

Aperçus d'emploi précaire et de lutte sociale : employées en services de soutien dans le secteur des technologies de l'information en Inde

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Résumé

Cet article examine les conditions de travail et l'expérience de la vie urbaine des employées en services de soutien. Elles sont concierges, gardes de sécurité ou livreuses de restauration rapide professionnelles dans les parcs technologiques de développement d'applications logicielles en Inde. La majorité de ces travailleuses font partie de familles d'ouvriers agricoles ou de petites familles propriétaires de maigres terres, lesquelles ont migré vers les cités indiennes durant les bouleversements économiques de la mondialisation qui ont suivi les années 1980. L'article s'attarde particulièrement à leurs luttes économiques et sociales en milieu de travail face à l'instabilité d'emploi et aux demandes croissantes de leur rôle domestique, inhérentes aux conditions d'emploi précaires. Les sociétés technologiques internationales confient en sous-traitance la gestion de leurs installations à des agences locales ou multinationales, qui embauchent des employés précaires ou informels comme personnel de soutien. S'appuyant sur des entrevues approfondies auprès de 37 travailleuses dans sept villes de l'Inde, l'article souligne les normes changeantes du rôle des femmes, passant de l'identité domestique dans un espace privé à celle de travailleuse dans un lieu public. Les entrevues répertorient leur expérience quotidienne de lutte, de négociation, de contestation, d'accommodement et de plainte sur leur situation dans le contexte des relations sociales changeantes qui façonnent leur vie de tous les jours comme travailleuses et membres d'une famille.

Narratives of Precarious Work and Social Struggle: Women Support Service Workers in India's Information Technology Sector

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Abstract

The article examines the working conditions and urban life experiences of women support service workers. They are housekeepers, security guards and fast food servers in the Indian technology parks that develop software applications. The majority of these women workers are from families of landless agricultural labourers or small farming families with marginal landholdings, who had migrated to the Indian cities during the economic churning of globalization after 1980. In particular, the article focuses on their workplace economic and social struggles as they encounter job instability and the growing demands on their domestic roles, which are incommensurate with precarious employment conditions. Global technology companies sub-contract the work of managing the facilities to local or multinational agencies, who hire support service staff as casual and informal workers. Based on in-depth interviews with 37 women workers across seven Indian cities, the article highlights the changing gender norms following the transition from a domestic self in a private space to a woman worker in a public place. The interviews record their experience of everyday struggle, negotiation, contestation, accommodation and complaint about the state of being in changing social relations that shape their lives as women workers and members of a family.

Introduction

This article explores the life, working conditions and urban experiences of outsourced support-service workers in India's \$181 billion information technology (IT) sector. They are housekeepers, security guards and fast food servers who work in and around the technology parks that develop software applications for a world market. The paper is drawn from a larger study carried out across several Indian cities that have a large concentration of software service companies. It included a quantitative component, but this

paper explores the in-depth qualitative interviews with 37 women workers which recorded their voices, including their discordant notes of hope, frustration, struggle and aspiration, based on their experience of everyday negotiation, contestation, accommodation and complaint about the changing social relations that shape their lives as outsourced support staff in the Indian IT industry.

The women we interviewed are typical of this workforce: young and middle-aged, between the ages of 18 to 60. Their job roles are housekeeping — cleaners, janitors, servers and cooks at food courts — and security — monitoring the movements of visitors and guarding IT companies in the technology park. Though support service jobs also include car and bus drivers ferrying software workers between homes and offices, I could not find any women drivers to interview. Like their male colleagues, the majority of women workers come from families of landless agricultural labourers or small farming families with marginal landholdings²; many of these workers migrated from rural or semi-urban areas at the beginning of globalization in the 1980s. Some were initiated into city life when their parents arrived in urban centres to search for jobs and ended up becoming servants in middle-class homes, outcast labourers in brick kilns, garbage disposal and construction companies or street vendors. Many women workers arrived in urban areas more recently, when their husbands decided to leave their villages and towns and live in slums not far from the glass and steel wonderland of an IT park.

The flourishing IT industry in the metropolis offers workers an escape from a life defined by poverty and drudgery. This is a drastic change from their part-time or seasonal employment on a farm or in a local factory, where, besides long hours and unsafe working conditions (especially for women), workers depend on the employer's mercy to receive even the legally mandated minimum wage. The new economic situation was a ray of hope for both men and women workers, who sensed a world of improved opportunities in the IT and related industries compared to casual employment in other urban jobs, like those in construction and brick kilns, as servants in middle-class homes or street vendors, in terms of labouring conditions and dignity of work. Jan Breman's fieldwork on the working conditions of the labouring underclass, the landless migrants from the villages working in the cities of the state of Gujrat as construction labourers, reminds us of "the

precarity of the classes in the lower circuits of economy in society” (Breman, 2016: 3). Breman’s findings point to the state of misery that exists in the informal sector of the Indian economy even after nearly three decades of economic reforms. “Our informants found, on average, employment for fifteen to twenty days per month... the workers are prone to accidents because of lack of protection for the head, face, arms, back, legs and feet which result in infectious wounds as well as fractures and painful joints which take time to heal” (Breman, 2016: 182). Breman reports that employers do not take any responsibility and there are no health benefits for the ailing workers. For the women it is a double burden, “running the household and taking care of the children as well as working along with the men on the building site” (Breman, 2016: 183). However, my research suggests that, compared to “footloose jobs” in the informal sectors, like construction and domestic labour in the cities, support service jobs in the IT sector deliver more regularized and secure employment. The opening up of the Indian economy in the last three decades has led to two important developments. First, a series of economic reforms resulted in the growth of employment in the organized sectors, particularly in new areas like IT and financial services; however, the economic liberalization that drove such job growth added another layer of employment in the organized sector outside formal employment. The formalized positions are joined by regular-informal and casual employment, wherein there is minimal government intervention and the absence of collective bargaining. In recent times, job creation in the organized sector is mostly of this type of flexible employment rather than secure, permanent jobs with benefits. According to a report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), about 80.9 per cent of India’s employed population (80.7 per cent men and 81.6 per cent women) are in the informal economy (ILO, 2018:129).

In his study titled “Globalization, Growth and Employment in India,” Ajit K. Ghose finds that, between 2000 and 2010, “the growth of informal employment in the organized sector was larger than that of formal employment, so the share of formal employment in total employment declined very substantially” (Ghosh, 2016: 146). Recent years have seen an acceleration of this trend,

indicating a faster growth of employment in the informal sector. Thus, the country is currently in a state of

'Informalisation of the Formal Sector,' where the entire increase in the employment in the organized sector over this period has been informal in nature. (Singh, 2014: 5)

This is especially true of the IT sector, which contributed around 7.7 per cent of India's GDP in 2017–18 (IBEF, 2019). The Indian IT industry boom is a direct result of economic liberalization and globalization, which led to increasing cross-border trade, the rise of global supply chains and acceleration of production-consumption commodity cycles. All of these have made the Indian market integrated with the rest of the world; the country has become a favourable destination for offshore technology services; and more flexible labour laws have permitted global and local IT companies to outsource some of the basic facility management services to contractors and companies.

Methodology

The qualitative interviews included in this case study of the women support service workers aimed to elicit responses in a free-flowing discussion that would reflect the workers' lives and experiences in a modern, technology-infused environment. During interviews, I tried to make connections between the relationship of the worker's lived experiences and their material world, including their labour conditions, union participation, gender issues and household management, as well as the narratives of their hopes and aspirations, their future life and the ways of improving their children's lives. These conversations took place in their workplaces, near their office premises and homes and at the local markets. Since I attempted to keep the conversations as informal as possible, on occasion we entered into relatively private and personal topics. Though it was awkward and embarrassing at times, especially when the women workers shared difficult stories of how their mothers-in-law expect grandsons, which led to subsequent discussions about their reproductive rights, we gained valuable gender insights from these types of discussions. The aim was to elicit responses in a free-flowing discussion that would reflect the women workers' lives and experiences in a modern, technology-infused environment.

The mean age of the women interviewed was 30.9. In terms of marital status, 26 were married, seven were single, two were divorced or separated, and two were widowed. Twelve women were

from upper caste groups. Twenty-eight had at least one child. The mean weekly working hours for these women workers was 53.6, earning mean and median monthly incomes of CAD \$152 (CAD 1= 52 rupees) and CAD \$140 respectively.

Migration and Change

The women interviewed feel their lives are caught up in the maelstrom of change. As one female security guard, Aparna (age 26: the women's names have been changed as per ethics requirements in order to protect the anonymity of respondents) says,

Everything is changing...there's been a drastic change. I feel that in the next two years, things will change even more. I don't know what people after us will do, the way of life for them.

An overwhelming majority — over 95 per cent of the women worker interviewees — are first-generation industrial workers and, for many (almost 60 per cent), coming to the metropolis was facilitated by their job at an IT firm. The financial daily *Business-Standard* reports that, in the last two decades, besides the construction and textile sectors, the IT industry has been the largest contributor to urban job growth, which has led to the massive migration from rural areas (Roy, 2017). These workers were previously living in their traditional family settings in rural villages or semi-urban settings, surrounded by poverty, informal labour and non-economic obligations. New communication technologies promised jobs with monthly pay, which would lead to a lifestyle that had only been a distant dream for most labourers; however, it would be simplistic to argue that these workers were merely part of a traditional social system infused with feudal values before joining the IT sector. Rather, Indian villages, rural hamlets and semi-urban localities have their share of post-colonial capitalist development with a fair bit of capital infusion in agriculture, transport and agro-based industries. Despite this, individual and family lives continued in much the same way as their parents and grandparents had lived. These workers had traditional moorings, but their lives were also connected to commodity production. There were occasional disruptions, such as the arrival of multinational cosmetic brands in local shops. For many, the “desi” (indigenous) face creams remained the preferred choice because they

were affordable and consumers were not “experienced” enough to replace “use value” with “brand value.” The scenario changed post-1990 with the launch of India’s new economic policy, liberalization and globalization, as new ITs brought economic transformations in the way that goods are financed, produced and marketed. The villages did not remain unaffected by this new development. Though the spread of capital is still unevenly distributed across the rural regions for historical and cultural reasons, there has been profound progress. As Dipankar Gupta argues,

There is a certain resistance in accepting the fact that the Indian village is undergoing major changes, not just economically, but culturally as well. The reluctance in coming to terms with this reality arises largely from the widely prevalent belief among intellectuals that the Indian village is timeless and unchanging and that the Indian villager likes nothing more than living in a rural setting. These notions need to be revised, not just for the sake of factual accuracy, but also because of the imperatives of the planning and developmental process. (Gupta, 2005: 751)

Changes can be measured by the fact that

more than 40 percent of the rural population is engaged in non-agricultural occupations today and the number is rising rapidly. A substantial part of this population consists of rural labourers who do not own land but do not find enough opportunity for agricultural work. (Chatterjee, 2008: 59)

Moving to a city is also an opportunity for workers to explore a different way of living, away from the suboptimal living standards that many faced in their villages of origin. Lakshmi comes from a nearby district in Hyderabad. She is the mother of two children, age 15 and 12. Her husband once worked as a mason in the village. Following a road accident that left him disabled, Lakshmi moved to Hyderabad in search of work to finance her children’s education. She now works as a housekeeper in HITEC City, earning around CAD\$150 per month. Lakshmi argued that moving to Hyderabad,

one of the largest IT areas in southern India, was the best thing that ever happened to her:

Hyderabad is a good place to live as I have a steady income and secured life. I like my work and nobody has anything to say about the kind of work I do. The people around me are good. They helped me gather money to get medication for my husband and I am really thankful to all my colleagues about that.

On the other hand, she described village life as a sort of hell in which she could not find any employment. Lakshmi is from a pot-maker family, which, in terms of caste hierarchy, belongs to a scheduled caste. She recounted that it was difficult for her parents to raise four children, which is the reason she had to drop out of school and support the family. In her village, she worked as an embroiderer, although she never earned enough to provide what her family needed. Work in HITEC City has provided Lakshmi with a sense of freedom to choose a future that was simply impossible in her hometown. Nevertheless, when asked if she would like to go back to her village, she answered, “Maybe but if it ever happens it would be after my retirement.”

Changing Gender Norms

I met Sera (age 23) while she was checking a visitor’s briefcase at her workplace in Bangalore’s White Field area, one of the software hubs in India’s Silicon Valley. Unlike many young Indian women who are brought up traditionally, Sera does not shy away from speaking with unfamiliar people. Perhaps her job managing visitors’ movements at the main entrance taught her to be more sociable with strangers, so she did not seem surprised when the research assistant caught her in the middle of her duties. When the purpose of the conversation was relayed to her, she was reluctant to talk and initially declined, but then promised to meet us outside the technology park after work without committing to an interview. The next day, we waited for her outside the gate, hoping that she would have some time for us. To our surprise, Sera approached us and whispered that she wanted to share several things about her family and work. Even before we could find a place to sit and chat, she began pouring out her story. She complained about her

workplace culture and wage rate as well as shared how offended she is by the misogynist jokes of her male employers in front of female guards. She asserted that, as a woman, she does not feel sufficiently respected in society. When asked why she did not initially want to speak, Sera said,

Maybe this is the first time in my life I am complaining about anything. My parents always tell me to be a good woman, never complain. Nevertheless, everything has a limit. I need to have a decent wage and a job free of harassment. The supervisors speak extremely rudely with the female staff. Our contractors are so worker unfriendly — that they do not even pay for our uniform allowance so we have to buy our own uniform.

As a woman whose upbringing in a traditional Tamil society was informed by the values of a caste-based patriarchal society, Sera's demands for respect and better working conditions meant ignoring the centuries-old community-sanctioned definition of a "good woman" — always compliant and submissive to societal norms. Sera admitted that she didn't have the courage to speak to her superior about her grievances. She had only confided her discontent to people with whom she feels she can connect. One reason for this is apprehension about losing her job, which she needs to run her family and provide financial support to her parents as, "This city is expensive and only husband's salary is not enough." Her spouse works as a front-office executive at a telecommunications service provider.

Like Sera, some of the other female interviewees suffer from workplace harassment and discrimination. We asked Jaya (age 26), a housekeeper, "As a young woman, do you feel secure at your workplace?" This is Jaya's second job in the last three years at the largest software park in Pune. Jaya answered, "It's not possible to feel secure, is it? If you are working outside, then you can't feel secure." After a pause, she continued, "There are men here, the way they look at you..." then her voice trailed off as if struggling to find a way to describe her situation. She attempted to explain: "If we try to take any initiative, then [men] tell us that it is not proper to do it, and you should do it in a certain manner." When asked what she would do if she had the choice between staying back home as a housewife

or working outside, she raised her voice to drive home her point: “If my husband would’ve been earning enough then I wouldn’t even have thought about working. But, he doesn’t, so it’s not feasible to stay at home.” The job’s salary motivates Jaya to work. Once at work, women like her find that discrimination and harassment make the outside world an alien, unsafe space where their labour and gender do not garner respect and security.

Hema (age 27), a security guard from Pune, intimated the extent of the discomfort women experience daily in these work environments:

This problem is common everywhere, no matter what company you go to. I cannot begin to tell you how hard it is every day, to work and at the same time to keep yourself safe from these people. And I have to face it every day. Because, if you don’t listen to them, you cannot come to work from the next day on, so we have to face these things, for our children.

Most of the time, the affected women either ignore abusive remarks or, if these comments go beyond their threshold of patience, they share their pent-up anger with a loved one or someone they trust to keep the information private. These women cannot speak about these issues in a public forum for fear of their employer’s reprisal, not to mention the possibility of being identified as “too sensitive” by male colleagues and supervisors. These fears prevent women workers from seeking recourse by making a formal or informal complaint about their treatment in the workplace. In the software companies where these women work, there are sexual harassment policies which call for greater gender equality, but these policies apply to only their employees, not to contract workers. As such, support-service workers cannot take part in the internal complaints committee (ICC). Twenty per cent of women interviewees raised the issue of insecurity and disrespectful behaviour in the workplace. The majority of the remainder either did not share if they faced workplace harassment or said that they had not experienced it at all. However, reports by the National Commission of Women (NCW), National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and Indian Bar Association suggest that there has been a noticeable rise in sexual harassment cases in the workplace: “70% women said they did not report sexual

harassment by superiors because they feared the repercussions, according to a survey conducted by the Indian Bar Association in 2017 of 6,047 respondents” (Chachra, 2017). There is a high rate of non-compliance in the private sector, as is evident in the 2015 study, *Reining in Sexual Harassment at the Workplace*, by Ernst and Young, which states that two in five IT companies were oblivious to the need to set up ICCs (Chachra, 2017). This is not an anomaly between the representativeness of the sample and the situation on the ground. It is plausible that some women did not face harassment or they may not be conscious of what constitutes non-physical harassment. Even if they are aware of harassment definitions and boundaries, they may not be ready to discuss their experiences with an outsider. The objective situation is that any conversation about sexual harassment in the workplace in India is still taboo. If this is so for middle-class working women, it is even more so for poor female labourers.

Unionization

Labour unions could be a useful avenue to address unfair labour practices like violation of wage and benefit contracts. Since the unionization rate in my sample is less than 5 per cent and these unions are mostly concentrated in just two cities — Calcutta and Bangalore — the scope of addressing complaints and discrimination are negligible. The low unionization rate is not limited to support service jobs; rather, this is across all professional groups in the IT industry, as reported by various studies in the last few decades (see Bisht, 2010; Sandhu, 2006).

Hema is one of the few women workers who would like to form a union to address various workplace issues; however, there are no unions in Pune’s IT service delivery centres. According to Hema, the problem of forming a union is the nature of the job profile, which is contractual, casual and informal. Hema said, “We didn’t have any unions because we didn’t work for the company itself. We were contracted employees. It is very difficult to form a union among contract employees, who are easily dispensable.”

The fear of a manager’s punishment, uncertainty about consequences and anxiety around stigmatization by neighbours, family members and colleagues deter these women from talking about their work issues candidly. While talking to these employees we came across several incidents where companies deployed various

types of coercive and consensual mechanisms against unionization efforts. There are also structural issues, such as the contractual and outsourcing nature of support-service jobs, which seldom provides opportunities for the people to form a union. Workers are expendable at any time, so creating an organization with a long-term membership is a formidable challenge. Although many workers are aware that a union would help them to address some of their workplace issues, organizational challenges are quite difficult. Major roadblocks include employers' repressive policies, including termination of employment or threat of physical violence, scattered and dispersed workplaces and bureaucratic political leadership in existing unions.

Most of the time, non-unionized workers have no way to file grievances about poor labour conditions. Compared with many developing nations, Indian labour laws have some well-directed rules and regulations which could benefit these workers, especially in the areas of minimum-wages, contract conditions, benefits and pensions, etc. Nevertheless, implementing such laws is difficult as the inspectors are hand-in-glove with the employers. Sometimes it depends on the manager's relationship with the worker to solve peripheral work-related issues, such as scheduling or sick leave. Workers lack the bargaining power to address more structural issues, like the violation of labour statutes. In situations like these, some workers have had to invent innovative practices.

Among the few exceptions is Radha (age 32), a housekeeper at Google's software development centre in Hyderabad. She is pro-union, although she could not find any opportunity to join one. In Hyderabad's HITEC City, there were a few attempts to rally for signing union cards, but without much success. The workers do not want to be rude to their employers as they are at least "providing food in our mouth," Radha said. One can view this worker-employer relation as a variant of the client-patron relationship, which is not unusual, but rather a carryover from the feudal past. Many workers in Hyderabad have roots in the village economy, where, for a midday meal and a paltry daily wage, they would work for the rich landed gentry they venerate as "mai-baap" (mother-father). Radha ended the interview by saying that, although she understands the need for a union, her employer never crossed the line of decency:

I never thought of being part of a union because my employment is not permanent and housekeeping staff

does not have a union. But they help each other. A few years ago when my husband met with an accident the housekeeping unit supported me economically and emotionally, for which I would always be thankful to them. I can never forget those disastrous moments in my life. It is important to have a union because it's always good to look to someone when you are in need and you can rely on them.

When we asked Radha whether it is possible to fight against employer's injustice and form a collective body, she answered:

It is possible to fight against employer's injustice. The housekeeping staff knows every other worker in the company and if something requires us to form a collective body, we can. But the employers get along with us; they never treated us badly.

After a pause, she added, "Except that everything is measured in money." Radha favours a union not because she thinks that it is one of the workers' inalienable rights to safeguard their interests (or perhaps she does, but this is not clear from the interview), but because unions are collective, social bodies within which fellow workers help each other in difficult times. For her, the care and emotional attachment absent in a society where "everything is measured in money" becomes a rallying point to form a union. Fellowship, as experienced in the traditional system, returns in a different form with different content within the modern urban centre's institutional setup.

Breadwinners vs. Homemakers

Aside from union bashing and the perils of gender-based discrimination, the IT industry boom has created new job opportunities for many poor Indian women whose life accomplishments had previously been measured only by their commitment to household chores. In rural India, individuals are often "part of a large household comprising also their parents and married or unmarried siblings" (Breman, 2016: 172). Young (married or unmarried) women arrive in the cities fresh out of their cocooned joint-family existence only to realize that many of their values and beliefs do not fit with urban

living conditions. They grew up with the familiar notion that the home is a private, female space while the world outside is the man's domain. In short, men will be breadwinners and women will be homemakers.

This arrangement often does not work in the new urban situation as the financial strains of maintaining a family often force women to work as security guards, caretakers or fast-food servers in the technology sector. The double burden of work for these women, which includes taking care of the family as well as earning money to cover family expenses, often challenges their received notion of womanhood — that is, subservience to their financial provider, the husband. This is reflected in their conversations on family life.

During the in-depth interview phase, we asked whether married male workers share in household chores. Almost all male partners stated that they do not participate in matters related to the shared domestic space. Few (less than 5 per cent) said they take care of the children when their wife is busy cooking or washing clothes. The general response of the married women is that sharing the household work would be ideal in a situation where both the husband and the wife are working, but the traditional patriarchal culture does not sanction this practice. Cultural and religious notions understand the husband as guardian of the family, leaving it to a man's discretion whether he would like to participate in household chores. Women, on the other hand, do not have any option since housework is clearly gendered. Latamani (age 46) is originally from Hyderabad and now works in housekeeping. When asked about her husband's role at home, she told us, "I got married to my own brother in-law who always backed me and [he] takes care of me. It would be good if he helps me in cooking or washing clothes. Not everything you get in life."

Women's social role is primarily to be a homemaker and, if men share household work, then this is reflective of his goodness. This is the cultural norm that our respondents inherited from their parents and communities. The idea that the family sphere is a woman's enclave while the public sphere belongs to men is one that the female interviewees learned very early in life. This idea of gendered training has been naturalized to the extent that few women have or are allowed to have a different opinion. There were some murmurs of dissent, but it is limited to expressing hope that someday their husbands will take part in domestic work. But hope may not be

enough in the face of practical life situations. Most of the married women in the sample have children to care for in addition to household chores. After an 8- to 12-hour workday, fatigued and exhausted, they return home to their domestic duties. Several told us that this routine is unsustainable in the long run unless their husbands step up to assist them. The women's longing to be a "good wife" is often challenged by the family's financial contingencies, the obligatory condition for becoming the new proletariat of the IT industry. To be or not to be a submissive, compliant and domestic wife is never a choice; rather the possible course of action is to sublimate their traditional beliefs in accordance with the requirements of modern life and then wait for better days.

For example, Sera demands a fair share for her labour at work, but does not bother much about her unwaged services at home. In fact, she expressed that she does not expect her husband to come home from work and help her with the dishes because "in [her] family [she] did not see this happening; it is not in our culture." Pam (age 29), a security guard from Assam, also asserted, "Sometimes I feel very tired. I hope he understands this. The work pressure is increasing every day and then coming back from the duty and start cooking immediately is not something I like."

Whether it is Sera, Pam or Latamani, this interplay between their ontology, consciousness and social reality produces a qualitatively different subjectivity (i.e., a "knowing subject,"), a personhood that neither totally rejects nor accepts the past identity, but interprets the past based on new social and economic conditions that force them to make necessary adjustments with the ethos of family life to enter the public space. To remain confined within the four walls of their homes is to bury their heads in the sand, risking losing their lives to oblivion. To be part of the new social structure defined by flexible labour, communication technology and mobile capital presents the agonizing experience of feeling torn between past and present.

New Life, New Commodities

The new social dynamic has its charms too. Paid work provides money for sustenance and expenses such as high tuition fees for children studying in private schools, which would otherwise not be possible. The public space also offers workers the freedom to purchase a plethora of commodities, including cosmetics, fancy

clothing and feature-filled mobile phones. Previously, these poor women's basic needs were food, water and shelter; now, they can afford to buy beyond what they need and into what they want. This desire may manifest as the luxury of having a mobile phone, television and an occasional fast-food meal.

For example, some women who had been using homemade sanitary napkins now buy safe and hygienic ones from the pharmacy for themselves and their daughters, even if it stretches their meagre income. As Savitri (age 42) shared, "We used to use cloths back in our time. But now we use sanitary pads. We are aware that cleanliness affects our health." Having income, however little, does afford some possibility for advancement. The decision to leave behind the past is a result of the Indian state's communication initiatives about bettering women's health and advertisements from pharmaceutical companies focusing on how sanitary napkins help to ease hygiene and mobility problems during menstruation, especially for working women. This transition is also a result of conversations in public spaces with female colleagues and friends as well as health workers and doctors at Employees' State Insurance (ESI)³ hospitals. Regular work, even precarious work, enables some financial freedom to exercise individual choice. These choices can be empowering to working women.

The meaning of well-being, as taught by their parents and school teachers, has become a contentious, unsettled issue. There is excitement to emerge from private family life and beyond the axis of primary relationships that was previously mapped out by the intersections and coordinates of family, spouse and the local village community. With such freedom and anticipation, there are also anxieties, dissatisfaction and anguish. Savitri is happy that her alcoholic husband left her, relieving her of the duty to feed him every day, but she is lonely in the city as close relatives cut off their relationship with her. She explained how city life has thus been hard on her:

It's been eight years since my husband abandoned us. Since then, I have taken the responsibility of my family and have been taking care of my children ... I have worked my way through all these years. I have worked for daily wages in farms, in building constructions, carrying bricks and soil, etc. As we grow old, we will have difficulties in doing such jobs as our body wears

and tears and does not support such jobs. During that period, I got to know about jobs in housekeeping from someone and shifted to this.

Here, I introduce two interviewees with unmarried participants. Aparna is single, but in a relationship. Abha, aged 24, who at the time of my first interview was going through a troubled marriage, had filed for separation when we returned for the second in-depth interview and now lived with her daughter. Her parents still resided in their ancestral village. The two women lived 2,000 kilometres apart — one in Calcutta and the other in New Delhi. Both worked as security guards at IT campuses. Aparna worked as an outsourced employee in a software development centre and Abha worked at a Domino's Pizza restaurant in Nehru Place, New Delhi's hardware retail hub. Both are from lower-middle-class families whose fathers were the only breadwinners and whose mothers raised the children. Both had to find jobs after finishing high school. With few marketable skills, they ended up as security guards, working 10 to 12 hours per day, six days per week, earning around CAD\$175 per month with few workplace benefits. Both take pride in their self-sufficient natures, fending for themselves and helping their families.

A few months before the second round of interviews, Abha separated from her abusive husband and now had to look after her daughter and her extended family with insufficient income. Her parents did not support her as she had married the man against their wishes in the first place. Abha does not want to be a stay-at-home housewife like her mother, but her status as a divorced woman forced her to realize that she is the only one responsible for her daughter. This is her only choice as her family denies any responsibility. When Abha was asked what she would like her daughter to be, she replied:

I would like her to study much more than I did. I could not do much in life. I hope she gets a good degree and then a good job. And after that she can marry whenever she wishes to. There will be no hurry to marry her off. Nowadays, nobody marries too early. Many women stay single until they are thirty. I believe I married too soon. I should not have gotten married at such a young age. I really wanted to study further. I still do. I couldn't, only because I didn't have the money to continue my education. I was in the commerce stream in school. I would have

needed private tutoring in the evenings to be able to study in college. My parents said they wouldn't be able to help with the money and that if I wanted to study further I'd have to get a job. That would mean that I would come back from work at around eight. It would be too late to go to tutoring sessions. Had I been a boy, maybe I could have studied more. They can be outside on the streets as long as they like. Even if they return home at 1 a.m. in the morning, nobody will harass them. But a woman has always got to worry about stuff like this. We feel scared after 8–9 p.m. and think it is best to return home quickly.

Faced with various social stigmas related to women who are divorced, Abha is not comfortable raising her daughter with the traditional values that her parents passed on to her. Her intention is for her daughter to do what she herself could not — be free to choose the way to live. Whether it is education, job or marriage, the decision will be her daughter's. As a mother, Abha has little to say about these choices, beyond preparing her for a better future by providing emotional and financial assistance.

Abha is convinced that, if her daughter does not want to suffer like she did, she must go to university and then find a good job. This is one part of Abha: a modern woman demanding respect from society; however, there is another side to her. Later in the interview, we asked about her dreams. Without second thought, Abha answered, “I dream that I should not have to work and (can) stay with my daughter at home. I want to take care of her and spend my time with her. I want to be a good mother.”

For less-educated Indian women, the idea of a “good mother” is a symbolic representation of a woman who takes care of her family and rears her children without aspiring to work. Unfortunately, Abha cannot do this as she is committed to raising her daughter and readying her for a “good job” in the market. This means that she must earn money and invest in her daughter's education. Given her skill set, this is only possible if she works as she does now — in a job that does not require higher education and training. Her narrative suggests that she would like to be a stay-at-home mother, but the reality of her situation does not permit this as economic necessity has forced her to join the workforce. Whereas her mother submitted to the tradition of motherhood, there is one

important difference — her mother’s status as a housewife was already decided by her family, husband and community. There was no option, even if it meant living in squalor. For Abha, the notion of motherhood was a preference, an ideological affiliation; however, it is not enough. Modern institutions and the economic structure have thrust upon her the desire to see her daughter achieve what she could not. Even if she wants to be a “better mother” by staying at home, she cannot as there is a conflict between her modern aspirations and traditional beliefs. Sometimes, this role conflict can be bridged and sometimes it cannot as the tension and restlessness of the present keep the contradiction alive.

When we met Aparna (also a security guard) we realized that she was very aware of her life amid the whirlpool of social changes. She talked about the uncertainty she faces in her job and the changing relationships with her family members. I met her at a tea stall in Calcutta’s software enclave on the eastern fringe of the city. She was taking a break during her usual 12-hour shift to talk to her union representative about some work issues. She was wearing pants, common with female security guards in the Indian corporate sector; however, Indian women prefer to wear the *saree* or the *salwar kameez* (a type of suit, worn especially by Asian women, with loose trousers and a long shirt) when going out for work. A decade ago, there were almost no female guards, but this began to change with the opening of security jobs for women in the service sectors, such as in retail and IT. I asked whether she feels comfortable in the uniform. In traditional non-urban circles, women wearing shirts and pants are considered ultra-modern and westernized. It was not easy for any Indian woman to ignore these markers.

Well, Sir; I don't like this job but I have to do it. I'm searching for a better job. Well, my job isn't bad per se... but I never wanted to work in a job where I have to wear a uniform... [By uniform she meant the shirt and pants she has to wear during her duty hours.] I wanted a nice job...my previous job in the cosmetics industry... I had to dress well... the whole situation was much more likable. Initially I found it difficult to adjust to my current job but now I'm used to it.

Here “dress well” does not mean dressed in expensive and

fashionable clothes. For Aparna, it signifies a sartorial style that would not violate her society's perception of a modest woman. She wants to leave her current profession and find another where she has the option to abide by the dress code approved by her family and society. She has applied for a receptionist position as well as a sales job in a cosmetic company.

Three months later, I returned to Calcutta to conduct an in-depth interview with her. She had left her previous job and joined another security company, which serves a few multinational IT companies. She became neither a receptionist nor a sales person in cosmetics after all. I asked her why she had decided to leave her previous position and Aparna replied:

I left, not because of any specific reason. They came to interview me here. They had called me from the NIS [her company] office and said that I should visit because they have a good job offer. Much better than what I would have earned being a receptionist or a sales girl. After all I don't have English fluency.

The only consideration for her is to “keep herself safe”. It is a “good job offer” that made her continue as a security guard in the technology sector, and it is within commutable distance. However, in her culture, leaving home to work in the outside world with men as colleagues is still considered a “fall” from the accepted notion of women's modesty and dignity. As such, a good job as a security guard is also the beginning of an everyday struggle against a socially imposed meaning of decency. When asked whether her family approved of her current job, Aparna replied, “There's no one in my family to object as such. And those who are there, like my brother and sisters, have no objection to my working as long as I keep myself safe. They have faith in me and know that I won't do anything untoward.”

Twice during the interview Aparna uttered the phrases “won't do anything untoward” or “keeping myself safe”. Like an oath to the sacred, it is her solemn promise to society that she would never violate community norms and values.

By keeping myself safe, I don't mean being introverted or isolated from others. That is not what I mean. At

work, one has to work and laugh with the others, even if sometimes, the person doesn't want to. You have to adjust at your workplace. But by keeping myself safe, I mean it's all right to chat and laugh. If somebody asks to have tea together, on some days, it's all right to agree.

It is all about keeping the family's reputation intact, so that it is not lost and no one in the community can accuse her of being a loose woman.

Nobody should be able to say or think, at home or outside, that this girl is bad. It may be that I... how do I put it? I like interacting — talking, staying in the company of other people. I'm like that. So, even here, honestly speaking, I've been in this profession for four years, and in the job I not only love my fellow staff members, but also the brothers in the housekeeping staff.

Aparna participates in office socials but always maintain a safe distance from the revelry.

In any matter — special occasions, enjoying. I like taking part in these activities a lot. Maybe it's not appropriate to be overindulged in these because there's a saying if you allow something to get in over your head, bad things might happen.

Every day when Aparna returns from work, she has to convince her family, relatives and neighbours — perhaps none more important than herself — that she has kept herself “safe” from the allures of big-city life. And it does not stop there: she also has to convince her employer that she is a disciplined and obedient worker who is always ready to rise to the demands of her workplace: “At work, one has to work and laugh with the others, even if sometimes, the person doesn't want to.” Like a slackwire artist tenuously walking a rope, Aparna tries to balance the traditional values and beliefs she inherited from her family and community with the demands of the urban industrial world to be more flexible in accommodating new ideas and ways of living. As in the lives of other women workers, Aparna's everyday existence is divided between the home and the

outside world. There is a palpable conflict between the two centres of her life, and the tension cannot be resolved by simply discarding one in favour of the other.

The job in the IT sector enables her family to have more than a hand-to-mouth existence and it also sows the seeds of a new subjective feeling which was unknown to her mother or grandmother: the status of financial independence. The money allows her to realize that she can have her own choices and desires without seeking confirmation from her elders. The money can also help her make some crucial decisions, such as whether to marry or live with her boyfriend, as she does not have to depend on her spouse's income. Aparna calls this a "good life", which

her mother never experienced. She does not want to be like her mother — taking care of her children while her husband looked after the family's financial needs — because Aparna does not accept this division of labour within families. When asked how important financial independence is to her, she responded, "I have a habit of treating people. I feel like giving something to someone. Every month after getting my monthly salary, I'd treat people to whatever they wanted to eat. I am like that. Losing this would be a big deal." We asked why Aparna thought financial independence was so necessary for women in the modern world when our mothers' generations never needed it. She replied:

No, it wasn't. Slowly, everything is changing. From all spheres. In case of salary, people nowadays earn much more than my father used to. As the times are changing, everything's changing. I've heard that earlier, our mothers didn't wear anything but saris. Nowadays, we're wearing everything — jeans, tops, churidars [Bengali word for salwar kameez], everything. But in some simple middle-class families, other family members may say that you shouldn't wear anything that looks bad. You can wear jeans, but act accordingly. There are many families like that even today. I'm not saying all are like that. So, in that sense, there's been a drastic change. I feel that in the next two years, things will change even more. I don't know what people after us will do. Our generation is seeing changes in husband-wife relationship. Already young people are saying there's no need to marry. Live in

is better, because everybody wants to live independently now.

When asked what independent living means to her, she said:

Independent meaning, there'll be nobody to scold and interfere in anything, like where we're going. Like, parents ask where we're going that late at night, or not to wear something, or not to eat something — this tendency is gradually decreasing.

But Aparna does not approve of this notion of absolute freedom or independence: “I would say a hundred times yes there should be a limit to freedom. I don't know about other families but it's still there in my family and I'm following that.”

On the issue of financial freedom, the “limit” does not work for Aparna. What happens if there is a “limit” on how Aparna spends her money, placed especially by her future in-laws? She said that it is her money and nobody, not even her in-laws, is permitted to ask questions about the way she chooses to spend what she has earned:

Suppose I work after I get married. I'll keep a part of the income for myself, a part for my family and then comes the issue of giving to the in-laws. Some in-laws will hold a grudge and say that I give money to my parents. But, why should they complain? It is my money and I have every right to share it with my parents if there is a need. Does that mean I can't contribute after I'm married? I can't accept that.

Aparna is interrogating one of the core patriarchal values of the Indian joint-family system: once a woman is married, she must abide by the family norm that married women do not have any independent existence except as a member of her family by marriage. We asked her if men can give it, why can't women?

Yes. Men like my boyfriend will give part of their income to their parents if required, so why can't we, as women, give money? After all, they're also my family just like my husband's family... So, if the mother-in-law thinks that

even after working the girl can't give her income to her family, she is wrong. She shouldn't think that way.

As a working woman, Aparna wants to control the way she spends her hard-earned money. Social customs say that a married woman belongs only to her husband's family and, thus, she has no say over her own labour and income, but she does not subscribe to this belief system. The financial independence gained from waged employment has provided women like Aparna with a degree of autonomy and freedom that is otherwise absent in their family, where women are not allowed to work outside the home. But the subjectivity of individual choice and desire has its limited application only in matters of money and work culture.

In some other areas of life, Aparna accepts what her parents taught her, especially in terms of her relationships with other communities, such as Muslims. The cosmopolitan workplace where people from different castes and religions work together creates a sense of collegiality, but this seldom overcomes the traditional barriers of identity and community. When asked how she views her colleagues from other religions, Aparna said:

The place where I used to work, there were Christians and Muslims. You won't believe it; one Muslim boy at the call centre once brought "semui" [sweet vermicelli] for me. He offered me his food to me with love and affection and would I throw it away just because he's a Muslim? I don't accept that. I eat from everyone's hand.

Nevertheless, when it comes to developing a personal relationship with a Muslim, Aparna would never entertain the idea: "No, because my mother used to speak to me frankly and she told me that it was all right to be friends with Muslims but not to fall in love with a Muslim. Punjabis and others are all right but Muslims, I don't know why." Although Aparna has worked with Muslim colleagues, she is not open to the idea of having a Muslim boyfriend. It is not that she is against modern values based on respect and individual choices but, as she says, "Not everything in our tradition we should reject." This complex blend of tradition and modernity and the resulting seemingly incompatible feelings present in Aparna's story were also observed among the majority of women workers we interviewed.

Conclusion

How do we understand these transitions? In what respect have the economic policies of globalization in the Indian economy resulted in new cultural developments? Is everything just about moving forward or do these women workers look backward, too? Do they try to engage in some kind of adjustment and negotiation between the past and the present? Above all, can the changes they experience be couched as a linear movement from traditional or “feudal” values to a more “progressive” ideology of capitalist modernity?

Like their male counterparts, most women workers (whether they were born in the cities or migrated later in life) decided that working in technology parks is a better option than working in a rural community, where women work as housemaids in rich farmers’ houses, or as landless agricultural workers, or without wages in the home. This could be one of the reasons why, unlike Breman’s interviewees, the majority of women in my study did not want to return to their villages. For most of the women in my study, the attractions of working in technology parks include fixed working schedules with some benefits, such as provident funds and the use of medical facilities in the state-run hospitals supported by government health programs. In addition to economic benefits, the independence, empowerment and pride in earning their own livelihood in a comparatively safe working environment at a technology campus have redefined these women workers’ subjectivity. Besides, for the female workforce, workplace unionization at some parks has provided a semblance of job security, which was missing in their previous jobs.

Based on their past economic situations and semi-skilled status, employment as an outsourced worker in the IT industry is one of the viable options for women workers. The new reality is profoundly different from all their previous job experiences. Their new relationships with the urban space, employers and their more well-off colleagues (i.e., software programmers, engineers and call-centre workers), which are mediated by digital automation, financialization and the workplace discipline, have whisked away familiar ties with their rural surroundings. In this situation, the interviewees like Aparna and Radha negotiate their nurtured values and life codes passed on to them by history, family and community in light of the everyday demands of the “informational, global and

networked” culture of fast-paced urban life. Often resolution leads to contradictory social outlooks. For example, Sera, who fights for the value of her labour but does not think this should apply to household work, or Aparna, who is not ready to marry a Muslim man.

These complex and varied sociological and psychological states reveal themselves in interviews through the narration of their everyday communicative experiences in dealing with their spouses, children, employers, colleagues or even the city bus conductors. It is tempting to interpret the socio-economic transition of these workers as moving into a new stage of capitalist modernity from a state of communitarian life. But this kind of theorization does not do justice to the historical context and empirical evidence about the formation of Indian modernity, namely the birth of commodity production in the colonial period, its intensification in post-independence India and its complex relationship with the country’s long tradition of religious, ethnic and cultural diversity. Following Sudipta Kaviraj (see Kaviraj, 2000), we can argue that the response of traditional structures to disruptions in productive forces unleashed by modernity is neither total acceptance nor rejection of modern values — “more complex trajectories of adaptation rather than confronting or acquiescing to modernity” (Kaviraj, 2000: 156).

The new working class, which migrated to the city from the rural outskirts, is absorbed into the global economic structure which breeds aspirations and promises for a better life especially for the future generation. The women workers experienced changes but the expectation is much more. The research shows that the women workers have variegated responses to social and cultural displacements. Between universality of the global economic order and the heterogeneity of cultural experience, there are disquieting moments to grapple with mundane issues of life, such as bread and employment. These are the moments when these workers face the ambiguities and paradoxes of India’s neoliberal economic reform program, which sought to transform India “from an inward-looking, command-and-control economy to an outward oriented, incentive-based, private sector-led economy” (Ahmed and Varshney, 2012: 71).

Manju (age 29), a housekeeper at one of India’s most venerated IT companies in Pune, reminds us that the salary is not good as the prices of everything are going up. She demands that the government or the company she works for should provide a

sustainable salary. Manju's words are a poignant reminder of the complex nature of globalized modernity in developing countries such as India, which offers limited monetary and social emancipation to the women workers. Yet it puts forward new forms of socio-economic challenges that they have to struggle against to survive in fast-paced global cities, now bereft of community supports upon which low-paid workers in the past relied for their well-being and reproduction.

Endnotes

1. Lawrence Kinlin School of Business, Fanshawe College, London, Ontario. ichakra@uwo.ca
2. Marginal farmers own less than one hectare (ha) of land while small farmers have 1.00 ha–2.00 ha of land: Highlights of Agriculture Census 2010–11, Retrieved 10 February, 2019. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=132799>.
3. ESI is a social security and health insurance scheme for Indian workers. The employee provides 1.75 per cent and the employer 4.75 per cent of the wage in every wage period: “The Employees ‘State Insurance Act, 1948 provides a scheme under which the employer and the employee must contribute a certain percentage of the monthly wage to the Insurance Corporation that runs dispensaries and hospitals in working class localities.” Retrieved 20 March, 2019. <http://www.mondaq.com/india/x/50440/employee+rights+labour+relations/Labour+And+Employment+Laws+Of+India>.

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