Skilled migrants are a key component of international population flows today. One of the key contemporary global flows of skilled migration involves Indian software professionals. The contribution of Indian software engineers to developed countries has received much attention; indeed, in 2005, the American Congress and Senate passed a resolution acknowledging and commending the significant contribution that graduates from the Indian Institutes of Technology have made to the US Economy. The market for skilled software engineers in this network age resulted in several developed countries creating quotas and fast tracking the migration of Indian software engineers in early 2000s to the mid-2000s. However, as the world economy slowed, job losses have seen Indian software engineers returning home. This paper captures the experiences of Indian software engineers at the highs and lows of the global economy.

While most research has focused on the macro-economic and political effects of skilled migration, the human dimension has received less attention. This paper addressed this void.
by examining the social dimension of skilled migration, and assesses the impact of transnational migration on marriages and relationships among Indian software engineers.

The work adopts a transnational approach using multi-sited ethnography carried out in India and the United Kingdom, to follow the migratory experiences of husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, as well as their families left behind. A central theme of this paper relates to hierarchical notions of power and how national and global structures such as nation-states and multinational corporations influence marriage and family structures, and how migration challenges traditional local structures (gender, age, caste, ethnic identity and wealth).

The migratory opportunities available to software engineers changed the dynamics of the ‘marriage market,’ and improved the marriageability of highly-skilled professionals. The prospects of access First World status were challenging previously held values and expectations, as well as traditional gender roles. This paper explores the different experiences and strategies used by women and men and how these young professionals balance their romantic lives with the traditional expectations of arranged marriage, and oblige family expectations.

For example, one route used by female software engineers to realise transnational aspirations is through marrying someone already abroad. Although identified at one level as associate migration, female software engineers adopted such strategies to gain family permission and support to migrate overseas. Such manipulation of the power dynamics of culturally prescribed norms and expectations enabled the females to achieve their personal and professional goals. Though it appears on the surface to be one of a ‘trailing spouse’, this approach is actually strategized by the women in order to experience international migration. This form of agency exercises the female’s power to achieve her outcome as well as transferring status to the family by marrying someone abroad. Thus she is able to maximise the rates of return of migration financially, socially (social status) culturally (meeting cultural expectations) individually and for her natal family.

Female software engineers felt that partners who lived abroad would be more liberal and considerate, and imagined that they could have an egalitarian married relationship overseas away from the constraining kinship power structures of the extended family. This would give
them more bargaining power to negotiate with their husbands the divisions of ‘traditional’
domestic roles, tasks and duties and career progression in the public space. The social and
economic changes of global migratory opportunities have influenced the imagination of some
of these young women as to the future gender roles especially as a young wife in an ideal
world. The transnational consciousness is influencing the thinking that they are more likely
to have a symmetrical family in an overseas country rather than in India. Similarly, men
enjoy the freedoms of having a more equal relationship with their spouse, who can be a
partner in a professional sense and on a personal level. Being away from their families
allowed them to experience a more ‘modern’ marriage, or pursue relationships in a less
constrained way. Marriage migration for both men and women can be as seen as vehicle for
freedom, escaping traditionally defined roles and expectations within Indian families.

As the global economy experienced a downturn, return migration places a new set of
challenges on marriages and relationships which are explored. External structures force the
timing of these changes, and place added uncertainty on migrant couples. The resultant
return confronts the previous ‘freedom’ of living away from traditional expectations. Some
women describe the constraints and resistance they face in re-entering Indian society. Back
in India, transnational couples draw on kith and kin networks of similar return migrants to
reminisce on previous experiences and share the challenges and contrasts of coming home.
This paper defines how transnationalism for this highly skilled group of professionals is
bringing about a re-negotiation of traditional roles and expectations within transnational
marriages and families, and changing the nature of intragenerational relations, and kith and
kin networks.