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## **Globalisation, Liberalisation and the Transformation of Women's Work in India**

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### **Abstract**

Globalisation has set in motion large-scale population movements that render meaningless distinct categories of displacements. Yet, in recent years nation states have increasingly emphasized the distinction between 'economic' migrants and political refugees. This paper interrogates the overlapping processes of cross-border and internal displacements in postcolonial states. In particular, I argue that gendered complexities of internal and international displacement require urgent attention. Based on recent and ongoing ethnographic research among poverty induced internally displaced women in India and cross-border forced migrants, this paper considers the context of their experiences. Focusing on some of the shared spaces of 'economic' and 'political' dislocation I outline how women and their families cope as forced migrants and how women themselves view and assess their situation. Given the escalating regional conflicts and the inability of states to ensure the rights of their own citizens, this paper reflects on methodological aspects of researching women's experiences of displacement.

### **Introduction**

India has pursued a policy of economic liberalisation over the past decade. In marked contrast to the post independence developmental strategy of self-reliant economic growth the current reforms are aimed at making the economy more efficient through increased market orientation. The central strategy is to secure a greater share of the global market in industry, trade and services through increased productivity. A growing numbers of global corporations are now established in India. They offer new employment opportunities to the emerging middle classes, which is said to have expanded as a result of the globalisation of the economy (Lakha 1999). While a number of scholars have explored emergent middle class Indian femininities precipitated by practices of consumption (John 1998; Munshi 1998; Mankekar1999), the ambiguous and contradictory impacts of globalisation on women remain under

researched (Ganguly-Scrase 2003). This paper focuses on women's work among different fractions of the middle classes.

The impacts of global market reforms on women demonstrate that the consequences can be both empowering and constraining (Einhorn and Yeo 1995; Afshar and Barrientos 1999: 1-17). Examining the relationships between market liberalisation, women's labour and gender ideology, Moghadam (1999: 128-153) argues that women's participation in the global economy and national labour force can serve to interrogate and modify gender relations and ideologies. Our paper examines emerging series of transactions or trade-offs that have significant gender implications for those working in the Indian call centre industry. While the push for call centre outsourcing to newly industrialising economies has been one way in which corporations have taken advantage of ever more cheaper overheads, it is important to identify how workers become embroiled within temporal transformations and trade-offs.

### **Not a tide but a significant trickle: Call Centre Offshoring**

During the early 1990s companies such as General Electric, British Airways and American Express relocated their back office operations to India. Soon after other multinational companies followed suit, either by establishing their own subsidiaries in India or China and Mexico, or sub-contracting to third - party service providers. By 2004 the Indian Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) industry represented less than three per cent of global outsourcing operations, however twelve of the top fifteen BPO companies operating in India were US-owned. While figures change with alarming pace, by 2003 over 300 firms operated around 1,200 call centres employing 170,000 workers. Around 65% of these firms had established operations during the past four years and around 14% did so in the last year (ACA Research 2003; Taylor and Bain, 2003: 5; Ramesh 2004: 1).

The cost incentive for US and Australian firms is significant. Compared to the average cost per transaction of US\$1.99 in Australia with an average annual salary of US\$22,723 for agents, Indian transaction rates are US\$0.29 and average annual salaries for Indian agents is US\$1,689. In terms of transaction costs, Indian call centres offer half the rate that China does, two thirds less than Singapore, and is six

times cheaper than Australian wage rates. However while Indian call centre workers earn less than their Australian, UK and US counterparts, these wages are substantially higher than that of most other Indian service workers (Van den Broek 2004). Moreover, as the respondents note, many of the working conditions are far superior to local employment. It is worth noting that since call centre work requires no particular technical or educational skills other than good command of English, which middle class Indians readily possess, it offers unprecedented opportunities to young people. This is particularly significant to those within lower middle class families whose only other option for securing high incomes nowadays is to be able to enter the extremely competitive professions in the IT field or the traditional occupations such as medicine.

### **Research methodology**

The findings are based on ethnographic research carried out over a five-year period among twenty lower middle class households and 120 in depth interviews in Calcutta and surrounding regional centres. Additionally in December 2004, three focus group discussions and five in depth interviews with young women aged 20-25 took place. The participants in the latest interviews and focus groups were drawn from both upper middle class families from metropolitan areas in New Delhi, Calcutta, Bangalore and Chennai as well as women from lower middle class backgrounds from provincial towns. The reason for drawing upon different fractions within the middle classes was that while much has been said about the formation of the 'New Rich' in Asia (Pinches, 1999), a homogenous Indian middle class as being the undoubted beneficiaries of globalisation is untenable (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2001; Sridharan, 2004). The distinct differences between these groups were apparent in their reasons for employment. Young women from upper middle class families regarded their call centre work as a temporary phenomenon; it was primarily for pursuing a consumer lifestyle and maintaining their independent capacity to spend. By contrast, those from lower middle class backgrounds were saving up for the future. Clearly they too were aware of the temporary nature of this type of work, which they saw as very demanding. However, they were not in the position of spending it freely since they had to support themselves while living in the city.

### **Gender and participation in the Public Domain**

In this section we begin with the ethnographic context and elaborate on the socio-historical processes that frame our respondents' understanding of women's work in general. This will be followed by our exploration of women's work in call centres. The respondents' attitudes are shaped and reshaped by the competing debates on women's work in the public domain. Debates on public visibility of women, their participation in employment and the subsequent emancipation of women have occupied centre stage in anti-colonial nationalist discourses as well as in post-colonial developmentalist narratives of nation building.

Public discourses since the nineteenth century has centred on two opposing categorization: labour force participation of poor women and widows and the employment of upper class women in high status professions. While the former could be tolerated because it was an absolute necessity, the latter was not only desirable, but also a moral obligation, a sense of public duty. For the rest, women's entry into the workforce signalled a loss of respectability. This was not only for the women themselves, but it also meant a loss of familial status. Throughout the past five decades empowerment through employment has been the general developmentalist agenda of the post-colonial state irrespective of the ideologies of various political parties. Nowadays, although developmentalism has been replaced by neo-liberalism, empowerment of women is a critical component of the rhetoric of the latter (Bagchi 1999: 368-370). Changing nature of gendered class relations have created the possibilities of moving beyond the dichotomy of the elite women's pursuit of high status professional occupations and poor women's financial necessity. Call centre employment is an exemplar of this cultural change. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the transformations in the culture of class in contemporary India. Suffice to say that the cultural milieu of the colonial and post-colonial middle classes based on notions of gentility and respectability have been replaced by conspicuous consumption (for details see Scrase 1993 Deshpande 1998; Van Wessel 1998). One of the crucial markers of emerging class identity particularly among fractions of the middle class is the desire for the public visibility of women and their relative freedom

to pursue careers. According to our informants, while the loosening of restrictions on physical mobility are seen as a hallmark of modernity, any attempts to restrict women's access to education and work constitute proof of 'backwardness'. Opening up the economy to global influences has offered some critical challenges to the notions of female dependency. They are in part shaped by the emerging images of the assertive 'New Woman'. Imbued with agency, she marks the arrival of a gender friendly globalised market (Chakravarti 2000). Advertising discourses have constructed this new persona by

...appropriating the discourses of traditional femininity on the one hand and liberating feminist discourses on the other (Munshi 1998: 573).

Using these new images of independent womanhood young women construct oppositional narratives of freedom from traditional patriarchal norms and challenge the gender ideologies in their families and society at large. Their responses were a powerful reminder of the significance of going out to work and the meaning it has for the women.

The common theme that typified the sentiments of most respondents was 'women's advancement', expressed primarily in terms of entering the world of work. For men it reflected a sense of pride that 'my' wife goes out to work or 'my' daughter is doing well in her studies and the hope that she will be well placed in a good job. These were subtly linked to ideologies of consumerism. Women were emphatic in their renewed confidence and conveyed the sentiment that paid work brings autonomy.

### **National sanctions of global temporalities**

Given that nation states are not containers that invite global processes to fill them, global economies have to be

...actively implemented, reproduced, serviced and financed (Sassen 2000: 217).

There have been various ways in which the state and industry associations have mobilised to support for the offshoring of foreign call centres to India. Apart from the various financial incentives the state and the major industry association for the information technology industry NASSCOM have strongly supported the relaxation

of regulations, which have historically restricted women working at night. There is a huge interaction and overlap of national and corporate agendas as this global temporal agenda is nationally endorsed. As such the state has sanctioned global temporalities by modifying pre-existing demarcations between 'worktime' and 'hometime' by relaxing laws which loosen traditional attitudes to women leaving their house alone or working outside the home at night.

Indian call centre firms have attempted to reduce the impact of harsh working conditions by creating a kind of corporate family. Our observations and interviews revealed that the firms offer company sponsored 'family days' and there are myriad social and recreational activities offered within the confines of the call centres including dance classes, pool rooms, canteens, games rooms and gymnasiums to name a few. Another important service is the door to door transportation of workers to and from work. These conditions are looked on favourably by those who work there and appeal particularly to the parents of 'respectable' women entering the industry.

In order to overcome potential bias of locals against the industry, companies also often 'recruit' the parents and or extended family of female workers. For instance, companies will call in mothers and fathers of young women at the interview recruitment stage to reassure them that the call centre industry is a respectable industry which offers unprecedented opportunities to the young. In combination these policies and practices help the company to emulate family support structures and family home comforts in an attempt to bridge the culture gap and pacifying pre-existing social mores about middle class women working unsociable hours. These changing work regimes have the capacity to erode national and cultural traditions (Thompson, 1989: 197). Indeed, young women working in the call centre industry articulated such erosions or remaking of social and gender relations.

### **Role of call centres in (Re)making social and gender relations**

Women working in offshored call centres where night work dominates often articulate the tensions and trade-offs which reshape the way they interact socially with their family and friends; it is also reshaping how women see their roles as workers and wives. For example young women talk of delaying marriage because of their inability

to balance work and family responsibilities and state that their social lives are often restricted to those working in the industry. One worker reflected

...we are into night shifts. We go back and sleep and then are back into work. Nothing outside...what happens is that we make our social circle here itself. We cannot go ahead and make friends outside (Focus Group Discussion, December 2004).

They also articulated tensions which have developed at a societal level:

If you talk about society, it is still a social stigma. There is some acceptance but parents still feel that when their daughter has to be married off and she works in night shifts, one might not get good matches for marriage. Even women in the neighbourhood are still perplexed and believe that girls working night shifts are not decent enough (Focus Group, December 2004).

### **Temporal Trade-Offs in Transitional Times**

Undoubtedly, call centre capital dominate much of the conditions under which Indian call centre workers undertake their work. There are also various ways global capital plant and supplant into national territories and influence institutions depending on the social (and economic) resilience or thickness of nation states. However within this there is much capacity for national (local) resistance and or accommodation. As Sassen (2000: 220) notes, these 'in between spaces' or 'regulatory fractures' might represent opportunities for social actors to develop new combinations of local, national and global social relations. Arguably such trade-offs represent obstacles as well as opportunities.

Therefore it is not simply global firms that shape workplace and social interactions, as is implied in much of the literature on the declining significance of the nation-state. Local processes themselves shape these interactions, and not merely by resisting them (Sassen 2000: 227). Our research has identified various ways in which opportunities close and open for employees. One central issue relates to the way material and social relations of female call centre workers are being remade. Unprecedented job opportunities that pay comparatively good wages are augmented by increased opportunities for consumption as part of the wider trappings of consumer modernity. However along the way traditional family relations are being challenged. The degree



to which social and gender relations changes will depend on the resilience and 'social thickness' of the host country.

Theory has often been constructed around this idea that place dominates time. However this may not always be the case. In transition phases like this period of call centre offshoring in India, time has appeared to disrupt place. The disruption involves women (and men) remaking social relations outside and around night work with women reconstructing their roles, as workers, wives and mothers, a situation where workers

... are detached from the spaces of social lives such as markets, households and transportation links, which only occur during the day (Mirchandani 2004: 365).

Escalating turnover and rising health issues are immediate by products of temporal tensions over shift work, however material benefits are significant amid limited employment opportunities. Therefore while Sassen talks of frontier zones marked by power and domination as well as 'in-between spaces', perhaps we are witnessing quite judicious trade-offs which have both positive and negative consequences. Here the frontier zones may be more transitional trade offs that are shaping emerging socio-cultural conditions relating to women's role in the family and the workplace, both now and in the future.

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