Introduction

INNOVATORS AND THEIR OTHERS

BEFORE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, the entrepreneur was someone who managed an enterprise, undertaking projects financed by others and seeing them through (see Sarkar 1917). This once managerial figure has in the early twenty-first century become mythic, symbolically bound to social progress through invention, production, and experiment. Globally circulating digital media—TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) videos and Harvard Business Review articles, for instance—popularize the entrepreneur as a normative model of social life. The ethos of innovation and entrepreneurship, honed in high-technology firms, has colonized philanthropy, development projects, government policies, and even thinking about international diplomacy. Innovation competitions, hackathons, and corporate mythologies around figures such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs proliferate optimism that passionate dreamers can change the world. Austerity is no barrier; in myth, entrepreneurs are fueled by nothing more than perseverance, empathy, and resourcefulness in the face of adversity or injustice.

The entrepreneur, no longer just a manager, has become an “agent of change,” an ideal worker, an instrument of development, and an optimistic and speculative citizen. This citizen cultivates and draws what resources they can—their community ties, their capacity to labor, even their political hope—into the pursuit of entrepreneurial experiments in development, understood as economic growth and uplift of the poor. Most important, entrepreneurial citizens promise value with social surplus; as they pursue their passions, they produce benefits for an amorphous but putatively extensive social body. The entrepreneurial citizen belongs to an imagined community of consumers, beneficiaries, and fellow entrepreneurs. If this imaginary of the entrepreneurial citizen sounds grandiose and vague, this is no coincidence; vagueness has been core to the global promise and portability of the entrepreneurial ethos. State and corporate elites point to
entrepreneurs as those who can make opportunity out of the innumerable shortcomings of development.

I call this economic and political regime *entrepreneurial citizenship*. Entrepreneurial citizenship promises that citizens can construct markets, produce value, and nation building all at the same time. This book shows how people adopt and champion this ethos in India in the early twenty-first century, articulating entrepreneurship with long-standing hierarchies and systems of meaning. Entrepreneurial citizenship attempts to hail people’s diverse visions for development in India—desires citizens could channel toward oppositional politics—and directs them toward the production of enterprise. Elites, political and industrial, produce this ideology. It makes the most sense for India’s middle classes—those with access to institutional, capitalist, and philanthropic patronage and investment. Entrepreneurial citizenship’s language and social forms discipline political hope. As people—privately or through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—pitch to funders, to innovation competitions, or to corporate partners, they have to articulate dissatisfaction and demands as “opportunities” in patrons’ interests. They monitor themselves, their relations, and their environments as terrains of potential. On these terrains, they look for opportunities to take on projects and redirect their lives to add value. These practices bend away from the slow, threatening work of building social movements; rather, people articulate desires to work for change as demos and deliverables. Calls to entrepreneurial citizenship promise national belonging for those who subsume their hopes, ideals, particular knowledges, and relationships into experiments in projects that promise value.

Proponents of this form—often technocrats and capital investors—promise that everyone is potentially an entrepreneur, from the least to the most privileged. Prominent business school faculty Anil Gupta (2006) and C. K. Prahalad (2004), for example, have celebrated the entrepreneurial capacities of rural inventors and informal producers. A report by the Planning Commission of the Government of India (2012d) featured a woman selling colored powder dyes on its cover, but its pages were filled with policy recommendations targeted at developing high-tech ventures. In casting street hawkers and elite technologists alike as entrepreneurs in potentia, proponents collapse the vast gaps in money, formal knowledge, and authority that separate these two. Entrepreneurial citizenship becomes one attempt at hegemony, a common sense that casts the interests of ruling classes as everyone’s interests.

But this entrepreneurialism is not only a project of the self but also a project that posits relations between selves and those they govern, guide, and employ: leaders and led, benefactors and beneficiaries, the avant-garde and the laggards, innovators and their others. Champions of innovation and entrepreneurship
often leave this hierarchy implicit or deny its existence, leaving the problems it raises unaddressed. So who becomes an innovator and who becomes the innovator’s other? Who conceptualizes and valorizes, and who does the work? Who modernizes whom, and toward what horizon?

Advocates of entrepreneurial citizenship argue that society must invest in innovators, as innovators promise a better future for all. This book depicts the practices by which institutions, organizations, and individuals selectively invest only in some people, some aspirations, and some projects in the name of development. As powerful institutions actively cultivate “the capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2004) through entrepreneurial citizenship, this book illustrates the seductions, limits, and contradictions of entrepreneurial citizenship’s promise of inclusion through the generation of economic and social possibility.

The politics of entrepreneurial citizenship play out diffusely, in sometimes hazy, sometimes passionate, and sometimes convenient decisions people make about who to work with, who to work for, who to invest in, and what spaces to inhabit. Schools, training programs, venture capitalists, NGOs, and entrepreneurial individuals cultivate and cull futures as they invest in some projects and people and not others. As these actors decide whom to fund, whom to have coffee with, and whose feedback to take, they select and cultivate relationships that produce emergent forms of hierarchy. These decisions play out moment to moment in studios, NGOs, and social innovation spaces, shaped by assumptions about caste, class, region, and cosmopolitanism. These judgments are often glossed ones of “like-mindedness,” “authenticity,” and “fit.”

Value orients entrepreneurial citizens and those who invest in them. But it is not tangible productivity, but what anthropologist Kaushik Sunder Rajan characterizes as “the felt possibility of future productivity or profit” (2006, 18). They produce and respond to vision, hope, and hype as they pursue speculative capital investments; they promise not only financial value but also social value and legitimation for socially responsible funders and investors (Friedner 2015). With this book, I render these social forces visible so that those working toward horizons of justice might channel their hopes and labor in ways less easily appropriated and disciplined by capital investments, and the demand for financial value. I assess entrepreneurial citizenship in light of the still lively legacies of enlightenment and colonial projects that position some people as India’s past and fewer people—the educated, the modernized, and now the innovators—as India’s future, deserving of investment in the name of the nation.

This book offers an ethnography of entrepreneurial citizenship. I pay close attention to why entrepreneurial citizenship makes sense to people—what histories, mediations, and ideologies make it compelling for those who respond
to its call. I link affects and practices to institutional, political, and political economic structures that necessitate them. I begin by analyzing various visions in India of how state and society ought to relate to one another and what kinds of subjects have emerged in such arrangements. Entrepreneurial citizenship is one such arrangement that emerged as the Indian state attempted to privatize the functions of development to private industry and civil society while managing surplus populations (Sanyal 2007). I draw on studies of South Asia’s history, political economy, and culture to show why these arrangements began to make sense to elites and to many in the middle classes in the decades following liberalization in 1991. I address questions about the organization of neoliberal hegemonic projects and how they shape class, caste, and gender relations (e.g., Bhatt, Murty, and Ramamurthy 2010). To understand what is new about this arrangement, I turn to development studies’ examinations of rule of experts and civil society NGOs and introduce the concept of “rendering entrepreneurial” to explain how the state goes beyond the management of poverty to the proliferation of enterprise around poverty. I draw on science and technology studies, economic sociology, and economic anthropology to show the kinds of infrastructures, social relations, media forms, and epistemologies that make such enterprises seem tractable in practice and in promise. From literature on human computer interaction (HCI) and design, I take the insight that interfaces and materialities of mediation condition interactions and intersubjectivities up close and at a distance (see, e.g., Lave and Wenger 1991; Dourish 2004). Drawing from feminist analyses of labor, I analyze these resulting subject formations and divisions of labor as regimes of invisibility and hierarchies of value. Debates about power and values in design processes (e.g., Friedman 1996; Nissenbaum 2001; Muller 2003) must reckon with the colonial, postcolonial, and capitalist processes that lend design and innovation their social promise in the first place.¹ And I turn to postcolonial and feminist studies to pose the question of how the social promise of innovation responds to anxieties about difference and disorder in the national community. Policy elites, for example, saw in India’s youthful population a productivity boon or fodder for political fire; all depended on whether entrepreneurship and industrialization could absorb and direct their energies (see Nilekani 2009, 52; Gupta 2016, 297, 341).

I use citizenship here as both an emic and an analytic term. Many whom I met in the course of fieldwork positioned entrepreneurship not just as an economic activity but as a nation-building one. They built on long-standing understandings of development as a collective national project demanding contributions from all citizens. As they spoke of their vocations and biographies, many spoke explicitly of problems of “civic sense” and what the government ought to expect from them. People did not speak of “citizenship” per se
but of the civic, of India, and of “doing one’s bit.” I also use citizenship as an analytic category to draw into sharper relief the implications of people’s own ideologies of belonging and specific state policies to recognize membership in the nation. In chapter 2 I show how the state redefined citizenship policies specifically to include the technical expertise and wealth of diaspora in the nation, elevating upper castes and classes with access to education over laborers abroad. Within South Asian studies, sociologists and anthropologists have primarily discussed citizenship in terms of rights demanded from the state, whether as consumers of services or as groups demanding affirmative action, land rights, or recognition; this book puts in the foreground the responsibilities the state attempts to place on citizens as well. I bring this study of citizenship into dialogue with the perspectives of science and technology studies, which I argue ought to attend not only to the practices and histories surrounding technology but also to the ways in which states hierarchize people in terms of their capacities to offer expertise recognized as high value at particular historical moments.

Innovation as the Rearticulation of Development

People champion a variety of cultural imaginaries under the seemingly global banner of innovation. A challenge of this analysis is to locate the stabilities among entrepreneurial and innovation projects while recognizing contestations and variations among them. Here, I begin by contrasting three different prescriptions for development from three elite policy actors. Their visions are varying capitalist, socialist, and Gandhian, yet they share a belief in entrepreneurial innovators as a vehicle for national growth and distribution. They share a vision that draws distinctions between valorized innovators and their beneficiary others. Differences among them signal the varied historical strands of development that still animate Indian politics today.

Arvind Subramanian, a former International Monetary Fund economist, served as chief economic advisor to Prime Minister Narendra Modi from 2014 through 2018. Sam Pitroda headed the National Knowledge Commission in the early 2000s after decades leading technology infrastructure projects for the Congress Party. Anil Gupta, a Gandhian Indian Institute of Management (IIM) professor, served the Modi government as second-in-command of the National Innovation Foundation. The three men vary in their political affiliations, but all envision entrepreneurship and innovation as engines of development.

Addressing the University of Pennsylvania’s India Innovation Conference in November 2013, Subramanian speculated about India’s future, painting the country as a temporal contradiction. “Despite being very poor, it is still cutting
edge. . . . [India] does things which a country at its level of development is not supposed to do”—Subramanian called this “the precocious model of development.” He envisioned an India that exported information services like programming and tech support; it trained skilled entrepreneurs and managers; its wealthy invested their capital not only in India but in other countries. But this precocious India had not yet arrived. “India contains all ten centuries within it,” he explained, pointing to the low-skill workers and low-caste Indians still mired in “backwards traditions” and without jobs. For Subramanian, innovation was key to growth, but it was the province of capitalists and highly educated managers and engineers who could invent it and organize it. He prescribed policies to empower these elites through easing restrictions on land, labor, trade, and foreign direct investment.

Pitroda is, like Subramanian, a nonresident Indian deeply involved in central government policy. He headed the National Knowledge Commission during Congress rule from 2005 through 2014. During a televised panel on innovation and the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) staged by parliament, Pitroda spoke about the poorest Indians at “the bottom of the pyramid” not as potential workers to be stabilized by incorporation in low-skill jobs but as village Indians in need of technical solutions, innovation, and uplift. The market alone—and finance capital in particular—simply “extracts value” through exchange, Pitroda argued in a swipe at commercial capital. By contrast, engineers have the capacity to innovate by going to people, identifying their problems, and “creating value” by solving them. Pitroda is himself an icon of this form; he had led the central government mission to bring telephone service to rural India in the 1980s (Chakravarty 2004). This was a vision not of inventing for export but rather of dedicating professional Indian inventiveness to domestic consumers’ and citizens’ needs.

A business professor with a starkly different ethos, Gupta (2009) posited rural India as the true “hotbed of innovation.” He taught for decades at India’s premier management institute, IIM-Ahmedabad, and led annual yatras, or walking pilgrimages, through rural India on a search for “indigenous innovation.” He mobilized audiences through TED Talk videos, a trade book (2016), and Indian national television. A global voice, but always donning Indian kurta and salwar, he made the case that rural Indians have appropriate technologies and traditional knowledge ripe for capitalization. These rural innovators, he argued, made affordable, repairable, and clever technologies driven by their impatience to make life easier. Gupta and his team documented these inventions and aided in diffusing them through patenting and licensing support, as well as a decades-old newsletter translated into a variety of regional languages.

In some ways, the three men could not seem more different. For Subramanian, innovation emanated from the gleaming towers of urban India to the networked
globe. For Pitroda, it moved from urban offices into rural villages. And for Gupta, it could, with proper state support, circulate within and beyond rural India itself.

Yet across this spectrum of sensibilities and politics, all three agreed that India’s development hinged on its capacity to innovate. “Innovation” blurred distinctions between social development and economic development, promising solutions to human needs and the production of new wealth. In this vision of development, progress came from individual innovators or small communities who developed novel systems that could be replicated and distributed—through others’ labor—to multiply use value through conversion into exchange value. Subramanian, Pitroda, and Gupta only quibbled over which people or groups had that capacity and what policy measures would best locate and nurture them.

Innovation brings to mind for many high technology: Mars missions, Apple computers, or new smartphone apps. In India, it also signaled the possibility of technological progress not mimetic of the West—a problem central to postcolonial nationalisms writ large (Lu 2010; Chatterjee 1993) but now a question of valorization in patent culture as well. Gupta and others argued that a pedal-powered washing machine could also be a site of less recognized but no less profound forms of innovation. Even as these men negotiated what ought to count as innovation, they agreed on the basic vision of the inventions of the few replicated for the benefit of the masses—in innovators’ others. Modernization theorist Everett Rogers (2003, 42) championed this model of innovation, which he called diffusionism. Like modernization theory, this theory positioned inventors and early adopters of innovations as closest to modernity; others became adopters, laggards, and backward refusers.

The promise of entrepreneurship, then, is not only that one makes one’s own future but that one can generate progressive futures for others through organization, know-how, and resourcefulness. Subramanian, Pitroda, and Gupta all saw entrepreneurs as the source of invention, innovation, and cultural creativity that could also transform communities and societies. This was the vision of the entrepreneur put forth by economist Joseph Schumpeter in the mid-twentieth century but deemphasized in many Foucauldian readings of entrepreneurial production that emphasize the market appreciation of the self (W. Brown 2015; Feher 2009). Schumpeter (1947) theorized the entrepreneur as the driver of economic history—a creative agent that escaped falling rates of profit by generating novel sources of profit within an economy. The entrepreneur found new arrangements of existing resources, relationships, and techniques to organize novel forms of production. For Schumpeter, however, the entrepreneur was just one functional role in the economy, distinct from inventors, capitalists, and managers. Fifty years later, a wide range of state, NGO, and corporate actors began to cultivate entrepreneurialism as a silver bullet, a highly flexible answer to the contradictions

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between human development and accumulation. Through myriad practices—conclaves, hackathons, and design research, for example—entrepreneurial citizens were to reimagine everyday life as a latent opportunity and the masses not as an exploited or disadvantaged class to feed but as potential “users”—customers who could be managed and mined for value at the same time.

Projects to cultivate innovators and, implicitly, their others reproduced long-standing divisions between those who develop and those who must be developed. After 1947 Indian nationalists formed a postindependence state where administrators in the public sector made up a class, disproportionately dominated by upper castes (Subramanian 2015; Desai and Dubey 2012), with access to higher education and tasked with calculating, planning, and administering development for what Jawaharlal Nehru called the “needy masses” (S. Roy 2007). These masses voted to legitimate the planning state, but the planning state saw these citizens as ill-equipped to exercise proper democratic reason. The state saw them as mired in local politics, religion, superstition, and hunger. The practices of planning tasked administrators with rising above the “squabbles and conflicts of politics” to express the rational will and consciousness of the nation (Chatterjee 1993, 202–3). During this period, planners directed the economy while the state figured producers—farmers (Philip 2016) and factory workers (S. Roy 2007)—as ideal citizens. Through the process of liberalization, state and proliberalization elites pushed for a different figure of productivity: the entrepreneur.

With liberalization, in 1991, the Indian government withdrew from its monopoly on planning India’s future (Mazzarella 2005; Chatterjee 1993). The state asked entrepreneurs armed with expertise from business- and NGO-sector worlds to step into the void left by the withdrawal of state-led planning and implementation. This was true of central government policies and rhetoric across the political spectrum, under both the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the centrist Congress leadership. Political parties, media, and business lobbies promoted the Silicon Valley diaspora as symbols of what Indians could achieve in the right institutional environment. The central government promoted nonprofit business incubators, called Startup Villages, across India (Upadhyaya 2014). The National Science Center in Delhi—a museum designed to cultivate appreciation for scientific knowledge among Indians—added an innovation lab focused on tinkering, invention, and promoting “patent culture” (see Kumar 2003, 217; Ganguli 1999, 286). The lab was meant to teach visitors that the entrepreneurial innovator tinkered not as a means of extending the life of scarce commodities but as a practice of experiment to invent (and patent) new ones.

The state backed this figuration with concrete transformations to law and institutions. The Citizenship Act of 2003 reconfigured belonging in the nation...
by endowing Indians in the Silicon Valley diaspora (and in fourteen other wealthy countries more broadly) with rights to invest capital in India. In the 1950s moment of anticolonial nationalism, Nehru had shunned the diaspora, instructing its members to become good citizens in the sovereign nations where they lived (Varadarajan 2010, 76). Through the process of liberalization, the state, under both Congress and BJP, tapped these wealthier Indians as investors and entrepreneurs of economic development, for-profit and nonprofit alike (Varadarajan 2010; High Level Committee 2001). Although “unskilled and semiskilled” diasporic workers in the Middle East sent more money back to India, the Citizenship Act initially left them out of this extension of national belonging, focusing instead on highly educated, often upper-caste professionals in wealthy countries (Varadarajan 2010, 91).

Parliament also dramatically revised the Companies Act, on the books since 1956, to formalize entrepreneurs as agents of development. The act made it possible for individuals to incorporate as “one-person companies” so the state could recognize the proverbial coders in the garage and offer them the liability protections of companies (Dash 2016). The act also called on large companies to become “socially responsible,” mandating that large Indian firms contribute a portion of their profits to Corporate Social Responsibility efforts; an update to the act in 2016 counted technology incubation in elite universities as a fundable area of social responsibility, alongside health, women’s empowerment, and education (Bahl 2014). Together, these aspects of the act figured the for-profit corporation as a site of potential and the bearer of responsibility to the nation. The private citizen, in turn, could become a corporation, both socially responsible and shielded from private liabilities. Entrepreneurial citizenship translated for capitalism older socialist figurations of the citizen as an engine of development, the bearer not only of rights but of responsibility for nation building.

Entrepreneurship even displaced older understandings of how government agencies plan and coordinate. India’s Planning Commission had been central to Nehruvian nationalism; the Delhi-based institution housed economists, statisticians, and other experts who optimized development inputs and outputs to balance economic growth and social welfare (M. Sengupta 2015). By 2015 the Planning Commission was gone. In its place, the Narendra Modi government installed NITI Aayog, a “think tank” and “knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurial support system.” NITI Aayog would coordinate the devolution of development to state-level and local public-private partnerships. The devolution had been in progress for decades (M. Sengupta 2015); the central government after liberalization treated state-level and municipal governments as entrepreneurs, tasked with finding their own investors and generating revenue for the central government (Bear 2016; J. Cross 2014; see also Sunder Rajan 2006). With NITI Aayog, the state narrated this shift as a
move to support diffuse entrepreneurship over centralized planning as the engine and steering mechanism of development.

Entrepreneurial citizens carried forward older ideologies of planning rationality and state-citizen relations into their personal, civic experiments in development. Instead of a Planning Commission in Delhi, people worked out of design studios, personal offices, and NGO offices. Entrepreneurial citizens, like the Planning Commission, had to address national fragments—women and children, the Northeast, the informal sector, Muslims, or other groups defined through governmental expertise—but they did so through experimental offerings that generated communities of consumption. They researched and reasoned, but instead of attempting to model the nation as a statistical object, they collected stories, quasi-ethnographic observations, and the occasional statistic that inspired design ideas to test and informed them of cultural risks and constraints. If Nehru eschewed politics as tarnishing objectivity, designers and entrepreneurs could welcome politics to the point that they generated innovation: inspiration, creativity, and new ways to make development into an opportunity (see also Elyachar 2012a). State planners and their populations had given way to myriad innovators and consuming others.

Innovators’ Others

While Indian celebrations of entrepreneurship posit everyone as a potential entrepreneur, they do not posit everyone as currently entrepreneurial or capable of innovating. Just as some justified late colonialism on the grounds that backward masses required preparation to govern themselves, the logic and practices of entrepreneurial citizenship differentiate innovators who find the edges of the future from those who are posed as beneficiaries of this avant-garde. This relationship between innovators and their others builds on long-standing accounts of India being not one nation but two. Anthropologist Ravinder Kaur (2012) calls this “the nation’s two bodies”: one is the new India that can attract investment and produce a recognizably modern standard of living; the other is cast as the “old India” that protests, strikes, and blocks this vision of development. These two Indias haunt the everyday work of development at social enterprise conferences, at design studios, in advertisements, and in policy debates. Sometimes they are called India 1 and India 2. Sometimes they are called India—referring to the modern nation—and Bharat—the Sanskrit term for nation as ancient soil but also referring to the masses of “real India” as both locus of cultural difference and developmental problem (Jodhka 2002). These two Indias are cast as temporally disjointed but interdependent.
Their interdependence erupts into visibility whenever rural Indians resist selling their land or vacating their villages to make room for factories, mines, and dams; subsistence and home sometimes threaten the promise of economic value. The interdependence of the two Indias weighs on urbanites—especially in Delhi—as middle classes worry about the density of cities when poorer Indians come to seek jobs they cannot find (see Sanyal 2007). Their interdependence weighs on India’s brand image abroad as well. India’s presentations in forums like Davos have attempted to present its population as a face of diversity and burgeoning reform and as a canvas blank of institutional and social blockages to implementing enterprising initiatives.

State and business elites transformed what they expected and promised of the entrepreneurial citizen in response to these tensions. In the decade after liberalization, as I elaborate in chapter 2, technocrats and politicians envisioned the entrepreneur as the “global Indian”—the highly educated, wealthy visionary who could innovate industries and value for India. As the polity rejected this vision through voting and through protest, policy makers both in India and in multinational institutions like the World Bank responded to these tensions by calling for “inclusive growth” (Roy Chowdhury 2013; C. Rao 2009; Kannan 2007). Inclusive growth casts a progressive glow around a diverse swath of projects to generate economic value while addressing poverty. Projects include incorporating the poor into financial capital through microfinance (A. Roy 2010; L. Karim 2011; Moodie 2014), addressing them as consumers through social enterprise, and even treating them as repositories of cultural resources to fuel innovation, as I will show in chapter 7. Inclusive growth called on the beneficiaries of Indian capitalism to make the benefits of development felt by the masses, whether through monetary payments, food rations, or improvements to material life (see also Bhatt, Murty, and Ramamurthy 2010; Ray and Quyum 2009). In doing so, inclusive growth celebrated the incorporation of diversity and difference among Indians into projects of value creation while eliding the specific destinations to which the wealth generated in these encounters flowed.

These experiments attempted to inch toward development, experimenting with ways that civil society, both domestic and transnational, could work with the state to develop novel forms of “sustainable” governance—projects that manage social order, generate profits, or, at best, both (Chatterjee 2004). Political economist Kalyan Sanyal (2007, 235) argues that the problem of inclusive growth is part of a much larger problem in postcolonial capitalist development. The majority of Indians, according to Sanyal, live as surplus populations to formal capitalist concerns—not as a reserve army of workers, not outside of capitalism, but dispossessed by processes like land acquisition, mineral extraction, or the importation of mass consumer goods. These poor, he asserts, live
in “the need economy”—an economy of informality, subsistence, and scraping by locked out of the organized sector. This sector is not a vestige of precapitalist relations but rather emerges through the workings of postcolonial capitalism. For Sanyal, the work of the postcolonial development state is not only to produce economic development but also to maintain state legitimacy in the face of such mass marginalization. Before the 1970s, Sanyal argues, the Nehruvian state attempted to incorporate the multitudes into industrialized development as workers. Failing this, it shifted to a policy of addressing the needs of the poor through a complex of programs, funded by the World Bank, aid agencies, NGOs, philanthropies, and microloan institutions, to manage poverty through entitlements—of food, of education, and of rural employment guarantees in recent years (Sanyal 2007, 208–52; Jayal 2013, 178). To Sanyal, the management of poverty through this state-NGO assemblage is central to how the state retains legitimacy among the poor dispossessed by capitalist processes (218). In making this argument, he resists moves in several strands of scholarship to see the poor as representatives of difference: as representatives of precapitalist relations in Marxist political economy, of essential cultural difference between, say, West and non-West in postcolonial and some decolonial approaches, or as alternative economies in feminist studies of the economy (92–97). Instead, he insists that capitalist processes also produce people who live on its margins and develop diverse ways of organizing and making meaning out of their survival.

Practices of entrepreneurial citizenship offer elites a way of making this diversity productive of value while also legitimizing India’s highly unequal economic order. Sanyal (2007, 224–25) identifies microcredit as one way that capital incorporates and generates value out of highly heterogeneous ways of surviving while keeping the poor at a distance. Geographer Ananya Roy (2010) calls the rush to invest and extract profit from loaning to and selling to the poor “poverty capital.” Anthropologist Julia Elyachar (2012a) has documented the range of ways the development sector has worked to map practices and social networks of the poor, overturning development’s traditional-modern distinctions by casting poor people’s practices as “next practices” for corporate innovation (see also Gajjala and Tetteh 2016). As poor people’s practices become latent sources of value, the mediators who can mine those practices are participatory designers, social entrepreneurs, and even activists who weave between the worlds of firms, NGOs, philanthropies, and start-ups. It is precisely this weaving between worlds and its relation to value that this book shows at work. Entrepreneurial citizenship promises those on the margins that they too can achieve social mobility; it also asks entrepreneurs to find the opportunities for value amid the diversity and marginality of India’s poor.

I met hundreds of Indians, mostly middle class, who answered the call to become entrepreneurial citizens. I conducted fieldwork primarily between
with follow-up visits each year up to 2017. I worked at a design studio I will call DevDesign. The studio employed engineers, business school graduates, filmmakers, and designers, many of whom had left corporate jobs in marketing, consulting, video production, and even oil drilling. They shared a desire to find personally meaningful work that engaged their interests while contributing to nation building. They moved through a world of similarly charged citizens—optimistic, curious about others, prolific generators of projects, and avoidant of formal politics, protest, or open critique. In the chapters that follow, I will show the ways they connected to the worlds of the poor and brought those worlds into design studios, coworking spaces, conferences, and expert meetings. These were the spaces of production, times of experimentation, and infrastructures of circulation by which entrepreneurial citizens engaged those they sought to develop. They could do the work of uplift with intimate familiarity but at a comfortable distance.

Rendering Development Entrepreneurial

Entrepreneurial citizenship rearticulates old distinctions between those who can govern others and those who must be governed, cared for, and drawn into modernity. Yet the shift from managerial professionalism and planning to design, entrepreneurship, and innovation accompanied a shift in images of nation building. Growth through planned industrial production and the village charkha, or spinning wheel, gave way to promises of India as a nation of a “billion entrepreneurs.” Citizens, nationalists had once imagined, ought to produce while the state deliberated, calculated, and planned development for the masses. Now citizens answered the call to plan, to feel out opportunity, and to experiment in the nation’s future. What was once the province of economists, urban planners, and sociologists expanded to include innovators more likely to be generalists than experts.

More than a set of methods, principles, or epistemologies, what entrepreneurial citizens share is an ethos of collaboration, experimental life, empathic civic interest, and the monitoring of possibility. Designers, entrepreneurs, and pedagogues often used “design thinking” to describe and train others in this ethos (Irani 2018; Kimbell 2011). Beyond design, these skills of collaboration, empathy, and experiment are now formalized in education at many levels, from elite business and design schools to job-training programs (Friedner 2015; Thrift 1997).

With the concept of ethos, I indicate the attitudes and styles of interaction by which entrepreneurial citizens explored their passions, knowledge, relations, and surrounds for opportunities—those possible futures occupying the overlap among the interests of those with the power to fund and act as
gatekeepers. School reformers taught children to empathize, act, and lead their peers (chapter 3). Studio members interacted playfully, quickly, and intensely with one another; in brainstorms and data analyses, they worked together to probe for potential value in their fieldwork stories about people’s lives (chapters 4 and 6). Michel Foucault elaborated ethos as “a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task” (1984, 39). I use ethos here as it tracks how Indians taught and practiced entrepreneurialism—as a style of interacting, seeing, and experimenting to add value. “Design thinking” was one professional practice that accommodated middle-class citizens’ pursuit of “authentic” selfhood, professionalism, and expressive cultural experimentation—a sensibility routinely contrasted with crushing competition for civil service or corporate jobs that offered little scope for personal expression. Ethos also marks shifts in nation-building discourse from collectivist to individualist registers. Rather than take this turn toward individualism as natural, then, I denaturalize the ethos by describing the social processes by which actors are ethicalized, through everyday talk and through the mediated forms of action, storytelling, and system building by which their ethics became the enterprise of innovating a nation.

The ethos of entrepreneurial citizenship is not the sort of standardizing discipline that requires people to bring their bodies and emotions in line with a norm (Foucault 1995). Rather, it thrives on people who can bring their differences into productive interaction—in brainstorming, in workshops, in the wandering chats that can become projects and partnerships. Difference—as long as it is embodied within an ethos that seeks to add value—is not something to be smoothed away. Studios, workshops, and conferences welcomed filmmakers, artists, chefs, economists, and literature buffs as long as they enjoyed hanging out, creating, and speculating about probable futures. Other kinds of workers—tailors, chai sellers, accountants—were essential to projects but offered orders rather than invitation into productively playful circles. In her ethnography of stock trading, Caitlin Zaloom (2006, 72) also notes a futures trading firm that sought value in human difference; the firm actively worked to diversify the gender, race, and ethnic composition of the trading room to “generate diverse points of view on the market.” Diverse forms of knowledge, in the trading room and in the studio, allow finance capital to intensify the detection of opportunity where competitors may not. Difference becomes a repository of potential to mine for value (see also Tsing 2009).

The ethos of entrepreneurial citizenship differs from assessments offered by existing sociologies of India’s postliberalization middle classes. Sociologists and political scientists argue that India’s middle classes are “consumer
citizens” who orient toward the state as a provider of commodities and services (Lukose 2009; Fernandes and Heller 2006). In such accounts, these consumer citizens want cars. They want faster roads for those cars. They want to accumulate wealth (Nigam 2011). And they want poorer Indians off the sidewalk, off the land, and out of the way (Rajagopal 2001; Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Kaur 2012). In some ways, the entrepreneurial citizens I met fit this profile. They saw consumer goods as vehicles for the good life; as designers and entrepreneurs, they wanted to design nice things for others.

But they also differed starkly from sociological diagnoses of consumer citizenship. They did not only see themselves as bearers of rights with respect to the nation-state. They also saw themselves as responsible to the nation-state. They spoke of design as a way of talking about improving the material culture and systems of the nation, reorganizing and reforming everyday life. Kritika, one friend, could not stop herself from critiquing the design of an ATM as she pulled money; “occupational hazard,” she commented wryly. Vivek, a social entrepreneur, griped that the state should design better water pump systems for the poor by accounting for installation, maintenance, and cultural practices. The scope of their hopes varied widely; they imagined new projects for themselves, their families, their friends, and the nation. Though they were happy to do this for companies or for the state, entrepreneurship also allowed them to initiate projects that expressed their own ideas of the good.

Festivals, design research presentations, crowdfunding, and Skype meetings with clients and partners were ways entrepreneurial citizens imagined hearing from and acting on the nation. This was a form of nationhood studio members imagined as cohering through products and services—an imagined community not of generalized citizens (Anderson 1991) but of innovators and their consuming and laboring others. These events invited people to imagine how their critiques and dissatisfaction might be turned into projects to transform those realities. These spaces seemed, on their face, compatible with political debate, dissent, and solidarity building through collaboration. DevDesign members often discussed politics. They made films about rural India and debated government policies; they looked up to activists in the Right to Information movement and even the occasional Maoist. They debated their own and others’ labor conditions. They talked a lot about values on cigarette breaks; during project time, they drew energy from their own values when they aligned with the project, but the desires of funders and investors always took precedence. These criticisms and values beyond the economic became, themselves, fodder for creativity rendered entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurial citizenship subsumed frustration and idealism, rendering it productive of new enterprise. Innovation was the promise that the nation’s varied use values, sensibilities, and lifeways could be realized as improvement, as modernization,
and as economic growth. This book chronicles the hope and waste of problematization and dreaming rendered productive.

This mode of experimenting in development, I argue, is more than searching for the technical fix (Morozov 2013) or rendering political and structural problems into technical ones. To render developmental technical, anthropologists convincingly argue, is to frame a situation as a problem to be solved through interventions at hand—markets, water filters, or fertilizers, for example (Li 2007; Ferguson 1994). Technical, in this sense, means expertise and seemingly objective knowledge rather than machines and computational systems. Interventions that “render technical,” anthropologists argue, dehistoricize social life, erasing politics and political economy in favor of fixes by experts: development economists, health officials, or agricultural scientists. Even grassroots participation, Tania Li (2007) argues, has been rendered technical by World Bank practices that fix the meaning of community and communication. Messy realities usually overrun development expertise, though even in failure the projects have sustained effects. James Ferguson (1994) shows how failed agricultural projects in Lesotho still bring state offices—tax collectors, overseers—closer to peasants. Li (2007) shows how failed expert interventions provoke political resistance among small farmers in Indonesia.

The practices of entrepreneurial citizens fit this image only loosely. Consultants, entrepreneurs, and engineers did render the social and behavioral into a problem of technique through expert interventions such as product design, “nudging” techniques, or development communication. These projects often, though not always, employed experts working to engineer impact. Entrepreneurial citizenship, however, was an engine for proliferating projects—experiments in what intervention had the right timing, the right investors, and the right partners, and the cultural resonance to stick. Entrepreneurial citizens were often involved in multiple projects at once, keeping many options as an uncertain world roiled around them. Failures were not endpoints but rather chances to learn, modify the attempt, and try again. Silicon Valley companies, influential in global governance, made such celebrations of failure iconic as precursors to progress. Google management advised engineers to launch early, launch often, and learn from mistakes. Facebook instructed engineers to “move fast and break things” (Fattal 2012, 940). Silicon Valley produced high-tech elites nursed on complexity theory—they fully expected models to fail and even celebrated failure as a chance to learn; what anthropologists of development called the act of “rendering technical” was, to entrepreneurial subjects, a provisional attempt to know and intervene just enough to learn something and try again. This was not an epistemology of certainty but of uncertain attempts and feedback loops (see Maurer 1995). The failures of attempts to render technical could open up contingent forms of politics, as Li (2007) argues. But more
often, entrepreneurs took failure as a source of data about the messy worlds and relations they worked to transform. Even the Gates Foundation, known for its global health and education experts, suspended expertise sometimes. Addressing a team redesigning toilets, a program officer told them to “err on the side of innovation” (chapter 6). Design thinking pedagogies celebrated this suspension, advising those who intervene to “see through the eyes of a beginner” and learn through experiment. These projects made life itself a site of enterprising experiment; I call this the process of rendering entrepreneurial.

Global philanthropies—the Gates Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and CitiFoundation, for example—disseminated these practices of rendering entrepreneurial globally. Human-centered design appeared both in development and in education projects as a pedagogy of caring entrepreneurialism; it taught citizens how to muster a will to improve, experimentally intervene, learn from failures, and try again. The Gates Foundation funded Palo Alto design firm IDEO (2009) to publish three guides on how “innovate and design for people living on under $2/day.” CitiFoundation funded Grameen Bank to train NGOs across several countries, including India, in innovation and design as well. These pedagogies were meant to infuse NGOs with optimism, experimental spirit, and customer focus so they could help develop financial products for the poor (Grameen Foundation 2013). UK charity Nesta similarly partnered with a celebrity list of development organizations—the United Nations Development Programme, USAID, Oxfam, and social entrepreneurship NGO Ashoka—to produce social innovation and design pedagogies for development and aid workers (http://diytoolkit.org). As institutions trained people to see like entrepreneurs, they found citizens to take up their agendas, distancing themselves from direct responsibility for failed projects. They distributed the costs and risks of research and development throughout society. Rather than censoring dissatisfaction, institutions redirected it toward the pursuit of value. Those with capital could selectively invest only in those people and projects most aligned with their own interests, disciplining progress without disciplining people.

The middle-class Indians I met readily stepped into the role of entrepreneur and agent of development, even if they had qualms about entrepreneurship. Through their education and upbringing, they learned to see themselves as trustees—the name Tania Li (2007) gives to those elites who claim the right to speak for the well-being of the population. They understood their projects not just as the implementation of technical programs of improvement but as syntheses of and compromises between their own and poor potential users’ visions of what interventions ought to look like. As middle classes, they saw the creativity of the poor as beautiful, inspirational, and chaotic—a source of “next practices” (Elyachar 2012) to organize under the putatively rational, systematic, and deliberative practices of management, design, and innovation.
Development rendered entrepreneurial generated complex tangles of partners across NGOs, corporations, and government. The work of the Tata Group offers an illustration. The family-run group operates over one hundred companies, as well as the philanthropic Tata Trusts. While the trusts historically funded education, academic research, and NGOs serving the poor, they have lately turned toward venture capital to fund social innovation ventures—water filters, education platforms, and toilets are just some of the funded projects. Tata’s long-standing networks of NGOs become logistical organizations that help funded innovators intervene in the lives of the poor. Development rendered entrepreneurial lives in the alignments among these interests, infrastructures, labors, and passions, rather than in the strictures of technical, expert prescriptions.

Sites and Methods

The core of this book’s empirical material is drawn from fourteen months of daily, immersive fieldwork at a product design and research studio I call DevDesign located in Delhi, India. I inhabited varying positions: early on, I was a participant-observer oscillating between recording observations and assisting with studio tasks; over time, I participated intensely and accountably, organizing events, analyzing research, and teaching. I did this in the studio, in homes, in the field, and at workshops. I followed the studio’s work to Ahmedabad, Auroville, Bangalore, Hyderabad, rural Andhra Pradesh, Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Silicon Valley. Core studio staff included people with varied training: MBAs, engineers, filmmakers, product designers, and economists. Their friends included artists, activists, managers, and consultants. They moved through education conferences, hackathons, and experimental cafes. Through these varied sites, I saw how they worked to embody and champion a form of entrepreneurial citizenship that answered the call of the state and domestic capital while carving a moral or, more rarely, even a political path. I conducted fieldwork in the social worlds they moved through as well, interviewing their friends, family, colleagues, and collaborators across government agencies, NGOs, festivals, and even homes. I followed people, design methods, and innovation practices as they moved. As I traced who put claims of design, innovation, and entrepreneurship to work, I found a wider system of public private partnerships, global trade agreements, and economic anxieties produced by social forces (Marcus 1995). This is how I came to understand DevDesign’s work as just one response among many to the call of what I have named entrepreneurial citizenship.

An ethnographic approach allowed me to see the diverse ways actors oriented toward value, created knowledge, and worked to order their social relations in response to social forces. I trace not only embodied, improvised,
contingent, and highly reflexive practices but also forces of habit and resources that structured those agencies and gave them form. Social forces shape grant cycles, project deadlines, government budgets, and political instability, and those conditioned what was possible in ways not always visible to practitioners day-to-day. Reflexivity and self-criticism were essential as entrepreneurial citizens told stories about themselves, adapted to changing circumstances, and forged partnerships. I do not treat those I work with like “cultural dopes” (Garfinkel 1967), but I also do not assume that they—or any of us—are fully aware of the forces that condition our actions (Bourdieu 1967). This book attends to entrepreneurial citizenship as a practice: of knowledge (Mol 2002; Fujimura 1988), as action organized in time (Bear 2016; Jeffrey 2010; Bourdieu 1977; Garfinkel 1967), and, crucially, as organized by social forces like finance and other resources (Bear et al. 2015; Bear 2015; Patel 2006, 2015; Maurer 1995; Marx 1978). Through ethnography, I worked to notice the patterned forms of marginality, exclusion, and hierarchy produced by innovation and entrepreneurship, even as their champions claimed openness, change, and chaotic unpredictability.

I interpret the utterances and practices of everyday life by contextualizing them in the histories and political economies that made those practices possible, sensible, and affectively compelling. Parts of this book will explain these conditions by analyzing, for instance, popular films that were meaningful in the sites and circuits I moved through. Other parts will rely heavily on historical analysis drawing on secondary literature coupled with close readings of planning documents, World Bank reports, and global consultancy reports. I pay particular attention to the changes in priorities and discourse in these documents over time and look to contemporaneous shifts in political economy, lost elections, or other moments of power shift to understand what drove the shifts in discourse. I do not privilege these documents as sources of truth claims, but I read them as attempts to consolidate and shape the direction of expertise and middle-class understandings of development. I also look for the subtle and most often unspoken conditions that haunted these attempts to plan and govern.

I wrote this ethnography not just for my scholarly fields or the “general public”—whoever that is. I wrote it for friends at DevDesign and beyond as they sensed the inadequacies of innovation practices in ways that manifested as cynicism, jadedness, or burnout. I wrote for those who see hope in the labor of making technologies in the struggle for a better life, but who might find wisdom and forewarning in the frustrations of the entrepreneurial citizens who people this book. Those I met in and around DevDesign responded to the call to be entrepreneurial, to build the nation as citizens, and to address “global” problems through development. And over the years, they grew frustrated with the limitations of development: funders clutching purse strings half a world away, impossible promises of a technological
silver bullet, and the promising but always not-yet connectivity of digital systems. As an ethnographer, I turned my attention to wider histories of class, democracy, finance, and geopolitics that conditioned the possibilities of their actions. I also did this for myself. I began this project in 2009 as a technology designer who wanted to draw on anthropology and postcolonial studies to intervene responsibly in my world (see Irani et al. 2010). Early on, a project to design a water filter nobody wanted—a story I tell in chapter 6—exploded that fantasy. This book is an effort to replace that fantasy with something more grounded in reality.

Those I worked with in Delhi called on me to recognize the similarities between my biography and theirs. “You’re just like us,” a graphic designer and friend of studio members told me six months into fieldwork. I do not take this statement for granted but rather as puzzle. It was not an attachment to India per se but a shared attachment to design and a frustration with postcolonial conditions that sparked my collaboration with designers in India. With members of DevDesign, I began the project idealistic about the possibilities of design as a means of aligning technology with progressive social futures. I met members of the studio through a colleague at Google where I had worked as a “user experience designer” for four years. With Akhil and Ajit, the studio’s founders, I shared a frustration with the provincialism of Silicon Valley designers and engineers, so certain of their global sensibilities and visions. A globalizing Google saw Indian designers as translators but not creative authors. European designers accused Indian designers of mimicking when they failed to perform a European vision of Indianness. As an Iranian American, I knew intimately the sense of coming from the wrong end of modernity’s time line, always catching up to Euro-American practices and knowledge. From these points of mutual frustration, and a mutual attachment to technology practices, DevDesign invited me to study their work. I neither went “native” in this fieldwork nor claim the distance of an “outsider.” DevDesign found my presence useful as an emissary from California—a repository of information, gossip, and sensibility. I found in them skillful and brilliant people, tapped as ghostwriters and translators of Silicon Valley innovation reports. As I spent more time with them within and beyond the studio, I learned their ambitions exceeded recognition as innovators in a global profession. Their ambitions were to turn their fellow citizens from knowledge workers into innovators of a nation. Work was not just labor but a way of belonging in society.

The world around the studio moved in a mix of Hindi, English, and Hinglish—the practice of blending English and Hindi often associated with cities and Bollywood film (Kothari and Snell 2011). At the studio, Hinglish was the more intimate register in which I engaged with studio members day-to-day, and English was the dominant language of consulting work, conference calls,
and most public talks. My primary informants interacted with lower-level staff or those Indians who were the target of their research in Hindi. Hindi was the language of domestic life, and of commanding the labor of others in Delhi. On occasion, DevDesign staff traveled to other regions of India where even they required translators to engage people in the field. Only rarely did DevDesign communicate its expertise to those who spoke only Hindi, whether their own research informants or their lower-level staff; on the rare occasions that they shared back research knowledge, they too consulted Hindi dictionaries though born, raised, and educated in India. The English-speaking “global Indian” of the managerial class already occupied a privileged linguistic stratum, and English was a key mechanism for delineating the distance between innovators and their others. Of eleven conferences and workshops I attended, ten were primarily in English, to the point that participants used Hindi and vernacular languages as political interventions or reparative attempts to include the marginalized speakers at home in other Indian languages.

A limitation of my position in the field was that I had less extensive discussions with lower-level office staff. While I explicitly attended to divisions of labor and interactions between designers and lower-status workers, the cooks, cleaners, and couriers I spoke with joked about work and our relations but did not speak to me extensively about their work. They saw me (accurately) as strongly associated with their employers. These ethnographic refusals marked power relations within the studio.

Map of the Chapters

Each chapter of the book traces the practices through which different actors enroll or become enrolled in projects of entrepreneurial citizenship. After this introductory chapter, the book begins by showing how politicians and business elites—especially, but not only, from the high-tech sector—attempt to pose entrepreneurial citizenship as new kind of common sense in response to dilemmas of liberalized development. I read state documents, especially Five Year Plans, in the context of wider histories of politics and development in India. I show how meanings of entrepreneurship and innovation shifted in response to institutional shifts like patent law or political realignments. I argue that we should look at categories like entrepreneurship and innovation historically, rather than granting them a philosophical concreteness they lack. Entrepreneurship and innovation are not static analytic terms but categories forged through efforts by state and capital to manufacture common sense. Chapter 3 shows how elite reformers—here, education reformers, media elites, and intellectuals—take up this common sense and make it concrete through projects to remake Indian education. Reformers take up “design thinking” as a pedagogy...
that marries democracy and productivity for middle-class Indians haunted by communalism, labor market pressures, and the desire for development.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on the work of the entrepreneurial imagination at DevDesign. The book presents ethnographic analysis of innovators at work in the design studio, in the field, and in development workshops. As they worked to feel out opportunities, attract clients, and carry out projects, they remade themselves and the divisions of labor that sustained them. Chapter 4 shows how designers at the studio organized their lives, their relationships, and their self-understandings as they continually relearned how to “add value” in the context of shifting global divisions of labor and speculative hype. Life and leisure became resources for speculating in new forms of value. Chapter 5 turns to the history and political fallout of entrepreneurial urgency. Entrepreneurs privilege “a bias to action”—a manufactured urgency that treats opportunity as always about to disappear. An ethos forged amid the volatility of high-tech industries, the bias to action encourages trying many possibilities quickly, learning from collaboration, and accepting failures in the search for value. This ethos, I show, also encouraged people to bring diversity to the table while temporarily foreclosing the slower work of democracy across difference. Chapter 6 turns to empathy and human-centered design—a way for entrepreneurial citizens to engage those for whom they design and innovate. Empathy, I show, generated inspiration and investment in innovation processes first and responded to the needs of potential users only to the extent that it aligned with investor interests.

Chapter 7 asks, “Can the subaltern innovate?” It calls into question how we know innovation: what counts as innovation as such, who designates it and how, and how these processes are embedded in relations of power and political economy. What makes some acts of technological configuration jugaad, or workarounds, and others proper innovation? What makes some designs innovative while others are characterized as derivative, inauthentic, or even copies? Put simply, I examine how, in contingent and everyday practice, people recognize some acts as innovation and others as not. I argue that we should examine innovation not as the search for value but as the recognition of value—a process of recognition inflected by caste, gender, regional identity, and class. I conclude the book by reflecting on entrepreneurial citizenship as a global project, promoted not only by Indian elites but also by the U.S. Department of State and global institutions of economic governance. I ultimately argue that the function of entrepreneurial citizenship is to subsume hope and dissatisfaction, redirecting potential political contestation into economic productivity and experiment.