seventh century led to the establishment of the church under the patriarch of Antioch, and a liturgy that still retains some Syriac.

Over the centuries, the Syrian Christians became divided among themselves into different denominations. There are Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, as well as Protestants of every stripe, who claim Syrian Christian ancestry. The Orthodox Syrian Christian Church of India is one such

denomination in this Syrian Christian tradition. It broke off ties with Antioch in 1912 and is currently led by a patriarch from Kerala.<sup>1</sup>

With the first wave of Keralite immigrants in the late 1960s, there was an increasing need for religious institutions in the United States. Many of these pioneer immigrants became actively involved in renting churches or community halls and organizing makeshift congregations.<sup>2</sup> Faced with the shortage of clergy, they paid for priests from other congregations in sometimes distant areas in the United States to come once a month — often on Saturdays — to conduct the service.

When the number of congregations increased in the United States, the mother church in India formed a North American diocese and assigned a bishop to oversee the new diocese on behalf of the patriarch in Kerala. St. George's is an immigrant offspring of this Indian Orthodox Church and is one of fifty-nine congregations in the United States and Canada (appendix 3).

## A Reluctant Participant in Central City

Entrée into St. George's was not difficult for me since I was raised in the Indian Orthodox Christian tradition. I introduced myself as a visiting student researcher, aiming to have an inconspicuous level of participation in the church. Having come to observe gender relations in the church, I wanted to remain on the sidelines and listen. Since I did not know any of the church members personally, I thought I could conduct my research on the “unobtrusive observer” end of the participant-observer spectrum. I was willing to let the field speak to me, but I was less willing to speak back and enter into a conversation.

However, I was pulled into the limelight by the new priest, who insisted on recruiting me to work with the junior high and high school age members of the church. The priest had inherited a congregation emerging from a recent and terribly divisive split in its membership. In his attempt to increase general enthusiasm, he thought that new ideas — specifically mine — would help inspire the participation of high school and junior high members. Consequently, I reluctantly became involved in teaching Sunday school.

I began by going to church early on Sundays to lead the Sunday school classes in song and to teach the ninth grade class. As Christmas approached, I was asked to coordinate the Sunday school Christmas program. I wrote and directed the Christmas play that year, which meant long practice ses-

sions on Saturdays at the homes of the young actors. These occasions gave me the opportunity to get to know several of the parents, who were the first married couples in the church that I approached for interviews, ultimately resulting in a convenience sampling method of interview subject selection.

Because I was interviewing men and women separately, it was often difficult to find a five- to six-hour period where both husband and wife were home. As a result, I stayed overnight in the homes of several parishioners, interviewing the husband in the evening, sharing a family meal and prayer time, and then interviewing the wife in the morning, or vice versa. In some cases, I had to go back more than once, either because the husband or wife could not make the interview or someone had more to say and we had run out of time.

My participant observation in the church and community influenced the content and the tenor of the interviews, and the experience of interviewing in turn affected how I understood what I saw in my fieldwork. Conducting ethnography and becoming a participant of sorts allowed me to recognize important issues and ask questions in a way that would have been difficult with other modes of research. Working with the young people allowed me to have a general sense of legitimacy in the church and a familiarity with their parents that was necessary for the deeply personal interviews I later conducted.

My involvement in the Christmas program led to weekly planning and practice sessions after church on Sundays. It soon became a habit for me to have a late lunch with the priest after the practice session. This weekly custom allowed me to meet and interview several priests and bishops who visited the priest at St. George's. While receiving the culinary generosity of the latter, I was allowed to listen in and sometimes participate in several conversations among the all-male leadership of the church.

One rule of research that I gleaned from this experience was that involvement begets even more involvement. I was soon asked to organize the young people for a Christmas caroling venture, which, at St. George's, was an exclusively adult male activity. While I was close to the mostly female teenagers who wanted to go caroling, and I wanted to help the priest, I did not want to be in the midst of controversy. As a young, unmarried woman, I found that my presence among the men generated expressions of resistance that threw cultural and religious assumptions into relief. If I had taken the safe way out by remaining an observer, I would not have seen the significance of caroling — it had been redefined as an adult male domain forged in reactive compensation for their loss of status at home and at work.<sup>3</sup>

Despite my reluctance in the beginning, I came to see the priest's initial invitation to help with the youth program as a blessing in disguise. First of all, working with the young people allowed me to get to know their parents. Second, I felt that contributing my time and energy to the youth program was one way to reciprocate for the valuable time that church members were giving me. In retrospect, I realized that many of these very busy men and women might have not given me their precious time and entrée into their lives if they had not come to know and trust me through my work in the church. Finally, taking leadership in the caroling turned out to be a uniquely revealing experience that helped me understand the importance of church participation for the immigrant men.

### Transgressive Ethnography in Kerala

Similarly, going to Kerala was not my idea and not one I welcomed. After eighteen months of being out in the field, I thought I had done enough research and was ready to come back and write my dissertation. My dissertation advisor, Michael Burawoy, in his own convincingly insistent manner, told me that I was not ready. After perusing my field notes and visiting me in Central City, he recognized the importance of a research venture to Kerala before I did.

The research in Central City had allowed me to observe the complex interaction between different spheres that resulted in male assertion of privilege in the congregations. But without going to Kerala, I would not have understood the importance of transnational connections and the role they played in Central City. Only in Kerala did I perceive the nature and importance of family ties and the role of the church as a transnational institution. The biggest puzzle was the stigmatization of nurses in Central City. Given the positive evaluation of nurses in the United States, the persistence of the stigma attached to them in the immigrant community could be explained only after analyzing the transnational connections that sustained the stigma.

To explore this transnational re-creation of norms, I studied the dense flows of meaning, people, and commodities between the two locales. I rejoined the flow myself, traveling to Kerala for six months to seek out the kin of the Central City couples and see what immigration looked like from the perspective of the sending community. It was when I spoke to the Keralite family members of the traditional householders — the category of community members who did not immigrate on the basis of

nursing — that I became aware of the level of stigma that still was attached to nurses. The recent economic mobility of the families of nurses who went abroad did not always translate into upward movement for them, especially on the social ladder. The relatives of the traditional householders I interviewed in Central City, a part of Kerala's nonmigrant elite who acted as the gatekeepers of old wealth and status, were candid about their reservations about nurses. In conversations with them and church officials, I saw how the old gender- and class-based stigmas were still in place under the thin layer of societal approbation for nurses with green cards.

While in Kerala, I also submerged myself in a church to compare it with St. George's in Central City. Among this new congregation, I learned that the church is a transnational institution that serves as a space in which immigrants make status claims in their Keralite communities of origin. In having conversations with Keralite church members, and by attending Sunday services and group meetings in the church, I became aware of the strength and nature of the immigrant presence in the Keralite church. My interviews with clerical leaders of the church in Kerala also gave me insight into the great challenge that this transnational administration has become for the church.

Finally, from individual and focus group interviews with nurses, nursing administrators, and teachers, I learned how their labor was stigmatized, indeed more stigmatized as their wages became more prized. By recreating this global field for myself, I saw how norms were reproduced in Kerala and from there transmitted and appropriated in the community around St. George's. My own presence, participation, and transgressions in Kerala brought me further insight into the unstated presumptions at both ends of the migration stream.

While traveling in an auto-rickshaw with my aunt, I asked the driver to stop at a particular place. He did not seem to hear me, so I tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention. My aunt was aghast: "He could get the wrong idea about you," she exclaimed. I had broken one of the cardinal rules of male-female interaction — I had touched a male stranger. From this and other such incidents, I began to understand better why immigrant nurses in Central City harbored the view that they were regarded as "dirty" women. I reflected on those young aspiring nurses who, twenty to thirty years before, had left behind a Kerala that probably had stricter prohibitions against the interaction of the sexes. These same women who were not allowed to enter the living room when male visitors came to their homes had to touch, clean, and nurture hundreds of male strangers as part of their professional duty.

My aunt's reaction in 1997 to my touching the driver gave me insight into the almost tangible gender boundaries among the Keralite immigrants of Central City. Although my study relies heavily on interviews, it was only through the transgressive ethnography of breaking rules and through getting my own hands "dirty" in the fields of Kerala that I understood the views expressed by people at both ends of this transnational migration.

## Autobiographical Proximity and Its Consequences

I remember that, even as I began to conceptualize my research agenda for this project, I was both compelled by and concerned about pursuing a topic so close to home. As an insider, I had some distinct advantages and limitations in doing this research project.<sup>4</sup> Because my autobiographical proximity to this project has been the source of countless anxieties for me, I wish to enumerate some of the key issues with which I struggled.

### FLUIDITY OF IDENTITY

As I mentioned already, *entrée* into research sites was relatively easy, but it also created tensions. I often found myself straddling or caught between competing identities. At St. George's I was both researcher and congregationalist, and yet at the same time I was neither adult nor child (adulthood is attained by entering marriage; however, in my late twenties I was too old to be a child). Nor was I a first-generation immigrant or member of the second generation. I am a *1.5er*, having immigrated as a twelve-year-old. First-generation immigrants are adults, and the second generation is typically made up of those born in the new country. But *1.5ers* tend to be those who immigrate at a young age and whose bilingual and bicultural capacities allow them to function in both cultures. In Kerala I was no less a hybrid. I spoke Malayalam fluently, I looked like a Malayalee, and I dressed like other young women, but I could never completely hide my difference. My cousin said it was the way I carried myself and made eye contact. Still, my in-betweenness and my liminality, which I usually considered an autobiographical headache, gave me the room to maneuver among different identities and see the field from different points of view. I could associate with both the adults and the teenagers, with men and women, nurses and nonnurses, without being locked into any one group.

But it was not all easy going. The fluidity of identity made it a constant

challenge to position myself. I was asked to follow scripts no one else could follow. On several occasions my presence, my clothing, and my body became the objects of sanctions, which allowed me to see firsthand the control exerted over women's bodies. Because I was seen as a member of the community, I was required to behave according to traditional gender norms.

At a national conference of the American diocese Father Mathew, the priest from St. George's, pulled me aside to tell me that two other priests at the conference had complained to him about my attire. On the opening night of the conference, Father Mathew had asked me to introduce one of the speakers. The whole affair had appeared to be quite informal and, since we were in the middle of a hot summer, I wore a pair of blue denim shorts that went down to my knees and a T-shirt with a loose, long-sleeve, unbuttoned shirt over it. I was surprised to learn that anybody had found anything wrong with my outfit. Father Mathew told me that the two priests had found my attire inappropriate because there were bishops present. The problem was not the informality of the clothing but rather that the shorts revealed my legs below the knees. Even though several of the high school boys and girls were wearing shorts, I was selected for reprimand because I was older and seen as a leader among the young people.

Later that same day, my attire inspired discussion at a meeting for the women's group, where the focus was on the needs of the second-generation women and single first-generation women. One of the bishops and one of the priests attended this meeting. The wife of one of the priests who had complained about my attire raised the issue of suitable clothing for young women. She complained that pants (and by the same logic, shorts even more so) were not fitting in religious settings. The bishop enthusiastically agreed and said, "They all say that we are conservative. Mothers should be responsible for training their children in these matters." The priest complained that he had asked one girl in his congregation not to wear pants and she had asked him, "Why not?" This was said as if it was obvious why girls should not be wearing pants and that the question showed her impertinence. The bishop commented that it is all right for girls up to the age of twelve to wear pants. It was clear that my apparel the night before was probably the stimulus for this discussion. While I was not comfortable with having my own body made the object of gender-patrolling forces, this incident allowed me to see how gender rules are enforced over generations.

Having to maneuver between the identities of researcher and com-

munity member was a foreseeable challenge that I had expected to encounter in the field. What I had not expected was that this challenge would continue after I left Central City and Kerala, when I had to wrestle with the data and present my findings to an academic audience for whom I had to translate a different worldview.

As I began to transcribe, and sometimes translate and analyze, my interviews, the first issue I tried to understand was women's lack of participation in the church. I saw how men had expanded their participation by redefining existing positions to make them exclusively male and by creating new positions for themselves. In my interviews, I heard one explanation for the men's increased participation — an explanation championed by traditional householders as a means to differentiate themselves and mark their own premigration status — that the “nurse-husbands” who had lost status at home were trying to recover it in church. As I struggled with the data, I unconsciously adopted the hegemonic, shaming term *nurse-husbands* used by the traditional householders and the upper-class bishops and even replicated by some of the husbands of nurses.

While intellectually I had seen use of the term *nurse-husbands* as a declassing move on the part of the Keralite upper classes, I had difficulty applying this insight because I had trouble seeing who was doing the declassing. Only after I analyzed my interviews and wrote chapter 3 did I see that the traditional householders were indeed a reality in my sample set, that they had names and faces and a coherent and congealing ideology that they expressed in their interviews. Only then could I see how it was in their interest to emasculate and declass the husbands of nurses and downgrade nurses as deviants. It was then that I could stop using the very terms they used and to see the powerful ways that stigma works on those who are stigmatized.

The explanation given by the traditional householders concerning men's increased participation in the church was a narrow one that stereotyped the households of nurses. Once I realized my mistake, I could see that the majority of the immigrant men who increased their participation in the church were responding to a loss of status not only at home but also at work and — as marginalized minority men — in the wider society. Their participation was also a generous response to the need among immigrants for a vibrant central community space such as the church to meet social, economic, religious, and cultural needs. Furthermore, by their remarks, the traditional male householders, who were also marginalized in the wider American society, were complaining about a loss of status positions that in Kerala had been traditionally and unquestionably theirs.

### A QUESTION OF AUDIENCE

It is unsurprising that my position as a member of the larger Keralite Christian immigrant community and my own family's experiences helped shape my research experiences and my final analyses. But what was somewhat unexpected was how being an insider continued to affect me as I began to share my work with the academic community. From objectifying the subjects of my study as data to explaining the differences of cultural beliefs and the underlying logic of different worldviews, I found myself involved in a self-alienating process of clarifications and justifications.

When speaking about Keralite Christians, I found it necessary to say "these men" or "these women" to create the distance that seems necessary in all such research. I suppose that all ethnographers who have spent months and years getting to know their subjects intimately must represent them similarly. In some ways, I did not really have to try. It was one of the consequences of doing the research. I had to separate my family and myself from the research to function on a daily basis. However, this separation was more difficult to maintain when I shared my work with an academic audience. Because I was also a part of the phenomenon I was studying, I felt alienated from myself when I had to objectify the familiar aspects of my life for an audience who came with their own conventional expectations of the nature of gender relations in an Indian community.

Sometimes, it was hard to think about and discuss complex and sensitive issues openly with those who did not have the prerequisite understanding of cultural differences. The dominant caricature of patriarchal South Asian culture is that the men are oppressive cavemen and the women are surely being beaten up and abused in their homes. For example, in a discussion about my research, a well-meaning scholar asked me why I had not found any domestic abuse in the community. Perhaps noting the surprise on my face, the questioner explained, "Everyone knows that domestic abuse is very common in South Asian communities — all the feminists say so." The assumption that patriarchy with a capital *P* is the essential nature of all South Asian communities leads not only to the expectation that there is rampant domestic abuse in such communities but also to the assumption that all women naturally flee such oppressive conditions if given the chance.<sup>5</sup>

Relatedly, several people asked me why immigrant single women went back to Kerala to the constraints of arranged marriages rather than marry Americans of their own choosing. Why would they not find some-

one here — presumably a more egalitarian relationship that is the antithesis of a patriarchal Indian arranged marriage? For most American academics, when discussing Indian immigrants the reference point is the cosmopolitan academic or professional who hails from a typically upper-class background and is relatively more at ease with American dating habits. Consequently, it is understandable that my academic public would conjecture that immigrant nurses would be comfortable with cross-cultural mate selection options.

To answer my audience's questions required various conversations. First, I would start with the Indian nurses' cultural lack of comfort with both their American setting and the dating habits of Americans, which would prevent the nurses from pursuing such options even had they encountered any propositions. Second, I would address the cultural differences that allowed Indian women to welcome guidance from their families and accept arranged marriage as their preferred way to find a partner. Despite the negative possibilities of an arranged marriage, many men and women follow the wishes of their families. Third, I would explain that the individual nurses who migrate often carry the hopes of an entire family and are beholden to help them. Marrying outside their community might not only bring shame to their families but also present an obstacle to carrying out their obligations to them.

While writing about my findings, I was conscious of my different audiences. I knew I could be reinforcing existing stereotypes about South Asian patriarchy among my wider academic audiences. I was afraid that ultimately I would contribute to an objectification of Keralite Christian social relations that limited their complexity to nurse-husbands and silent women caught in oppressive patriarchal institutions such as arranged marriage or the church. I fear it may be all too easy for readers of this book to go hunting for a Keralite Christian immigrant church and find the emasculated husbands of nurses exercising their patriarchal power. I understand that this is part of the danger of writing ethnography, because the particular phenomenon that one analyzes may become *the* representative and identifying characteristic of the group. I hope I have painted a more comprehensive picture encompassing the complex, multivalent reality of life for this immigrant group.

Another audience I have kept in mind while writing is the Keralite immigrant community. It is a common trope in ethnographic writing to reflect on the reception of scholarship in the community studied. Unlike the majority of scholars who engage in such reflection from the safer spaces of academia, I am still a part of this community, being a member

of the Orthodox Church and an active participant. I struggled with how much I should reveal of what I saw. I was aware that community members could view my project as dirty laundry that should not be aired in the sight of outsiders.

I know that gender relations are not at the top of this community's list of urgent issues. However, I chose to focus on this topic because I believe that the particular characteristics of this immigration pattern highlight the everyday struggles around gender and class that are not unique to this community or to immigrants. Rather, in our rapidly changing world, where two-job families have become the overwhelming norm, most couples in industrialized societies struggle with the domestic division of labor. The resulting tugs-of-war over the definition of normative masculinities and femininities resonate not only at the familial level but also within communities and societies at large. Gender, race, and class tensions intersect on the grounds of these everyday battles. For example, one type of division of domestic labor can become the hallmark of a particular masculinity or femininity and tinged with racial or class overtones. While I understand why community members may not want these issues discussed, I hope I have risen to the challenge of portraying what is universally human about the conflicts that my subjects faced and the creative solutions to which they resorted.

Despite all the difficulties discussed above, I consider it a privilege to have undertaken this project. While being an insider presented several challenges, I was able to sustain my interest in this project over a long period of time only because these issues were important to me. As a result, I have learned a lot about doing ethnography and about my own identity.

## A Road Map

This study examines an unusual immigration pattern of primary female immigration and its implications for gender relations in the three spheres of work, home, and community, as well as the role of transnational connections in the reproduction and transformation of gender relations in the immigrant community.

In chapter 1, I situate the questions that guide this study within several bodies of literature, from the feminist-inspired gender and immigration literature, to the literature on religion and immigration, to that on transnationalism. Furthermore, I outline a broader theoretical framework that informs my understanding of the interrelationship of gender relations in the spheres of work, home, and community.

Next, in chapter 2, I focus on the genesis of the female-led nurses' migration from Kerala. I trace the journeys of Keralite nurses who gained employment in different parts of India and then sought lucrative opportunities all over the world, including in the United States. I then examine the work experiences of nurses who confronted the racialized hierarchy of the American ward floor and yet developed a new sense of professional pride, a pride not possible in Kerala. I contrast the rising social status and economic power of the nurses with the experiences of their husbands, who lost status both at work and at home when they joined their wives in the United States.

The downward mobility of the men raises questions about what happens in the domestic sphere and how men deal with their loss of status. In chapter 3, I reveal the consequences of immigrant men's declining social status, and of their dependence on their wives' jobs, for gender relations in the home. Using in-depth interviews with twenty-nine couples, I identify four types of immigrant households: traditional households, where the women do the housework and child care and the men are in charge of the financial decision making; forced-participation households, where the men are forced to share the child care; partnership households, where all aspects of domestic labor are shared; and female-led households, where the women shoulder almost all the labor in the household, including the financial decision making (see appendix 1 for the list of participants in the in-depth interviews, by household type).

In chapter 4, I demonstrate the necessity of examining spheres beyond work and home in order to understand the effect of migration on gender relations. I analyze the complicated relationships between men's status in the immigrant church and their status in the wider U.S. society. I show that men who lost status in the workforce and at home as a result of immigration began to expand and elaborate their roles in the church and even push women out of activities traditionally open to them in Kerala. However, even as these men created a necessary space of belonging for the immigrant community, they also relied on male privilege, with the support of the church hierarchy, to compensate for loss of status suffered in the process of migration and settlement. Yet ultimately, the husbands of nurses became connected to the stigma attached to nurses that was reproduced through another set of transnational connections with Kerala. But why were these seemingly successful immigrant families, who appeared to have achieved the American dream, still plagued by social stigmas that originated thousands of miles away?

Chapter 5 takes a close look at the nature of transnational connections between the immigrant community in Central City and Kerala and at the

complex influence of these connections upon gender relations in the immigrant community. In this chapter, I argue that, while transnational connections are a valuable resource for the economic and social reproduction of the immigrant community, they also help reproduce established gender- and class-based power relations. Immigrants' identities remain oriented to Kerala as a result of concrete practices largely organized through relationships with family members left behind in Kerala, practices such as finding marriage partners and help with raising children. These practices foster the reproduction in the United States of family forms and gender roles rooted in Kerala. The cultural construction of nurses as dirty, or lower class, from Kerala is reproduced in the United States through many different channels, including the media, film, and the transnational marriage market. Transnational connections in the church at both the individual and the institutional levels help reproduce Keralite gender norms in the immigrant community. However, I show that Keralite gender ideals and practices are selectively adopted in response to the specific conditions of an immigrant community based upon female-led migration.

Finally, in chapter 6, I revisit the questions and themes raised in earlier chapters and address some of the broader implications for the study of migration, gender, and transnationalism that emerge from this project.