Burnout:

An Ethnographic Study of Occupational Stress

among Mid-Career IT Professionals in Hyderabad, India

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by

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to the

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INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY HYDERABAD

July 2019

to

My Family

(My Parents, Vikram & Sindhu)

&

My Guide

(Dr Aalok)

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis represents my own ideas and words and where others ideas or words have been included; I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented, fabricated or falsified any idea/data/fact/source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will result in disciplinary action by the Institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources that have not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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CERTIFICATE

It is certified that the work contained in the thesis entitled "*Burnout: An Ethnographic Study of Occupational Stress among Mid-Career IT Professionals in Hyderabad, India*" submitted by Ramachandra Raju Bhupathiraju (LA17MPHIL11005) in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Philosophy to the Department of Liberal Arts, Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad, is a record of bonafide research work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance. The results embodied in the thesis have not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Ramachandra Raju Bhupathiraju (LA17MPHIL11005) has satisfactorily completed all the course requirements for the M.Phil. Program in Anthropology.

Ramachandra Raju Bhupathiraju was admitted to the candidacy of the M.Phil. degree in June 2019.

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the production of burnout among mid-career IT professionals in the city of Hyderabad, India. My analysis is oriented by two main questions: What is said to produce to burnout among IT workers? Why do IT workers continue to work under conditions that they experience as being extremely stressful? Drawing on in-depth ethnographic interviews with IT workers in Hyderabad, participant observation, and analysis of primary and secondary literature, I argue that burnout among IT workers is produced at the intersection of significant political-economic and cultural shifts. These include, for example, the altered nature of work in the new economy, the blurring between personal and professional space/time, and the cultural privileging of IT-based employment that effectively locks individuals into IT work with seemingly no other options.

Employment in the Information Technology (IT) industry has come to symbolize the promise of securing middle-class status and associated livelihoods in post-liberalization India. As a significant body of scholarship demonstrates, this promise has resulted in deep cultural, educational, institutional, and political-economic reorientations in order to facilitate the growth of the IT industry in India. These reorientations, however, have also produced an experience of high stress -- often referred to as burnout in popular discourse -- among some IT professionals. While the making of the new Indian middle class in relation to IT-based work has been investigated at length in scholarly literature, the associated production of occupational stress, i.e. burnout, has received scant attention. My research aims to address this gap. Overall, it contributes to furthering empirical and theoretical understandings of IT-based work in India under contemporary conditions of globalisation.

Chapter 1- Introduction

My professional trajectory until 2012 was typical of the times in India. The Information Technology (IT) industry that has come to symbolize India's success in the global economy was in its formative years when I was pursuing college-level education (I graduated with a Bachelor's in Business Studies in 1999), and had quickly become a much-sought after career choice for many. The city of Hyderabad (where the present research is based) was rapidly becoming a big centre for IT work, and this was transforming not just the city, but the countryside in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh thoroughly as well. IT training centres were becoming ubiquitous: with the promise of well-paying IT jobs and associated lifestyles, as also international travel opportunities, and for many, permanent relocation to Western centres, the U.S. in particular, but subsequently also to other countries like Australia as well as those in western Europe (Biao 2006). Also typical of the times, I moved to the United States right after my Bachelor's education, to pursue a Master's in Business Administration. Since 2001, I worked in various professional and managerial roles in the IT industry, first in the United States, and since 2006, back in India.

By any measure, I was an extremely successful IT professional. I ascended the corporate hierarchy rapidly; my Customer Satisfaction (C-SAT) scores were excellent; I was also presented with the "Managing Director's Appreciation Award" in 2006 for my work at a multinational firm in Bangalore (now Bengaluru) where I was employed at the time.

But professional success had come at a high cost to my physical and mental health. In my first job in the United States, I was based in the city of Detroit, but working with a team of workers based in Hyderabad. Working together entailed ensuring some overlap in our actual working times: which started with about two hours in the morning for me every day, but as deadlines got closer toward the end of the project, it had escalated to at least four hours and sometimes as much as 10-14 hours per day without any days off for weeks at end. By the fourth year of my professional life, this intensity of work, which is very typical of IT work, had started taking a toll on my health: my eyes were

constantly dehydrated, I was always tired and groggy, losing weight, and eventually diagnosed with a condition, *Alopecia Areata*, wherein my immune cells had started attacking my hair follicles on account of excessive stress. In my subsequent work in Bangalore, again, I experienced the effects of extreme work-related stress: in successfully undertaking a seemingly impossible task of streamlining eight different kinds of permissions for 150 different projects simultaneously, I had also reached a point where I had started waking up in the middle of the night blabbering numbers and dreaming about serving my clients. A few months into this job, I was diagnosed with hypertension. As a result, by 2012, I decided to quit my professional trajectory thus far entirely, and had found my way to social research instead.

Over time, I have come to be disillusioned with the working style that seems to characterize the IT industry: tight deadlines, long hours, lack of emphasis on and opportunities for personal fulfilment, and for me, a severe toll on personal health. As the stories that I have collected over the course of this research demonstrate, I am hardly alone in my experience of IT work. But unlike me, many of my interlocutors continue working in the industry for a variety of reasons in spite of experiencing their work as unfulfilling and stressful. As will be evident throughout the dissertation, my interlocutors voice a variety of frustrations with their work, both in its every day manifestations (unpredictability, long working hours) as well as more abstract considerations about the value of work and a desire for a better balance between their work and personal lives. And yet, they do not think that they have the agency to make any changes toward addressing these frustrations. Understanding this curious contradiction, here in many IT workers continue to work in jobs in which they are seemingly unhappy, is the central aim of this research.

1.1 Burnout

"Burnout" is one way in which IT workers describe the stress of their work. As a medical condition, burnout is defined in extremely vague terms as "a state of vital exhaustion" (World Health Organisation 2016)

As such, it is not a pathological condition that can be diagnosed or understood from a normalised set of health factors. The definition doesn't provide any clues about the causes or the remedies to this condition either. IT workers, too, use the term equally vaguely, broadly clubbing together their experiences of work-related stress under this term. My goal, therefore, isn't to arrive at a definition of burnout either—indeed, as will be evident in my analysis, such an endeavour would be doomed from the outset. Instead, I use self-reported accounts of burnout by my interlocutors as a point of entry into my research: I want to understand what produces high levels of work-related stress among IT workers. Two primary questions orient my analysis: What is said to produce to burnout among IT workers? Why do IT workers continue to work under conditions that they experience as being extremely stressful?

My analysis locates burnout at the intersection of many distinct but interrelated shifts. One set of shifts are in the very nature of (IT) work globally. As I outline in my literature review, work under neoliberal capitalism has become increasingly more flexible (Martin 1995) (Harvey 1992) (Lyotard 1984): a shift away from stable long-term employment conditions to casualised, contractual work conditions with neither security nor safety nets that nonetheless valorise overwork (O'Donnell 2014) (Ho 2009). For many, work is both precarious (Calvão 2016) and meaningless (Graeber 2018). Added to that is the uncertainty that characterises everyday work: emanating from, for example, the seemingly arbitrary allocation of work, unrealistic deadlines, unpredictability of schedules owing to both bad management as well as the transnational nature of IT work that spans across multiple time zones, and rapidly changing technologies that undergird IT work. Some of these observations are true of work in the globalized service sector economy, while others are more specific to the IT industry, particularly in India.

A second set of shifts are cultural. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, working in the IT sector has become a status marker in contemporary Indian society. The symbolic capital accumulated through commodity consumption, such as the wearing of branded goods and living in suburban gated communities, has come to be a defining aspect of the "new" Indian middle class (Khandekar and Reddy 2015) (Fernandes 2006) (Jodhka and Prakash 2016) (Lukose 2009) (Mazzarella 2003) . In this imagination, the ability to consume is often attributed to the high levels of financial remuneration associated with working in the IT industry. The underlying shift from labour to consumption as defining middle class identification plays out starkly in my analysis: the promise of IT work and associated lifestyles, for example, are often cited by my interlocutors as why their families pressurized them into pursuing education in the field of engineering in spite of their stated lack of interest in doing so. Similarly, IT workers feel compelled to continue working in the industry even when they are unsatisfied: in part, this is attributed to the "deskilling" nature of IT work, such that it leaves no room to diversify beyond working in the IT industry. Equally, however, this is also because my interlocutors are wary of not being able to afford the lifestyles that they have grown accustomed to if they were to quite the industry. Such anxiety is further amplified among interlocutors for whom IT work has represented the way to transcend the particular socio-economic locations from which they come.

I also examine the role—or lack thereof—of legal and policy interventions in the seemingly *laissez faire* working of the IT industry itself. A key finding of my research is also about the seeming non-implementation of applicable labour laws in the context of the IT industry in Hyderabad. Moreover, one surprising finding of my research is the lack of awareness of applicable labour laws, both among IT workers as well as personnel from Human Resources departments in some IT companies. Also noteworthy in this context is the disinclination among my interlocutors to think about themselves in terms of labourers, which indexes their anxieties of belonging to the new middle class. Consistent

with the literature, this also exemplifies the individualization of work and responsibility under neoliberal capitalism (Biao 2006) (Harvey 2006).

1.2 The Fieldwork

I conducted fieldwork for this research in the city of Hyderabad. Since the 1990s, Hyderabad has been one of the major IT hubs in India. Moreover, I am a native Telugu speaker and have lived in Hyderabad for the past five years now. Connections that I have built over this time have greatly facilitated access to IT workers that constitute my core group of interlocutors. Equally, the growth of the IT industry in and around Hyderabad have already received significant scholarly attention. This literature, however, was done during the early phases of the development of the IT industry in Hyderabad (Saavala 2010) (Biao 2006). Nearly a decade after these studies were published, my fieldwork enables us to understand how specific aspects of the industry have developed over time.

My fieldwork was carried out mainly in summer 2018, but I also did some follow up research in the ensuing months. It comprised of participant observation, in-depth ethnographic interviews, as well as some legal and policy analysis. Two moments of fieldwork are particularly salient: in May 2019, I have documented road shows organised by a labour forum, Forum for IT workers (FORIT), that were campaigning for better work conditions for IT workers. Second, I was invited to spend a couple of days interacting with employees in a medium-sized IT company that was voted as one of the "top 50 great places to work" during the period of my fieldwork.
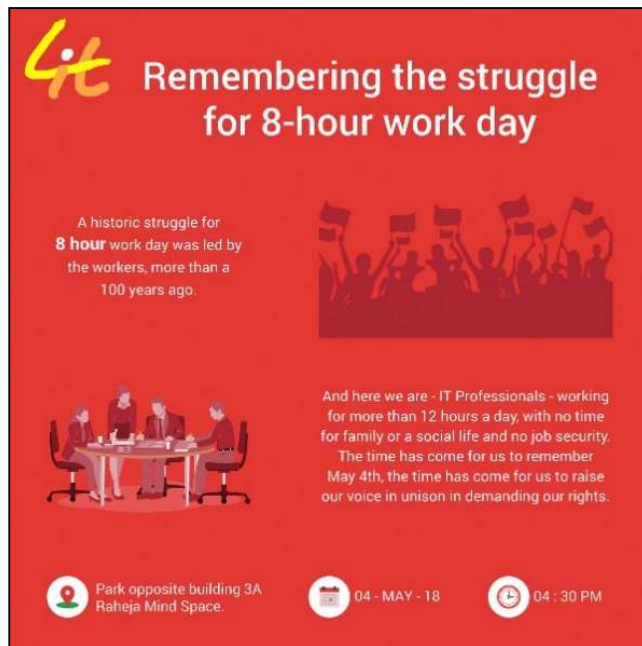
Figures:

Figure 1: FORIT's Facebook Event Graphic, inviting people for a roadshow
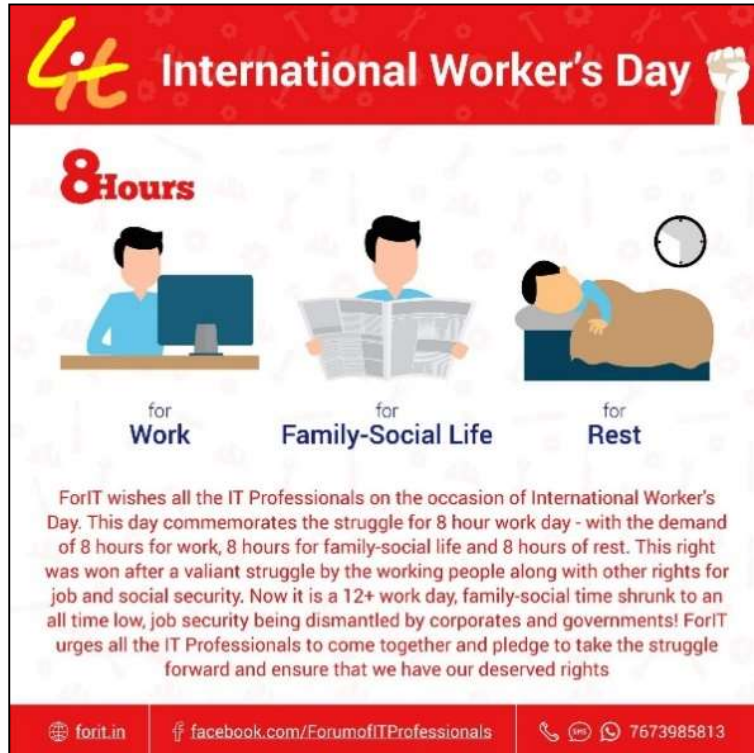
Figure 2: FORIT's Facebbok Post Graphic Professing Work-Life Balance

Figure 3: FORIT's Roadshow at DLF- IT Park in Gachibowli, Hyderabad

Figure 4: A picture of FORIT's State Convention in progress

Ethnographic interviews constitute the bulk of my data. A particular methodological choice has been to focus on mid-career IT workers: unlike new recruits full of enthusiasm, mid-career professionals (with approximately 7-10 of work experience) have witnessed some of the transitions of the industry overall and are likely to have a readily considered language to articulate why their work produces stress. This is also the generation that has experienced the effects of the changes that Biao (Biao 2006) documents in his work, and are hence likely to make connections between the world of work as well as broader cultural shifts that I am interested in tracing. As the research evolved, I have also sought out differently situated perspectives about IT work: including those of people working in Human Resources departments as well as those occupying managerial roles. I have also interviewed two labour lawyers over the course of my fieldwork. Overall, I have conducted 34 interviews in all. Lastly, I make some use of other data sources as well. For example, in Table-1, I provide a summary analysis of the various labour laws that should apply to IT companies in the state of Telangana.

The scope of my research is very preliminary. My results cannot be generalized too broadly: indeed, it is not my claim that all IT workers experience extreme stress because of their work. I do claim, however, that this phenomenon is pervasive enough to merit further scrutiny, both academically as well as through internal studies within particular corporate settings in order to promote greater employee well-being. My analysis is a first step in that direction, aiming to suggest possible directions for deeper investigation.

1.3 Synopsis

This thesis is organised into four chapters. The introductory chapter has provided a broad introduction to the research. In this chapter, I have outlined the context of the research, my primary research questions, and the scope of my fieldwork. I have also preliminarily introduced insights from the scholarly literature that help interpret my ethnographic data.

In chapter 2, *IT as Labour and Culture*, I provide a more detailed overview of the scholarly literature. In particular, I highlight the changing forms of work under neoliberal globalization, the making of the new Indian middle class through the logics of consumption, and the development of the Indian IT industry at the nexus of neoliberal globalization and cultural shifts privileging privatised consumption in the making of the new middle class.

In chapter 3, *Education and Ambition in IT Work*, I present the empirical material that I have collected over the course of my research. I highlight the remaking of engineering education in India alongside the evolution of the IT industry. I also draw out everyday experiences of the IT workplace characterised by high degrees of uncertainty and unpredictability. The chapter also draws out the predicament of middle-classness among IT workers: on the one hand, the new middle class is experienced as an aspirational space by my interlocutors; these aspirations, however, also provoke anxieties about the potential loss of status and lifestyles that working in the IT industry is said to make possible. Cumulatively, I argue that these dynamics produce the effect of locking IT workers in place, such that seeking alternative trajectories seems impossible even if the work itself is experienced as being extremely stressful.

In chapter 4, I summarize my findings and reflect on some of the questions that my analysis has opened up.

Chapter 2. IT as Labour and Culture

This chapter outlines the scholarly literature that helps contextualise my research. In the next section, I outline broad shifts in the organisation of the global political-economy, each characterised by its own distinctive set of relationships between modes of production, work, and culture. Following that, I outline the scholarly literature in two broad sections: the first of these helps understand the changes in work and working conditions, as they relate to IT workers. The second helps the ways in which perceptions of IT work shape and are shaped by their cultural contexts in India. Overall, the literature review helps me situate my research interests in understanding the shifting configurations of work and its cultural, social, and political-economic implications, from the point of view of mid-career IT professionals.

2.1 Historicizing the Present: The 4 Industrial Revolutions

The notion of the 4th industrial revolution is commonly evidenced in contemporary popular discourse. Implicit in invoking this term is the idea of large-scale automation and penetration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in all domains of human activity, fundamentally altering social, financial, and political structures. The idea emerges as an evolutionary stage of human civilization: starting from the 1st Industrial Revolution through the present.

The advent of the steam engine in the mid-1700's ushered in industrialisation. The power that ran the world until then 'man' and 'beast' started being replaced by 'coal' and steam'. We today call this the first industrial revolution *(1IR)*, and it mostly happened in Europe. Markets for the products were the colonies of the then imperial European powers. About a hundred and fifty years after this, in the 1900's came the second industrial revolution *(2IR);* where machines were powered by oil from fossil fuels. This fuel was much more energy dense. Thus strengthening the power of machines and industry to produce more than ever.

The third distinct iteration of industrialisation happened again in the 1970's with the invention of the silicon chip/semi-conductors ushering in the third industrial revolution *(3IR)*. Robots that could

perform replicating tedious tasks were now at the heart of the industry. Higher efficiency automation of physical production started in this phase. Production capabilities grew exponentially with the new computing power (Silicon Chip Technology) that was available to the industry. Unambiguous computation of most kinds went from being under the control of humans to computers. Surpluses from this resulted in a flood of a new wave of technological advancement and production, resulting in an explosion of global trade. With technology making production as efficient as it got then, developed markets greatly prospered. New markets were required to expand businesses in optimising the production costs reaped from these new efficiencies. By this time, the socio-political situation of the world considerably changed. There were hardly any colonies left which would serve as direct markets of the former western imperial powers. The new formula to expand markets came in the form of 'globalisation'.

Key to globalisation during this period were also advances in information and communication technologies. With industrial production technologies optimised, the next frontier for business was to access global intellectual resources; which was aided by ICT's eased access to the remotest corners of the globe. Digital networks that could span across cultural and political boundaries came to be the defining infrastructure for this new industrial configuration, thereby collapsing traditional notions of time and space. This new era in the global political-economy has been variously called as the information age, the network society, and the knowledge economy.

In recent years, we are once again witnessing discourses of an impending transition that is being referred to as the 4th industrial revolution (4IR). The 4IR is said to be ushered in because of rapid advances in computing technologies that will enable large-scale automation through the use of technologies of artificial intelligence and machine learning. Discussions about the future of work, and indeed human societies is underway even as I write this thesis.

And indeed, these transitions between various iterations of industrialization have been accompanied with profound social, political, and economic upheavals. Each period, for instance, has witnessed

profound anxieties over loss of employment, as mechanisation of various kinds came to substitute human labour. Greater urbanisation and associated challenges of infrastructure provisions, environmental degradation, and maintaining social cohesion, for instance, have also been prominently visible in these moments of heightened social change. Writing in the context of transitions in French society in the early part of the twentieth century, for instance, prominent social theorist, Durkheim (Durkhiem 2005) writes about "Anomie"—the alienation of individuals from society because of the breakdown of social order caused by rapid industrialization. Globalisation theorists have similarly written about identity crises wrought by the re-articulation of social and political structures in light of greater interconnection and interdependence among various peoples and places such that place-based identities begin to lose some of their salience. Similarly, in this study, I am interested in understanding such changes that can be correlated to the transformations that have been set into motion because of the deep penetration of digital technologies in all domains of human life.

2.2 Globalisation, Neo-Liberalism, and Precarity

> "We are the first generation to live in this society, whose contours we can as yet only dimly see. It is shaking up our existing ways of life, no matter where we happen to be. This is not – at least at the moment – a global order driven by collective human will. Instead, it is emerging in an anarchic, haphazard, fashion, carried along by a mixture of influences. Many of us feel in the grip of forces over which we have no power."
>
> Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World : How Globalisation is Reshaping our Lives*
>
> (Giddens 2002, 19)

Starting in the 1980s, academic and popular literature alike started to debate an as yet nascent "globalisation" and the changes that it entailed. At the core of the idea of "globalisation" was the recognition that new technologies of transport and communication were bringing about profound shifts in the organisation of human societies such that peoples and places across the globe could no longer be understood as isolated entities. Established political structures, of which the nation-state was the most prominent example, were also being put under pressure by cultural, social, political, and economic processes that were no longer neatly contained within the boundaries of the nation-state.

And this was simultaneously understood as having both emancipatory and well as oppressive outcomes. On the one hand, greater circulation of people, ideas, and commodities made it reflexively possible to imagine progressive and equitable social change. The expansion of the capitalist world-system promised greatly expanded economic opportunities. Social mobilisations, such as various women's movements, proactively cultivated transnational alliances acted as ways to put pressure on repressive political regimes at home. And exchange of people and knowledge held forth the refreshing possibility of cultural and intellectual vitalism at a global scale. In an early and influential reading of globalisation, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, for instance, reads globalisation dynamics resulting from tension between "homogenization" and "heterogenisation" (Appadurai 1990). Homogenization as evidenced in the globalisation of certain (predominantly American) institutions, media, and ways of life; some have referred to this phenomenon as the "McDonaldization" of the world (Ritzer 2018). On

the other hand, the sheer number of divergent cultural forms in circulation multiplied to make possible still newer ways of being, doing, and belonging, resulting in greater heterogeneity than ever (Appadurai 1996).

At the same time, however, critics were also quick to point the uneven distribution of risks and benefits under globalisation processes, leading them to posit globalisation as a form of neo-colonialism. Critics here point to the particular institutions through which globalisation has been enacted: the post-World War Bretton Woods agreements giving birth to institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, with developing nations often at the receiving end of policies enacted in the name of "Development." In such an understanding, globalisation continues historically salient uneven political and economic relationships, and hence continues colonial relations between the West and the Rest, albeit in new forms (Escobar 2011).

A concomitant change in the 1980s is the ascendancy of neoliberal logics in restructuring political-economies at a global scale. Neoliberalism as a doctrine follows the minimising of the intervention of the state and law into realms of economics and social affairs of the state under the belief that sustained economic growth as the means to achieve human progress. A few of neoliberalism's defining characteristics are 1) its confidence in free markets as the most-efficient allocation of resources, 2) an emphasis on minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs, and 3) its commitment to the freedom of trade and capital (Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism 2006). A key mechanism of implementing neoliberal policies has been to cut down tariffs to facilitate trade and the flow of capital across national boundaries. The principle of "Free trade" dictates that businesses assemble the *best of what is out there at the most competitive price* in the making of a business offering. There exist institutional frameworks like the World Bank, World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which facilitate this trade in goods and services. The conundrum of trade then becomes the trade in the services of human capital (people) that then run this trade. Once global businesses are set up, they are to be managed by the same principle of *the best of what is out there at the most competitive price*, regardless of the human

costs. Human worth itself is recast in terms of expertise in the context of a knowledge economy, which in turn facilitates the trade in the services of human workers across the physical borders of the nation-states (Ong 2005).

Starting with Ronald Regan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, we can witness a steady rolling back of the welfare-state under neoliberal doctrines. Weakening of labour unions and rolling back of labour rights has been an important casualty under neoliberal doctrines. Such scaling back, has important consequences for Indian IT workers to experience the world of work today.

As a result of neo-liberal doctrines, most contemporary labour is worked in a casual fashion where there are no legal or social protections. These casual and intermittent casual forms of labour live at the juncture of unstable contract labour and a loss of state provisioning.

As states have withdrawn welfare from populations through austerity measures and labour has become unstable as it has been reorganized from the Fordist assembly line to networked forms, this chasm in protections has led to the informalisation of the labour economy. Informal economy rests on the notion that work is self-employment where the individual worker is to fend for themselves for all and any protections which we have taken to be as a part of employment before the advent of neo-liberalism. This informal economy now seems to be a permanent feature of capitalist development, as production is reorganised through flexible labour regimes.

This casual labour could be called the "lumpenproletariat […] who are easily seduced by thrill and gifts" (Han 2018, 333). The lumpenproletariat turns to credit "maintain the image" of an aspirational middle class, but it also threatens the ability of the households to reach the end of the month. Culturally, the distinction here comes between *naukri* (permanent and regular job that carries a monthly salary and is protected by legal guarantees against arbitrary termination) and *kam* (or untenured casual employment). The social effect of this is the widespread experience of 'precarity', signalling the loss of stable, regular jobs, which had allowed people to predictably project follow a

trajectory of upward social mobility. As I demonstrate in my empirical analysis, the turning to credit also has the effect of locking IT professionals into their jobs in spite of their dissatisfaction, so as to be able to repay the debts incurred in the pursuit "thrill and gifts" and to "maintain the image" of an aspirational middle class into which the new economy has seduced them.

2.2.1 Work in the New Economy

The changes outlined above, Castells (2000) argues are indexical of the passage from the industrial age into the information age. In Castells' highly influential thesis, in the information age, "[a] number of major social, technological, economic and cultural transformations [come] together to give rise to a new form of society," which he has called the "Network Society" (Castells 2000, XVII). He further defines "the network society as […] a society where the key social structures and activities are organised around electronically processed information networks" (Castells 1996). So it is not just about networks or social networks, because social networks have been very old forms of social organization, it's about "social networks which process and manage information and are using micro-electronic based technologies" (Castells 1996).

A key dimension of scholarly attention on these changes has been the changing contours of labour and work. As I have already outlined above, work arrangements have generally shifted away from stable life-long employments to short-term, contract-based employment, enabling corporations to be flexible in response to the exigencies of capital (Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism 2006) creating an experience of "precarity" overall. An associated effect of such casualisation and weakened labour protections is what Karen Ho calls "overwork is normative" (Ho 2009, 99), setting off a race-to-the-bottom because individual workers with little employment security are effectively made to compete with each other. Working conditions themselves are transformed, whereby unplanned and tight deadlines, working in ways to manage time differences spanning various locales globally without any recourse to legal protection also become routine (O'Donnell 2014). The resulting "high-stress-high-reward" culture that Ho describes in the context of Wall Street, has itself effectively globalised across

a wide-range of service-sector industries globally, as is evident, for example, in my interlocutors' descriptions of work in the Indian IT industry as well.

When production is outsourced to the developing countries that are either/or both 'natural resource-rich' and 'cheaper in human resources'; the control over these comes from the digital technological networks which monitor them, the agency of the end workers comes into question. When business services are outsourced over these ICT's and control of these resources lies in networks, affective dimensions of this nature of work are to be explored. This movement of work across boundaries of space, time and nations 'characterises the industry and its workers as they communicate across spatial, linguistic, and cultural distance, while simultaneously being emplaced by 'regimes of racialised labour' (Mankekar and Gupta 2017).

Evolution of networks from their infancy as voice-connection-technologies to today's real-time resource monitoring and forecasting with algorithmic controls disembodies human agency (Aneesh 2009). Investigating "algocracy," a new mode of labour integration that allows workers across national boundaries work seamlessly with each other, Aneesh (2009) demonstrates that the lack of direct bureaucratic control across continents is supplemented by algorithms making use of the ICT's and high-speed connectivity technologies brings an understanding of the structures of IT to work. This understanding then goes to explain the question of how this rapidly growing labour practice is organized and how this labour integration through programming code is distinguished from two other systems of organisation—bureaucracy (legal-rational), and the market (price).

2.3 IT, Consumerism, and The New Indian Middle Class

If one set of shifts have in the global political-economy, another set of shifts have been in the self-fashioning of the Indian middle class. Fernandes (Fernandes 2006) traces the origins of a "new" Indian middle class to the colonial period, characterised by a politics of distinction: distinct from both the vernacular and indigenous elite as well as the colonial administrators. It was this class that

eventually championed the anti-colonial nationalist movement, and it was in this class that Nehru looked invested in the early years of independence as the architects of a new India. The socialist imaginary of this period, however, quickly soured in the decades to come—owing both to the increasing fragmentation of Indian politics as well as rising unemployment, despite high levels of education, among the new middle class. Growing disenchantment with the national political culture, in turn, has resulted in the large-scale espousal of privatisation policies by the new middle class (Fernandes 2006) (Khandekar and Reddy 2015). Increasingly, the new middle class has invested in corporate brands and associated lifestyles as the antithesis to a "wholly corrupt Indian state" in order to realise their aspirations (Vedwan 2008) (Mazzarella 2003). Alongside, the very terms of citizenship in India, as (Deshpande 1993, 5-35) argues, have shifted from those of being the "patriot producer" to being the "citizen consumer."

Consumerism, then, has come to be a mainstay in Indian public culture. More than work itself, it is the symbolic capital afforded by consumerist practices—by the sporting of branded goods and living in gated communities, for example—has become an important status marker, thereby making 'pleasure', not 'leisure', the hallmark of modern consumerism (Appadurai 1996). Moreover, as Ngai (2003) notes, this disposition towards consumption is perpetuated through a process of "subsumption," (Ngai 2003, 469) whereby workers themselves become "desiring machines" who produce surplus value in order to be able to consume. The Indian middle class, thus, find themselves straddled between "belonging and acceptance […] wedged between often unrealistic expectations, the realities of the daily grind and multiple pressures from a huge range of competitors for a coveted status" (Saavala 2010).

IT work has come to exemplify the desires of the new middle class. As an industry that matured at the very nexus of neoliberal reforms in India and from a large-scale turning away of the middle class from government jobs to private employment, IT came to be the dominant pathway into middle-class lifestyles for many. Recent scholarship documents especially the enormous cultural, institutional, and political-economic reworking in order to make IT as the career of choice among the Indian middle

class (Sharma 2015) (Upadhya 2016) (Biao 2006), for example, Biao documents the enormous changes that took place in the countryside in Andhra Pradesh in the form of the near-ubiquitous establishment of IT training centers and changes in the dowry system in the pursuit of transnational IT careers starting in the 1990s. In a similar vein, Fuller and Narasimhan (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014) demonstrate the interplay of caste, class, and structures of the Indian society among IT professionals, and in particular, the use of education as a tool for upward mobility. Others, such as (Khandekar 2016) draw out cultural shifts as Indian families themselves become more trans-nationalised.

Others still, tease out some of the implications of IT work in India. Prominent here, in particular, has been a focus on the call centre industry. Mathangi Krishnamurthy's *1-800-worlds*, for example, focuses on the cultural emulation of the adopted lifestyles of both social and work cultures of both the locations where work is transnationally conducted though high-speed telecommunication technologies and to the location where it is catering to. This mimicry of adaptation and hybridisation of lifestyles straddling the village and foreign clients creates distinctive social behavioural patterns and structures (Krishnamurthy 2018). Balancing good paychecks with the of ills of doing just grunt and not innovative work, and working "graveyard shifts" often result in severe health problems (Nadeem 2011, 74) as well as social estrangement, as Nadeem demonstrates in his ethnographic treatment of the journeys of these IT workers cycles of hope and disappointment and the stories and structures of the lives of BPO workers of India (Nadeem 2011).

Overall, this stream of scholarship documents how IT work has to be a privileged pathway into middle class status and associated lifestyles in India. It also demonstrates that some 20 years after it started its ascendancy to positions of dominance, it has been associated with a range of social and cultural affects and effects. It certainly has enabled well-paying careers for a certain class of individuals, but it has also generated significant health and cultural implications which are often less addressed. My thesis seeks to address this gap: burnout, as I describe empirically in the next chapter, is one manifestation of these cultural and political-economic shifts as experienced by mid-career IT professionals in India.

Chapter 3. Education and Ambition in IT work

In Chapter 2, I reviewed scholarship focused broadly on globalisation, labour, and the new Indian middle class in the context of the Information Technology industry. I highlighted the flexibilisation of labour under neoliberal globalisation that effectively produces precarity as an everyday lived experience. I also highlighted how consumption, enabled in part by working in the IT industry, has become the predominant site of identity formation for the new Indian middle class. This scholarship provides the context against which I present my ethnographic analysis in this chapter.

In the following sections, I describe the configuration of the IT workforce. I highlight here that pursuing an engineering degree has become a default choice for a vast majority of students, regardless of subsequent career aspirations—sustained largely by the promise of professional employment in the IT industry. I then draw out the everyday experiences of work and associated anxieties that IT workers voice. Here, I pay attention particularly to the changing and often unpredictable nature of IT work and the resulting stress that is said to ensue. I also draw out the perceived threat of loss (of work and of the cultural markers of success that IT work makes available) that IT workers voice as a key reason for them to continue working in their particular jobs even when some of them experience these as being stressful and unfulfilling. In the penultimate section, I present interview data gathered via my interactions with labour lawyers, to outline the legal and regulatory framework that governs the IT industry and ways in which it has been effectively undermined in practice.

Interview data constitutes the bulk of my material in this chapter. However, I also draw on observations that I have made during this period: some of these related directly to my fieldwork; others, such as the vignette about a visit to RGUKT-Basar (IIIT Basar) are incidental but included here because they exemplify some of the dynamics that I would like to underscore through my ethnography.

My analysis confirms insights from the literature that has documented IT work and workers in India. I make two further observations to this literature: one, there still has not been sustained attention to the restructuring/ redefinition of engineering education in India in light of a now-mature IT industry and the implications this has for how IT workers experience work itself. My findings underscore that many IT workers view their jobs in purely instrumental terms (i.e. as a means to achieve high levels of financial remuneration), which at least some of my interviewees attribute to the seeming disconnect between education and work. This, then, leads to my other observation: while the literature seems to emphasize the changing nature of work and employment conditions as the primary drivers of employment-related stress, my research suggests that stress is also produced because work itself has been emptied out of meaning for IT workers and has been instead recast in purely instrumental terms. Consumption, not labour, is the primary source of identity formation among IT workers: I want to suggest therefore that the always-in-flux nature of IT work is experienced as being even more stressful because workers do not identify with the work itself.

3.1 Reluctant Engineers

I start this section with a brief vignette about interactions I had with students at a prominent regional technical school in the state of Telangana to highlight, as has already been documented in a growing body of scholarly literature on contemporary India (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014) (Khandekar 2013),that pursuing an undergraduate education in engineering has become a default choice for a vast majority of students, many of them sustained by the promise of subsequent employment in the IT sector. As the literature also demonstrates, this career trajectory from engineering into IT was championed and normalised through hiring practices from within the IT industry (Biao 2006) (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). In this section, I explicate how this has been enacted in the lives of my interlocutors. Throughout, I am interested in understanding how the normalisation of the engineering education-to-IT career trajectory has produced particular ideas of work, ambition, success, and personal fulfilment among IT workers.

In January 2019, I visited the Rajiv Gandhi University of Knowledge Technologies (RGUKT) in Basar, Telangana for a workshop. Basar is located in the hinterlands of Telangana, at about 20 Km from the town of Nizamabad, in the predominantly rural Nirmal district. Set up in 2008, RGUKT is the foremost government school for intermediate (11th and 12th grade) with sciences as a major. It also offers an integrated six-year (2 Years Intermediate + 4 Years B.Tech) programme. Admission into RGUKT is exceptionally competitive, applicants frequently requiring grade point averages upwards of 9.7 (on a ten-point scale [or] 97.5% or above). In the Telangana and Andhra Pradesh regions, RGUKT is colloquially referred to as IIIT, alluding to its conception as a centre for STEM education and the final name approved by the Indian affiliation authority - All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). The Idea of a premier institute for Information Technology was mulled by the undivided state of Andhra Pradesh in 2008 which is when this institute was called IIIT. Later in the year 2010 the Government of India came up with a national framework of premier IT institutes at a national level, which is when the IIIT Basar and the subsequent additional two institutes that came up in the united Andhra Pradesh were all (re)named under the RGUKT framework.

During my conversations with teachers at Basar IIIT, a vast majority of students here come from rural backgrounds, about 85% of students are from Telangana and the rest of the 15% of students are from across the country. This institute, based on its intake criteria, undoubtedly, has the most academically talented group of 10th class graduates in the Telugu speaking states (especially from the state of Telangana).

High school science studies in the Telangana region are primarily divided into three groups. MPC, BiPC and M-BiPC, which respectively mean Maths-Physics-Chemistry, Biology-Physics-Chemistry and Maths-Biology-Physics-Chemistry. Until a few years ago, the Basar IIIT had options for all the above three groups. But presently, it only has options for MPC. Unlike private schools that are for-profit (though technically, all schools in India are not-for-profits), and only run courses that create a profit, government schools are run to cater to all disciplines. Earlier, the university also had a department for performing arts which does not exist now. The point I want to make here is that even without a profit

motive, state universities too seem to be giving up any courses that aren't related to engineering (biological sciences subjects, for example, that do not fall under engineering were discontinued). This point also corroborates the field notes where some interlocutors have said things like "Engineering is the natural choice" of a profession.

In conversation with students, when I casually enquired about what their motivations are to have applied here or if there were college dropouts, the answers the students had concurred with what the IT industry leaders have said in my interviews in Hyderabad. The students, now in their 2nd and third year of engineering said that "they were way too young to be able to decide what they wanted to in life when they passed their tenth grade." The aura of being able to get into a IIIT, in addition to the scholarships they would receive, is what pushed them at that moment to be seeking admission. But in retrospect when they think, they feel that they should have had more information or exposure to have explored options than what they did at that time. These students also told me that for those that have not grown to like their chosen fields of engineering, "education is a dread" and they do whatever it takes to endure to graduate. They also told me about students losing motivation and dropping out of the institution because of their inability to keep up their grades.

Over the course of my fieldwork, a student from one of Andhra Pradesh's top-ranked engineering schools explained this further.

> "You know…? When I graduate, my college will give me a placement if I get just about decent and not even great grades. To get good grades all I need is to study for 2-3 days before the exam. I don't have to do anything more for that. And when I do get placement, my employer will train me for about six months on what they want of me. What is the point of me learning something now, to unlearn and relearn? I might as well 'enjoy' my college life."

When asked about why she took up engineering the student said "I don't like engineering, I like hotel management, but my parents forced me to take up Engineering first as a backup career, because IT jobs are better paying and easier to find. After I complete engineering, if I don't want to pursue engineering, they are fine if I want to get into Hotel management."

I offer these vignettes as context to what was subsequently also highlighted in some of interviews over the course of my fieldwork. My interlocutors who occupied managerial positions often suggested that a vast majority of IT workers were "Reluctant Engineers." A majority of the engineers interviewed also agree to it. When probed about why they thought this was, there were a host of reasons. One of the primary reasons was that engineering as a college option is not taken up by a vast majority of workers out of a conscious and personal choice but as a "*de facto*", "well paying", and a "seemingly prestigious", option. They feel that a vast majority of IT workers become engineers for all and any reasons other than the joy of being an engineer. Managers also think that this leads to what they feel is an "exhaustion of cyclical learning", where every new language/technology the IT workers learn has to be started back right from scratch. Managers felt that after about a few iterations, say after changing four or five technologies, employees' enthusiasm for learning new technologies/languages diminishes.

One of the managers that I interviewed suggested that "an average Indian graduate is unfit for employment, straight out of college." He suggested that these graduates are products of a "blinded horse education system" where the only emphasis is on solving a given or defined problem but not to figuring out root causes or peripheral issues that might be causing problems. As a result, the burden of training these "unfit" engineers falls on the companies that hire them. Companies usually do a minimum of 4-6 months on-boarding (training) for these fresh hires. Without a strong base of education, they further explained, a majority of these "mediocre" technology workers still need constant employer interventions in training them leading to another issue of "Learning on the job sprint model." As another of my interviewees put it, "It is like hiring drivers without the knowledge of the difference between a gas pedal and a brake - IT has made this mistake. Sooner or later this mistake will come to become a huge issue for the IT industry."

My interviews also hint at the role of social backgrounds of IT workers. Biao documents the stunning transformations in the countryside in the Andhra Pradesh-Telangana region: the ubiquity of IT

training institutions coming up in the countryside against the backdrop of a growing IT industry in Hyderabad as well as a "futures market" for educating potential grooms into IT-based employment (Biao 2006). The flip side of this dynamic is reflected in my fieldwork: a vast majority of my interviewees are first-generation migrants from tier two/three cities or rural areas; their IT job in the city is what has brought them first time to Hyderabad. As these new migrants navigate their altered social circumstances, social institutions like the family continue to exert significant influence on their decisions: what educations to pursue, what "famous companies" to work for, all become matters of collective decision-making.

Most of my management-level interlocutors did not have a very positive opinion on employee expectations. Putting it colloquially in Telugu, not mincing words, one of them said that employees look at the glamour of the IT industry and think it is "వాపు చూసి బలుపు" (Vāpu cūsi balupu), meaning 'You look at a highly inflamed limb/muscle and construe that it is a big strong muscle'. What my interlocutors meant to say is that people look at the prestige and pay of an IT job and think that it is all great in there, in the industry. My senior-level interlocutors say that a lot of graduates and prospective employees look up to IT workers in their families and social circles and draw aspirations to work in IT. It is these high aspirations and ambitions that they set for themselves, without doing their own respective reflections of their realities which leads to a dissatisfaction when they do end up in IT work. When asked about what this results in, one of the CXO's quoted that stress happens "When Ambitions overtake ability", things like burnouts don't happen when "ambitions are in check." Senior level interlocutors I interviewed also believed that employees think that "just delivering good is enough" and that they don't strive for excellence. This lack of "striving for excellence" they believe is what has made India become a back-office nation, rather than an IT innovation hub or a Silicon Valley.

A singular emphasis on engineering education also manifests itself as a lack of any personal activities that they engage with after work and is sometimes cited as a reason for burnout. Highlighting this specifically in the case of IT-related employment, one of my interlocutors suggested that, "Other

professions help an individual to expand horizons naturally, IT doesn't." Employee engagement initiatives taken up by employers also were said to seldom achieve their anticipated impacts. For example, the company I interviewed my interlocutors at was trying to conduct a longitudinal study on their employees in association with a governmental-nutritional-agency and a health-NGO which aimed to improve the health and lifestyles of their IT workers. Of about 300 workers, 70 signed up, and hardly 7-8 actually turned up for getting their vitals checked. After much persuasion, the company seems to take the programme much slower than anticipated.

Thus, my fieldwork suggests that there has been a gradual cultural privileging of IT-based employment over other forms of work. At the level of education, this has resulted in a transformation whereby a large number of students opt for undergraduate degrees in various engineering fields without a strong sense of interest in those fields. Engineering education itself is instrumentalised as a means to secure apparently high-paying employment in IT-based industries. Moreover, decisions to pursue engineering education, as well as particular IT-based jobs, are themselves influenced by social backgrounds as well as kin networks of these IT workers. This is said to have resulted in a disposition of indifference and "cyclical exhaustion" among the workers. In the following section, I turn to examine the transformed nature of work in IT-based industries more closely.

3.2 The Space/Time of IT

In the previous section, I have highlighted ways in which IT-based employment has become a normalized career trajectory among my interlocutors. I have also tentatively suggested that because of such routinisation of IT work; several interlocutors report not deriving a sense of fulfilment from their work. In this section, I want to further analyse this aspect of my interlocutors' experience. In this section, I describe in some detail workplace experiences of my interlocutors, highlighting the unpredictability and flux that characterises everyday work experiences. In chapter 2, I have already reviewed scholarly literature that has focused on the changing nature of work in contemporary times. In this section, I provide ethnographic detail to that literature: I highlight, in particular, the short-

livedness of technologies and workflows that characterise IT-based work, the unpredictability of schedules and improvised nature of everyday work, the individualisation of work and responsibility, and the transnational dispersion of work and its implication. In effect, I suggest, such constant change in conjunction with the particular pathways through which the IT workforce is configured (as described in the previous section), exacerbates the experience of work as being stressful among my interlocutors.

My interlocutors highlighted that changing technologies and associated models of organising work are an important characteristic of IT work. Unlike manufacturing-based industries, technology in the IT industry is said to evolve at breakneck speed. My interlocutors report that in IT five years is considered to be long term for IT tools/platforms/programming languages and that most "mid-career" professionals (upwards of 5-7 years of work experience) would have worked with at least three different technologies. Every new iteration potentially entails learning new technologies from scratch and that this learning curve could be very exhausting and daunting for them to master. IT Workers rued that only in the IT industry does one go from knowing everything there is about their work to something like that of being a fresher when technology shift happens.

Similarly, models of organising IT work themselves frequently shift in the world of software development. For example, if one were to benchmark the software development methodologies to the year 2000, stacking of multiple roles and responsibilities can be noticed in today's industry work practices. In and around the year 2000, the predominant methodology used was the Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC). In this methodology, there were separate roles of a Programme Manager, Business Analyst, Systems Analyst, Team Lead(s), Developer(s), Tester(s), Deployment Specialists and Project Maintenance Staff. It was an effort of 8 separate people and roles. Documentation was a critical factor in this methodology where every person/role depended on it to deliver their piece of the work. Specialised roles of business and systems analysts made certain that documentation was foolproof. Much emphasis was put on documentation, which meant communication and document were crucial to the success of projects. Management interlocutors say

that today one individual partially does all of these roles where multiple functions overlap. Todays Agile-methodology is much more granular where every IT worker sits in much closer coordination with their respective client worker(s) and works in developing the system. Here, a worker's ability to multi-task in addition to interacting more personally than ever with clients of different geographies/countries becomes a key to their success. Managers feel that poor quality training during graduate education of these engineers makes them susceptible to new more complex and advanced processes which are not linear any more in function and need overlapping and multi-field expertise. There are also concerns in the management(s) that lack of good communication skills hinders the workers' ability to perform.

Technologies and work models aren't the only entities in flux in the world of IT professionals. More immediately also, my interlocutors report a high degree of unpredictability as part of daily lived experiences. At one level, this is a result of the transnational nature of IT work such that the work becomes both spatially and temporally dispersed. Outsourced IT work means working for clients based elsewhere. In working overseas Indian IT companies and IT workers try to work at least partly unison with their international clients in their local business hours. This would mean either coming in early or working late in India against the 9am-5pm business hours. Working Australian clients would mean work would start at 5am IST, working with Europe would mean starting work around noon IST, whereas working with the Americas would mean starting work at 5pm IST. All of this would mean traversing three different times: the circadian clock of the Indian worker, local Indian Standard Time and the time zone of the client wherever in the world they are at. Without at least an hour or two of overlap of workhours coordinating international projects become difficult. My interlocutors have told me that often times this one or two hours of overlap hardly ends at the intended hour or two. Still, others working in industries such as the call centre industry where availability per customer schedules is crucial end up working entirely per European and American working hours, disrupting their social and personal lives in significant measure (Nadeem 2011).

Managers in IT companies believe that with the globalised world and the digital-enabled transnational IT work, "The 8-hour work day is practically dead." They believe that with a strict eight-hour workday, IT work will not happen in India as it would just not be possible to take advantage of India's geo-location with respect nations that outsource their IT work. Handover and take off of work between the 24/7 development model needs work happening on projects at all times. This makes me interpret that the weakest link in this chain of transnational labour effort is the Indian worker, with no legal labour protections, who ends up facing and bearing the brunt of the stresses and strains of transnational IT work.

IT work gets dispersed beyond the confines of the workplace as well. One strategy to adopt to the distributed nature of work has been to make it more flexible, allowing employees to work from home rather than reporting physically in the workplace. Such work then is coordinated through electronic means, over e-mail or chat messaging. But this, perhaps unintentionally, has the effect of IT workers thinking about work all the time irrespective of whether they are work or not. Work is no longer confined to a delimited period of time, my interlocutors feel responsible for answering/solving the issues that every odd email might that they would get at any time of the day or night. This they feel makes them temporally never disconnect from work irrespective of the time and place they are in. This they believe effects coordinating the personal and social and work aspects of their lives.

If foreign clients are one dimension of work leading to stress, other aspects of local cultures have their own other dimensions that add to this stress. While work culture in IT is seemingly professional, my interlocutors report that local managements often use "indirect pressures of agreement" to get workers to agree to unrealistic timelines. "Use of passive aggressive tones" and "tactical questionings" that implicitly pin the blame on individual employees rather than unrealistic targets are other ways that result in the production of stress among my interlocutors. Some of my interlocutors report that this is especially true in small businesses: because of a scarcity of resources in smaller organisations, clear plans are seldom made and exclusive resources aren't allocated to projects;

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overlapping responsibilities between projects and the resulting extremely demanding "priority games" result in high stress.

"Work dumping" just before the end of the day is also a peculiar case which was mentioned by interlocutors, i.e. just about thirty minutes or an hour before the workers plan to wind up work, new work seems to be given and piled up before the end of the day, where technically the employee would then not be finishing their work for the day. With this situation of work dumping perks of flexible-time and work-from-home become a liability for the IT worker, as they are now expected to take the work home and work in non-business hours. As one of the Human Resources professionals that I interviewed put it, "work from home becomes work for home."

Another peculiar instance which an interlocutor reported was undergoing "Peer Reviews" as a part of her appraisals in the early-mid 2000's. This was a time when management practices like 360' appraisals were the new rage in corporate governance and jargon. She felt that this practice was an aggressive, stealthy and a heartless way to pit colleagues against each other, contributing to a hostile workplace overall. Explaining these three aspects, she felt this way: "Aggressive" because unless one spoke of themselves in these reviews as better than the other there would be no way that they would survive or excel in their annual ratings; "Stealthy" all information about such peer reviews was confidential, which my interlocutor feels was not fair as anyone could say anything about their peers on official records and yet get away confidentially without substantiating to the person on whom the comments were made; "Heartless" she felt that this practice was very dehumanising, as it pits colleagues against one another and plants mistrust and doubt as the foundation to work relationships rather than trust and camaraderie.

Overall, my interlocutors seemed to suggest that employee well-being in most instances becomes a matter of empty rhetoric. According to them, support for employee health in IT companies is restricted to having good healthcare benefits (such as quality health insurance), but other considerations are typically lacking. For example, in one case an employee took about 15 days off to

recuperate from an illness and also care for an elderly family member. When she returned to work, her time off was considered as a time of "no productivity" and pay hike was rejected. This employee believed that technically time off should not have been considered at all, in terms of a performance review. This interlocutor felt betrayed by the company, primarily because of all the "jargon and talk about the world's best workplace, … but when it came to a life or death health situation, the company really did not seem even humane in helping deal with the health situation."

3.3 Cultural Shifts

Shifts in the IT workplace have been accompanied by cultural shifts, experienced both in the workplace as well as broader aspirations that my interlocutors voice. On one level, these manifest in the form of particular mannerisms that my interlocutors report. On another level, there is a broader shift in underlying values (as I have also suggested in my literature review) such that work and responsibility in IT has been individualised to such an extent that it renders collective action aiming at structural change impossible. Zooming out even further, these shifts are located in broader societal shifts, where IT workers, emblematic of the new middle class in India, have come to evaluate their success through possession of conspicuous markers of consumption. This leads to situations where my interlocutors feel trapped: loss of IT work, in effect, is perceived as a personal failure. Added to this is their sense that skills cultivated by working in the IT industry do not readily allow for diversifying into other fields of employment. My interlocutors, therefore, suggest that they continue working in the industry even when they experience it as being stressful because they do not think that they have any other options.

"Bending over backwards… [this] is a very Indian thing," an interviewee exclaimed during one of our conversations. This gentleman has an extensive work experience of about 15years. He has worked with clients in both The Americas and Europe. In his fifteen years of working, as very rudimentary observation which he says he made is that, "it is only Indians that make time out and work out of their business hours to accommodate interfacing with their clients." He went on to say that he has almost

never seen or known of a western client working out of their regular business hours to ease work on their Indian counterparts; it is just almost unimaginable to expect western clients to work outside their local business hours. Several interviewees also suggested that an "inability to not say no" characterised the culture of work in Indian IT with the result that their (often) western clients seem to talk their mind and are able to push "more work than otherwise" where Indian workers would not say no. All of this leads the Indian worker to being overburdened, compared with what can generally be worked out in the average work day. Another Interlocutor who seemed to understand this situation said that "People in India have accepted to saying yes for everything, that's the only problem." She goes on to say that since she learnt to say no, the quality of her work, her team's work, and her projects overall health improved and thereby brought down stress levels in her colleagues.

One other interlocutor, a Red Project Specialist (someone that is an expert in setting right of badly performing projects) went to say that "Setting right expectations is the only way things can work in IT"; where he meant candid client conversations often lead to progress and not conversations where the off-shore teams (Indian teams) seem subservient to their clients. A management level interlocutor who has about 25 years of experience in the IT industry feels that Indian companies "Commit to the customer more than required." He believes that the business of IT should be conducted at a more egalitarian level than the present scenario where the clients become "demi-gods whose wishes cannot-not-be fulfilled."

One of the most important aspects that came across in this study is individualisation, meaning putting the onus on an individual worker in this context. The areas where I noticed this in the IT industry is in the aspects of experience-of-stress, performance-at-work and health. Throughout the interviews with managers and management level interlocutors, the onus of stress management has been put on the worker. Things like management of stress is something that workers are expected to be able to figure out for themselves. To help the worker, organisations do things like flexible work hours and work from home. An example here would be how these work from home and flexible work hours though sound like flexibilities given to employees work at their own time and pace, they intrude the personal

time and space of a worker. An HR personnel interviewed said that she offers both these options as employee-friendly options when she conducts job interviews, but at times she "feels sad that this flexibility is what makes employees work at odd hours and everywhere, affecting their lives adversely." Coming to the onus of stress that employees feel, companies make the employees responsible saying that it is the employees' individual responsibility to manage their own stress in the light of the perks of time-space-flexibility they have been provided, to work with lesser stress.

During participant observation at one of the roadshows conducted by the labour union I was shadowing, a young new employee passing by the roadshow loudly mentioned to the labour union people "You won't have to do all of this [roadshow and fight for a balanced work life engagement] if you are truly talented at your work." When I went to him and asked him to help me understand what makes him believe in what he said, he said that "it is talent and competency that matter, and not all these *dharnas* [labour strikes in Hindi] and agitations."

When It came to health, workers, especially regarding lifestyle diseases and stress, understand that it is them that are ultimately responsible for themselves. A common belief that comes across overarchingly is that health is an individual thing. It is for an individual to take care of his health and not the company's responsibility beyond a point. One of the interlocutors said that "no health test will tell you that you get lifestyle diseases because of the sedentary jobs that we do", so the onus of health becomes a personal/individual prerogative.

Lastly, almost universally, my interlocutors associate IT work as a means of high compensation and supporting lifestyles. "Fame and fortune [should be] by-products, not entitlements of IT work," rued one of the managers that I interviewed. He elaborated that workers consider the perks of working in IT MNC's such as lucrative pay packages leading to higher spending power, aesthetically pleasing office spaces, a comfortable working environment like airconditioned workspaces, and international work and travel opportunities as markers of class mobility. The IT leadership interviewed state that the factors mentioned above are high influencers in drawing new and mid-career employees to the

industry. A common perspective which the interviewed leadership had was that IT workers are generally more attracted to this bling, perk and pay, rather than the very technologies/projects for which they are hired. In other words, the leadership believe that this leads to a worker who is half-hearted in work ethic. Instances like "employees leaving mid-tier companies with projects with excellent scope for learning and challenge for companies with mediocre work but great brand names and infrastructure" were mentioned in the leadership interviews.

As with any other MNC business practices, the IT sector too considers employee compensation as confidential information. Owners I have interviewed feel that in India this information is anything but confidential. An employer went on to say that for all practical reasons "Compensation is public information" amongst their workforce, no matter how hard they try to keep in confidential. Management feel that employees freely talk about their packages and make comparisons of their respective compensation packages. The problem comes with not with the compensation numbers getting to be public but the employee "comparisons and conversations" which do not involve the finer details of why the compensation numbers are arrived at. In a case that a CXO narrated, an employee came to that CXO and was very disappointed to know that her colleague was given a significant raise where she did not get it. The reason for her disappointment was that she and this colleague had the same number of years of experience. For this, the CXO said that "this disgruntled employee did not take into consideration the excellence at work, both in their own work and also for the whole practice, brought in by the now higher paid employee." These comparisons without true and accurate data as to why one is paid higher than another were one key reason that the CXO's felt that there is unhealthy competition for pay in the IT industry.

In most cases like these, the CXO's observed that employees jump companies to get a significant rise in their salaries instead of improving themselves within the organisation, adding to their own worth and not to that of the company. One of the key reasons the CXO's feel that this practice is rampant is because of "the lopsided labour availability and market demand imbalance." They went further to say that this is one of the most vicious circles which feed off of each other in the IT industry, where the

not-so-talented employees can highjack companies to pay them better than they deserve. The CXO's feel that this vicious circle is "not sustainable in the long run."

3.4 Liberalisation as Labour Holiday

In this section, I highlight how the perception of the IT industries enjoying a labour holiday takes shape. I draw especially on interviews with labour lawyers that I conducted as part of my research, but also to a lesser extent on interviews with upper management and HR personnel as well as IT employees. The section also provides a very brief overview of the legal framework that applies to the IT industry.

The legal fraternity I interviewed in one form or the other agree about the inadequacy of applicability or oversight of Labor Law in the field of IT. Lawyers believe that "All Businesses are run as profit centres" and that "Organisations function with a sole purpose of profit." In saying so, these corporate lawyers feel that IT business in Hyderabad with lack of applicability and/or implementation of labour laws do not really care either in spirit or in practice about employee welfare. I would like to quote two examples given to me by my interlocutors, one from a Labour lawyer and another from an HR head. 1) Labour Lawyer: The labour lawyer said that the labour department has never to his recollection conducted a labour inspection raid on an IT company. The lawyer also said that the "IT employees look down on the word Labour as something beneath them", the lawyer tells that "IT employees believe themselves to be a part of the higher echelons of the society." When it comes to the labour department's perceptions of the IT employees, the lawyers say that the department considers these handsomely paid, upper middle class employees not needing any protections. 2) An HR head I interviewed said that in discussion with their companies Labour lawyer, the lawyers would laugh at a prospect of any labour suites on IT companies, from IT workers. Neither the lawyers themselves nor the Labour department believe that IT workers need labour protections.

For years, people have come to believe that Labour laws do not apply to the IT industry. This is verifiably true only in the case of Karnataka where the IT industry has been exempt from Labour law

for the last two decades (The Hindu - Special Correspondent 2019). In case of the erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh, and the newly formed state of Telangana, there is a belief that labour holiday applies here too. But technically, the lawyers interviewed could not corroborate this. But the lawyers themselves said that, for all practical reasons, the law is not implemented in the IT field. Lawyers mentioned of instances where labour department and commissioners brushoff or disapprove of even a reference to a labour violation in the IT industry.

The Labour Lawyers I interviewed had IT companies as clients. It was mentioned by a lawyer that he couldn't remember any significant cases where IT employees have complained to the Labour Department about any employer violated labour protections that they are entitled to under the law. Even though IT companies are registered under the Shops and Establishments Act where Labour Laws technically apply, in practice, none of the lawyers I interviewed believe that other than them as consultants to these IT Companies held by retainer, no one in the IT companies knows anything about either the laws that apply to them, or their compliance. To corroborate this statement, when HR Interlocutors were asked about their knowledge of Labour law, I did not get a single HR professional that said they knew anything about the labour law or how it applied to their business or how it functioned. All of the HR personnel including management level professionals said that their lawyers thought that their company's HR/Labour policies complied with the laws. The IT industry HR personnel interviewed candidly thought and expressed that they did not think that it was vital for them to know the laws for themselves, as the company policies themselves were run through lawyers for legal compliance.

The lawyers also feel that the basis of the Indian laws, especially "the labour laws are antiquated and are rooted in Pre–Independence Laws." Looking at the laws listed below and the years of their coming into existence would explain how these laws range all the way from 1937 to 1988. The relevance of the law with the realities of contemporary work conditions seems to be missing here. This disconnect of law with contemporary work realities and the protections that it is to be creating is a massive issue for IT workers that might need to get any labour issues redressed.

"Exemption of Labour Laws" or what is called "Labour-Law-Holiday" to IT companies is a concern that lawyers interviewed have shown. Even in this environment of a Labour-Law-Holiday in Hyderabad, corporate lawyers feel that companies still use "Phraseology" (carefully crafted use of words) to sound and look to employees and the media that they are really concerned about employee welfare. They have concerns that "Companies function in the fringes of Law, not at the centre of it." The example of Ms M. one of my interlocutors who worked for one of the worlds' top three employers could be taken here. M was falling constantly sick, as advised by the doctors for rest, her manager very congenially accepted her two weeks of sick leave. M was very happy about this. When M returned from the leave, it was the time for her annual review. In the review, her manager took her two weeks of medical leave as complete non-performance which threw her ratings off the chart. M was expecting a promotion in that review. She felt that her company cheated her. She did not even report this to the HR for facing one more humiliation in addition to being rated non-performing for two weeks.

The introductions to the law(s) are how and what each of the respective the laws described themselves to be as, in their own introductions. All information has been taken from the Labour Department of Telangana's Acts and Rules Website (Government Of Telangana 2018).

Act(s) Under which IT companies are registered in Telangana:
- Telangana Shops And Establishments Act, 1988
  - The Andhra Pradesh Shops and Establishments Act, 1966 was enacted to consolidate and amend the law relating to the regulation of conditions of work and employment in shops, commercial establishments and other establishments and for matters connected therewith. In the implementation of the said Act and in the changed conditions in labour relations, it is found necessary to provide for some more measures for safeguarding the interests of the employees. With a view to enlarge the beneficial provision under the Act and to make provision for some more facilities and benefits to the employees in shops and establishments to suit the present needs, there is imminent necessity to make a new in repeal of the 1966 Act.

Labour Laws which IT companies are to technically follow in Telangana:
- Labour Welfare Fund Act, 1987 And Rules, 1988.
  - An Act to provide for the Constitution of a Welfare Fund for the financing of activities to promote welfare of labour in the State of Andhra Pradesh and for the establishment of Board for conducting such activities and for matters connected therewith.
- Equal Remuneration Act 1976.
  - Duty of employer to pay equal remuneration to men and women workers for same work or work of a similar nature.
  - No discrimination to be made while recruiting men and women workers.
  - Power of appropriate Government to appoint authorities for hearing and deciding claims and complaints.
  - Duty of employers to maintain registers.
- Minimum Wages Act 1948.
  - An Act to provide for fixing minimum rates of wages in certain employments.
- Payment of Bonus Act 1965 And Rules 1975.
  - An Act to provide for the payment of bonus to persons employed in certain establishments on the basis of profits or on the basis of production or productivity and for matters connected therewith.
- Payment of Wages Act 1936 And Rules.
  - An Act to regulate the payment of wages of certain classes of 2[employed persons], whereas it is expedient to regulate the payment of wages to certain classes of 2 [employed persons].
- Payment of Gratuity Act 1976.
  - In India gratuity is a type of retirement benefit.
  - An act to provide a scheme for payment of gratuity to employees engaged in factories, mines, oilfields, plantations, ports, railway companies, shops or other establishments and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

Another concern that lawyers have is about how the HR personnel, MBA's - Management, "are barely introduced to the Law (as a part of their education)" and become ignorant leaders that run the IT industry. A strong opinion of the lawyers that comes across is that "HR Departments need legal knowledge" in their daily functioning. During the course of this research, not a single HR or a corporate person interviewed said they knew the labour laws that applied to their organisation. The company personnel told that they send their internal policies to their corporate-lawyers or retainer-legal-desks to get a signoff that the internal policy doesn't violate the laws. The lawyers said that it doesn't matter to the companies whether these internal company policies function in the spirit of the law, all that companies seem to care about is barely being in the compliance, so that they are technically not in violation of the laws.

Especially in foreign MNC's that conduct business in India, there is a concern that "Global policies are not localised" to suit the domestic socio-political-cultural situations. When asked to give an example, the lawyers took the case of layoffs in the Indian and the American scenario. They said that "The American labour setting might not stigmatise a worker being laid-off without notice on a Friday evening. In the Indian setting though, it is considered a disgrace for the employee to have been laid-off, especially without notice and with the office not giving them a chance to prove their worth even if it means that the office is resizing its labour in adaptation to the market requirements. Laid off Indian employees feel very insulted and a loss of worth and face to their families." This lack of both understanding and respect for local conditions they believe is a cause of concern for the employees.

When asked about how the Labour law functions in the IT industry, no lawyer was able to say with certainty about the applicability of labour law to the IT companies in Hyderabad. "Enforcement of Law is Lax" is what a labour lawyer felt, they went on to say that there is a "Drastic coming down of Labour Audits" by the Labour Department, irrespective of the nature of industries. This goes on to support the study's literature review `which suggests that governments and business now function under neo-liberal attitudes where there is lesser and lesser government regulation, intervention and control.

A criticism that the lawyers had of IT workers was that "IT workers think that they belong to Higher Echelons of Society." By saying this they mean to say that IT professionals think that it would be under their dignity to think of themselves as workers to come under Labour Law, or to be associated with labour unions. In line with this interpretation of the lawyers, the barely one or two or two labour unions that do exist don't have either of the traditional words 'Labour' or 'Union' in their names. They are called 'FORIT-Forum of IT Professionals' and 'FITE-Forum of IT Employees'.

The labour lawyers go on to say that "The Fourth Industrial Revolution(4IR) law reform needs to happen [To bring in a Reality Check]." One way they feel that this ideal goal to have a contemporary set of labour protections meeting the realities of the 4IR would be by "Implementing the present laws which would be a good start."

With no real labour audits being conducted by the Government department of labour in the IT industry, and no true advancement or initiatives to improve the work conditions of IT workers, the Labour unions believe that "Labour Department has become Management Dept." They go on to believe that with "No protections in IT employment is a systemic-issue of the crony capitalistic era." This could be understood in the lens of the neo-liberalism that prevails in the political and legal spheres of most of the globalised world. To understand the status quo of the state of labour in IT in Hyderabad, the labour union in their convention demanded a whitepaper by the government. Ignorance of labour law in the levels of IT Management(s) and also in the IT employees themselves is what the labour unions think is one of the fundamental reasons for the state of quagmire in work conditions and labour protections in the IT industry. They believe that at the time of signing up of employment, every employee is to be given a copy of the labour laws that apply to them. This change if implemented, the labour union believes, will start to lay the first brick to the foundation of labour protections and fair work practices in the IT industry.

The labour unions believe that unity in IT employees is broken up by the companies in the notion that if one does great work, their jobs would be protected. They believe that the very nature of today's HR

practices in the IT industry is diffusing of employee unity outside the organisation's stated policies. Unionism is looked down on by everybody in the industry along with new/young employees too as a bastion of incompetence. The union believes that unless there is discrimination, most employees do not 'look up' or 'at' venues like themselves to redress the issues they seem to be facing.

What emerges from my research is a weakened legal and regulatory environment in which IT companies operate. The weakening results not just from a roll back of labour laws—indeed, there seems to be a persisting confusion as to what laws are applicable to these companies in the first place—but also from lax implementation of such laws as well as a general lack of awareness among various stakeholders as to what legal and regulatory frameworks govern their work practices. During my fieldwork, such lack of awareness was attributed, in part, to educational deficits especially among management and HR personnel, and in part, to a generalised cultural pre-disposition against labour, among management and employees alike.

3.5 Conclusion

In the words of one of the managers that I interviewed, the vast majority of the students who pursue an engineering degree are "reluctant engineers"—that is to say that they choose engineering as a career trajectory without much forethought. Rather, parental and social pressure and a generalised privileging of engineering as a career choice culturally have made an undergraduate engineering degree the *de facto* choice for many. In part, this privileging of engineering education is sustained by the promise of subsequent employment in the IT industry. As the literature demonstrates, this career trajectory from engineering into IT was championed and normalized through hiring practices from within the IT industry (Biao 2006) (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). I build on this literature further to ask: what have been the effects of the normalisation of the engineering education-to-IT career trajectory? My argument is that the cultural privileging of IT work (and an engineering degree as the preferred pathway) along with ongoing changes in the nature of work itself have produced particular ideas of personal and professional space/time (and allied ideas such as ambition, success, fulfilment,

and work-life balance) among IT workers. It has also produced a pervasive experience of latent stress among IT workers because of the rapidly changing nature of IT work and the perpetual threat of loss (of work and of the cultural markers of success made possible through IT work) if individuals fail to keep up. In the extreme, such stress manifests itself as "burnout."

Chapter 4. Conclusion

Summing up the study, this conclusion would bring out the emerging central theme of this study. It brings to fore nature and pace of technological changes, socio-cultural effects of these changes, educations' role in this change and finally it and puts out essential questions thrown up by this study for future research to look into.

There has been a paradigm shift in the technologies used globally by the industry. Today it is believed that the world has entered a knowledge economy. Information is the new oil and the generation, collection, storage, analysis and usage of this information is powered by digital technologies, highspeed wired and wireless networks. As every paradigm shift in technology brings about, these technologies too have changed life as we have never known earlier, mainly by collapsing of time and space (Section 2.1).

With a globalised-market-economy, states are withdrawing their services and protections. Employees now fend for themselves leading to a sense of loss of protection, control, disillusionment and precarity, while trusting market dynamics without regulatory/legislative oversight. The individual, in all of this, is directly subjected to market cycles/variations (Section 2.2).

The effects of these are noticeable in the making of the reluctant engineers, and traditionally state responsibilities like education are failing to make well-equipped workers that can serve themselves and the industry well (Section 3.1). At the same time aided by virtualising highspeed digital and ICTs, work has seeped into both the physical and temporal realms of lives, transcending time and space (Section 3.2). In a neo-liberal regime, running industry with minimal or no legal protections and oversight on worker welfare is only adding to the workers' sense of precarity (Section 3.4). With globalisation, a wave of a cultural shift towards consumerism has occurred (section 2.3). This consumerist shift in the culture of the middle class has ushered in volatility in the socio-cultural structures of the society and lives of the workers (Section 3. 3).

The lifecycles of technologies have changed and undergone extremely fast iterations since the advent of the World-Wide-Web (WWW) and high-speed digital technologies. If one were to broadly trace the technology and life-cycle trajectory of industrialisation, it took the industry 150 years (The 1750s' – 1900s') to reinvent itself in coming up with fossil-fuel-based engines in the 1IR. The next iteration in 2IR was electricity and electric engines bringing in much more efficiency, which lasted 75 years from the 1900s' to 1970s'. The invention of the silicon chip in what we call the 3IR further automated and optimised the output of repetitive work lasted 25 years. In what is mostly called either the advent of the 4IR or the transition between 3IR and 4IR since the widespread use of the WWW has seen so many paradigm changes in the technologies used. When it comes to the broad iterations of WWW/ICTs' since the year 2000, things like Web 1.0, Web 2.0, E-commerce, Data Mining have already happened. Today the technology is at Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence and Internet-Of-Things (IOTs'). Though technically all of these digital technologies build on each other, once they come into being the older technologies are left to die. So every time there is a paradigm shift, things start anew, and the older technologies are left out. Picture workers in an industry that is evolving at this breakneck speed, they have had to start almost afresh every time there is a change in technology. In my study, IT workers and managers alike in trying to surf these rapid waves of technological changes have claimed that they face what they call "exhaustion of cyclical learning."

Tracking back the issue of why this perceived "exhaustion of cyclical learning" seems to happen, management and senior level interlocutors were asked for their opinions. The blame went straight to the education system saying "an average Indian graduate is unfit for employment, straight out of college" coming from a "blinded horse education system". They say that the model of learning in colleges and schools is usually cramming and replicating through rote memorisation. This only prepares future workers for "Learning on the job sprint model". The skills to foresee and go deep into any problem are neither introduced nor taught to the future tech workers in school or college. As I have described in section 3.1, with a lack of this ability, the workers-to-be become the burden of the industry to train in readying them for work.

After much research, the study had to understand that burnout, especially in the context of IT workers, is not an empirically observable or pathologically definable condition. This study understands the condition of burnout as experiential. How IT workers feel they both experience stress and what they think conduces or catalyse this stress, is the ethnographic data generated from this study. Macro systemic inducers/conducers of stress is what the literature review scaffolds up by creating spaces to place the ethnographic data in creating a picture that helps explain the burnout both from the perspective of a worker and from that of macro-systemic perspectives.

Perceptions of workers from the ethnographic data could be categorised into the following five areas: Legal, Economical, Health, Socio-cultural, and Familial. The legal category primarily reflects on labour safeguards to work. Things like labour law, labour law holiday in the IT sector, job security, protection from discrimination, protection from being fired at the will of the company, audits by the labour department Etc. In the economic category, workers spoke about economic lifestyle traps, where maintenance of 'quality of life improvements' like flats, cars, expensive schools for children, consumerism, brand consciousness, economic expectations of social circles etc. The workers also felt that in addition to their regular work pressure, this indirect stress also dramatically affects them. When it comes to the health category of the data, workers primarily talk about lifestyle diseases. They say that lifestyle diseases like hypertension, diabetes, cholesterol which otherwise they believe would not have occurred to them were the result of their sedentary and desk work. They also go to say that doctors are not able to diagnose these health effects as a result of their high-stress work. About socio-cultural pressures, workers were happy to have transcended a class or two with the handsome pay that IT work entails. That said, they also felt that there was a lot of pressure from their social circles about how they conduct their lifestyle choices. Examples given where questions they would get like "Have you not bought a car?", "Do you not live in an apartment complex?", "Doesn't your child go to an international school?" etc. The workers interviewed feel that their agency to make decisions that are right for them is taken away by this social-cultural pressure. Finally coming to immediate familial

pressures, the omnipresence of work through high –speed networks and wireless high speed connected devices is what workers feel is a massive hindrance to their family life.

Incoherence of aspects explored in the structure of the study like law, economics, health, socio-cultural issues and familial dynamics leave workers in tricky conditions with hard to make choices that are always seemingly within their reach, yet they are not. Understanding this from a psychological lens, this creates dissonance, where what the person is thinking, speaking and doing are not coherent. Psychologically, dissonance is known in to be one of the key reasons for stress.

From over thirty-five in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted as a part of this study, it is to be understood that extreme stress, which in the IT industry is called 'burnout' is caused by an array of factors related with IT work. These systemic factors feed on and into one another thereby making a self-perpetuating ecosystem that induces and sustains stress. Workers feel trapped when they want to mitigate the stress that they feel they experience. They feel a loss of agency of being unable to take/make decisions that would help them mitigate stress. Globalisation is one of the key reasons that IT outsourcing has stared, but on the flipside of it, it is only the cost advantage of the foreign exchange arbitration that keeps this industry alive according to industry leaders.

Virtually all data from my ethnographic interviews in some way or the other says that people become IT workers as a means to achieve prestige. This prestige could mean going up the economic class, transcending the caste barriers from their non-urban backgrounds using the achieved class status in the city, and increased spending power and prestige that is achieved through the high paying jobs which the IT industry entails. Though workers realise that there might be options for them to cut back on stressful work, they feel a lack of agency in being able to take those steps like cutting down on the stressful work which has higher pay.

A vast majority of my interlocutors agree to what they believe is a fact of imprudence in economic-decisions and lifestyle choices made by IT workers. Undoubtedly, they agree that mid-career

employees feel they undergo immense stress. However, they also say that they think they would rather be stressed than taking options which would need them to step down the socio-economic class ladder. My interlocutors think that the material comfort zone (consumerist spending power) that pay in the IT industry entails is a respite than the unknown that would lurk amidst a reduced income, class and prestige.

Interlocutors also spoke about the debt that mid-career IT workers buy into, in the name of investments, increased spending power and the resultant consumption. This makes them feel sucked into lifestyle traps. These spaces that they have moved in to have a certain prestige associated with them. Example: Owning real-estate and living in and around the Hitech-City/Cyberabad jurisdiction itself brings an achieved status of being financially sound. As long as a visual public claim of ownership is established that property (usually an apartment or a car) is acquired, whether that acquisition is on a loan, or whether it is a paid-up mortgage, or how it is acquired becomes immaterial. My interlocutors have called this as "being stuck in a meaningless rat-race."

There is a general understanding of a patterned financial trajectory of IT employees from stages of freshly graduated employees to mid-career professionals. This could be called a financial cycle that an IT worker goes through. The pattern would go something like this: Fresh hires start with immense purchasing power, leading to transcending economic class. With marriage and family coming into the picture a few years into the job, long-term expenses like home and vehicle loans come in. As their families grow with kids coming in, social pressure adds up in being able to hold a continued ability to spend at the same level as when the worker was single and had much more disposable income. In the race to keep up with the escalation of class, expenses along with the increased incomes also keep going up. What my interlocutors tell me is that with both of the income and expenses going off in tangents, there comes a sense of insecurity of "what if" the worker were to lose the job, how would they be able to pay off the loans and maintain the lifestyle. They have also said that consumption in a consumerist lifestyle is a process that is difficult to stop once it starts.

Even if or when an IT worker does want to go off the achieved class and lifestyle that comes with IT work, they feel a considerable sense of insecurity of how to step back on class and affluence. If they would give up the work in the IT industry, they would also loose class and affluence including their social status and standing. Even if the worker would want to take this decision individually, pressures of family and seeming social demands of keeping up the prestige of being an IT worker are something that their immediate and extended families might not be approving of. Biao's work describes how traditional arranged marriage alliances are made primarily based on the prestige of the worker(s) being IT employees (Biao 2006). For the first generation workers from rural backgrounds whose marriages also have happened due to the prestige of their IT jobs, leaving the handsome pay and all the perks that come with it as-an-option becomes a no-option.

"We do not want these people from the IT culture." This is a quote that a mid-career IT worker told me about, which an IT colleague of his encountered when trying to move out of IT into a manufacturing business. There is a general sense in the non-IT job market that IT workers find it very difficult to adjust to work structures in the non-IT business styles. Earlier in the thesis, having described IT workers' perks like work from home and flexible working hours, non- IT businesses seldom allow this flexibility. Though IT workers themselves have said that both flexible work hours and work from home seem to eat into their non-work time and space, the very same IT workers also find it difficult to transition into non-IT jobs where these flexibilities don't exist.

The glamour of IT starts with the socio-cultural notion that IT means smart or intelligent. Hyderabad being a subtropical climate where work in non-IT means working in hot weather, IT work is understood as sitting and working in state of the art air-conditioned office. The international travel perks of IT gives the IT workers a sense of globetrotting and a bucket list checkoff of international destination which until about a decade and a half were out of reach of even the upper middle class. The assertion of achievement through a social display of manifold increase in consumption and consumerism is something that a lot of IT professionals who come from middle-class means seem to love. "No other industry gives a decent pay right after an undergraduate degree", to socially state

achievement of early and high paid employment, an IT job becomes glamourous for fresh students to assert their achievement.

This study is very broad-based. It documents the experience of work-related stress in *some* mid-career IT professionals in the city of Hyderabad. My results cannot be readily generalised into easy prescriptions, but rather, my analysis points at broader cultural and structural conditions within which burnout takes shape. Both my personal experience in the IT industry as well as the stories that I have collected indeed confirm the "high-stress-high-reward" model of work that Karen Ho (Ho 2009) describes; I hope to have brought out some aspects of this in the context of India where the prestige of IT seemingly overshadows some of its less desirable aspects. The present research itself would benefit from longer-term immersion in the field to capture the production of work-related stress as an everyday phenomenon, both in professional as well as domestic spaces. Indeed, ways in which the boundaries between personal and professional space and time become blurred can be traced in much richer detail over the course of longer study-period.

My research, nonetheless, also suggests other promising directions for further inquiry. In particular, the "blinded-horse education system" that was alluded to on several occasions deserves particular scrutiny. A particular interesting question is to look at education and employment independently of each other, as several ethnographies have done by now, but rather to trace how these two have shaped each other. As my research suggests, the promise of a career in IT drives many to chose engineering as their college major, on the other hand, that very education seems to set the stage for experiencing work purely in instrumental terms of financial gain without deriving any satisfaction from it. Equally prominently, the research also foregrounds questions pertaining to both, employee welfare as well as the role of legal reform in enabling it. What should be employers' responsibilities in ensuring employee welfare? What systems of accountability would serve to ensure these? There already seems to be an emergent conversation around such issues, as witnessed in the roadshows mobilised by ForIT (and similar associations in other cities as well). My hope here is to contribute to such conversations, both practically as well as conceptually.

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6. Appendix

6.1. Interviews Conducted

- Lawyers - 4

  - Corporate Lawyers: 3

  - Labour Lawyers: 1

  - Male 3; Female 1

- Employees in the IT Industry: 29

  - Male:20

  - Female: 9

- IT Labour Organisations: 1

  - Labour Roadshows: 3

  - Labour Conventions: 1

- Professor of History- 1

Total number of Interviews conducted: 34

6.2. IEC Clearance Certificate:

Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC)
Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad
Kandi – 502 285, Sangareddy, Telangana, INDIA
Phone: (040) 2301 6033; Fax: (040) 2301 6003 /32

This is to certify that the following submitted topic and IEC protocol number has been critically evaluated by Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC), IIT Hyderabad, in the meeting held on 11.12.2018. The submitted protocol has been granted ethical clearance to continue the mentioned study. The end result of the study and any further change in standard operating procedure for the research study protocol must be submitted to IEC, IIT Hyderabad.

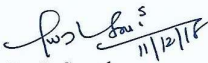**IEC Protocol No. IITH/IEC/2018/12/20**   **Version No. 2.0**

Effective Date: 11.12.2018

Title of the Project: Experiences and voices of Burnout: An ethnogrqaphic study amongst midcareer professionals in Hyderabad

Principal Investigator/s: Dr. Aalok Khandekar and Mr. Ramachandra Raju B. Department of Liberal Arts, IIT Hyderabad.

Reviewed and approved:

Dr. Subha Narayan Rath
Member Secretary, IEC
IIT Hyderabad

Dr. P. Suresh
Chairman, IEC
IIT Hyderabad