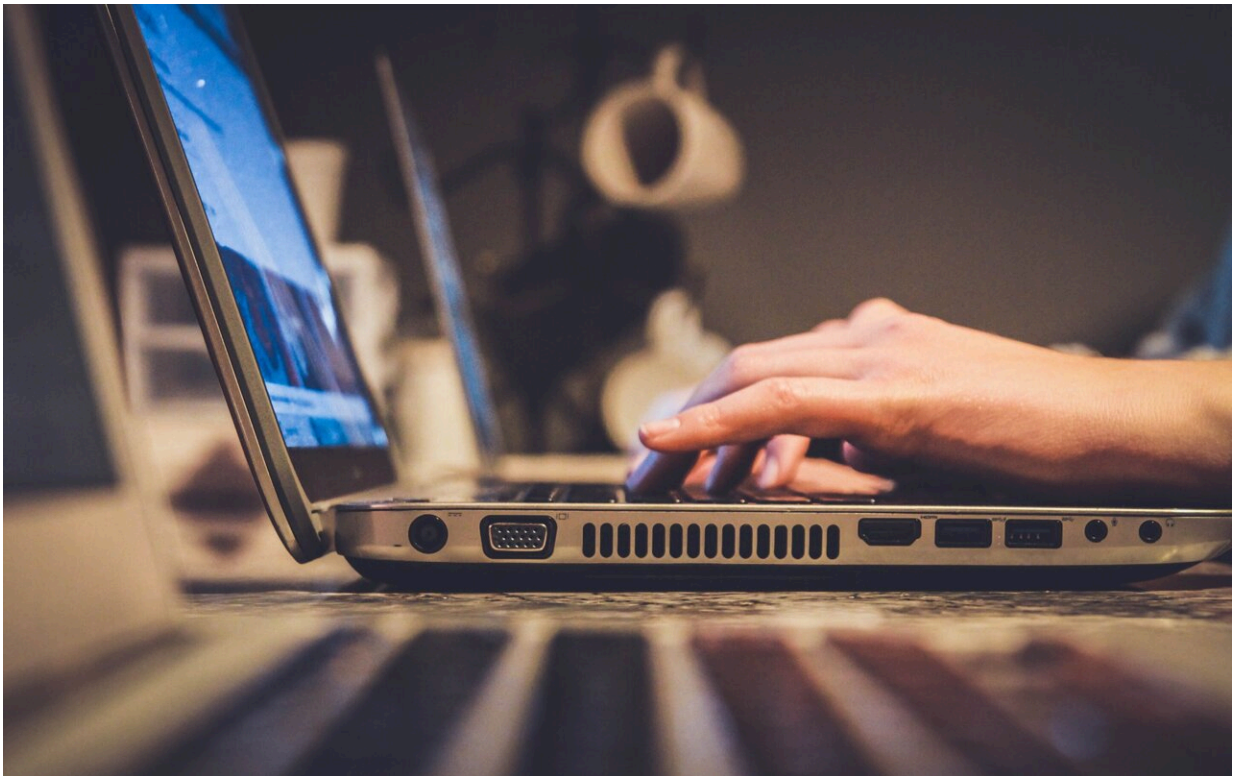


In India, computer typists embody 'fuzzy' nature of state borders

December 15 2023, by Kate Blackwood



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Pakistani Hindus arrive in the western Indian city of Jodhpur with hopes and plans to migrate, but before they even approach the Foreigners' Registration Office (FRO), most have to visit a typist.

It's not a [legal requirement](#), anthropologist Natasha Raheja writes in a new ethnographic study she conducted at this [border](#), but many migrants lack the [computer equipment](#), literacy in English or Hindi (the languages of government paperwork), or bureaucratic insight needed to successfully cross into India.

"The typist is an important figure, facilitating interactions between immigration officers and migrants," said Raheja, assistant professor of anthropology in the College of Arts and Sciences (A&S). "A lot of them have quasi-formal offices, many of them outdoor stalls, outside of the formal immigration office. There's a zone of indistinction where you're not really sure where the immigration office begins or ends."

State borders are taken for granted as fixed lines, Raheja said, but she argues that crossing spaces are, in reality, expansive and indistinct: fuzzy. The computer typists who provide essential services to prospective migrants into India embody this characteristic fuzziness, she writes, a contrast with the Indian government narrative touting [direct access](#) to the state—and can be seen at international borders in general.

["Fuzzy Borders: Media, Migration Brokerage, and State Bureaucracy"](#) appears in *American Ethnologist*.

"When migrants cross borders, they carry with them multiple attachments that show us that nations and respective states are more linked than we may think," Raheja said. "As an anthropologist, I'm interested in everyday movement, how people on the ground are countering meta-discourses we have from governments and states about their borders and territory. In this article, you get a textured sense of how brokers' mediating practices make fuzzy the distinction between state and non-state."

During 22 cumulative months of fieldwork in Jodhpur between 2014 and

2019, Raheja spent time observing and getting to know these brokers. Computer typists are usually private vendors who use their computer skills and equipment to prepare applications for prospective migrants. They advertise their close association with [immigration officials](#) and shuttle in and out of FRO offices, staying aware of the officers' whereabouts or even acting as unofficial secretaries—who can be blamed for things going wrong.

"Immigration officers' reliance on mediators displaced responsibility for bureaucratic errors onto typists," Raheja wrote.

All the typists Raheja met were men, consistent with gendered hierarchies around public administrative work in the region, she said. Many of them are former migrants themselves who put their experience and knowledge of the system to work for their clients.

"It's a model of resource distribution; it's not necessary for every person to have their own computer or printer to fill out their own individual immigration applications," Raheja said. "A brokerage economy offers integral infrastructural services."

Raheja's fieldwork revealed that even migrants who have computer skills and equipment and literacy in government languages—typically marks of class or caste privilege—still go through migration brokers for their specialized knowledge.

"The reliance on brokerage reflects the need for support for navigating the bureaucracy across the board," Raheja said. She thinks this need for support contrasts with the Indian government's "narrative of immediate access" to citizens and prospective migrants, seen, for example, in its Digital India campaign to make its services widely available through improved online infrastructure.

Brokerage is present at other international borders, Raheja said, but it works differently in different places. In Nepal, for example, migration brokers have licenses, and immigration offices formally incorporate private vendors into their work. She wrote in the study that countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany, and Japan have contracted private, multinational companies to broker visa processing.

In this study, Raheja focused on daily immigration activity in India, but she said brokerage is necessary to move across borders all over the world.

"States are not the only regulators of mobility. That doesn't mean states aren't one of the most powerful actors," she said. "But things are happening on the ground that muddy the narrative that states have all the power at their borders."

More information: Natasha Raheja, Fuzzy borders, *American Ethnologist* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/amet.13224](https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13224)

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