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Setting the Backdrop

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Introduction

One of the turning points in India's recent trajectory has been the liberalization of the Indian economy in response to neoliberal compulsions, which thrives on free-market regime and involves the encounter of the local with the global capital (Ramaswamy 1999; Stiglitz 2004). Briefly, the change has been from an earlier state-controlled and relatively more job-secure environment to a gradual withdrawal of the state-controlled regulationist market, which also 'absolved the employers the responsibility of providing benefits, which usually came with tenured jobs' (Sen and Dasgupta 2009 xiii; Corbridge and Harriss 2000). The ensuing change in the process of production – from assembly-line Fordist model to a more flexible post-Fordist regime – has also brought in with it contractual and flexible labour, particularly in the manufacturing sector in the post-1980 globalizing phase. Although it would be rather erroneous to suggest that the pre-reform period was characterized by secure jobs, the recent decades have witnessed a more insecure employment scenario. As per the National Sample Survey estimates, the share of workers in the total organized manufacturing sector was 26.47 per cent in 2010–11 compared with 15.7 per cent in 2000–01. However, this increase has largely been attributed to the substitution of directly employed workers with contractual workers (Kapoor 2014).

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Earlier, it was the public sector including government, quasi-government and local bodies that was the main employer of labour in the organized sector. However, over the years, its share has been declining because of disinvesting policies that accompany the changing role of the state. A concomitant shift to the privatization of industrial production (with its emphasis on cost cutting and profit maximization) has also been responsible for the enhanced employment for women. According to one estimate, although the increase in the absolute number of women workers was almost the same in the public and private sectors in the recent past, the increase of women in the private sector has been nearly double (Khandelwal 2004). This is despite the fact that the overall employment of women workers in India has always been comparably lower than that of other countries in the region, such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Maringanti 2008; Banerjee-Guha 2009).¹

In general, the increase in urban women's workforce participation has invoked contested and often contradictory debates on 'feminization of labour'² as well as on informalization of labour.³ These discourses can perhaps be anchored to the trade liberalization in general and the emergence of spatially designated export processing zones (EPZs) in particular (Pearson 2010). It would, however, be helpful at this juncture to address very briefly the question as to whether trade liberalization is something new, if not a continuation of patterns previously observed. In this regard, we borrow from Standing's observations. Accordingly, earlier – until about the 1970s – trade was largely confined to countries with similar labour rights and therefore, roughly equivalent labour costs. Since then, international trade and investments have progressively been directed at economies with relatively lower labour costs. In contrast, the labour rights in industrialized countries were increasingly perceived as costs of production, to be avoided in the interest of enhancing or maintaining national competitiveness. Trade openness ensures export-oriented growth, which often sustains cheap labour the world over, as regions are forced to compete on cost. In addition, the technological advances in the recent past have created a wider range of technological–managerial options in working arrangements of labour across the globe. Cost cutting in labour inputs by accessing cheap labour across developing countries has thus emerged as a more significant determinant of allocations and divisions of labour. Although the exploitation of cheap labour, informality, home-based production have always been the case, these changes coupled with structural adjustment and other supply-side economic policies have accelerated these tendencies, bringing about, in recent times, radical changes in labour market relations sans protective labour legislations,

regulations, wage parity, employment security and statutory regulation, etc. (Standing 1999). It is now clear that India took the first important, albeit small, steps towards liberalization around 1985 to loosen various regulations having a bearing upon trade liberalization; the reforms announced in 1991 went much further in this direction.

Such growth opens up heightened opportunities for women who can be lured to enter the labour market as paid labour instead of remaining engaged in unpaid household work (Standing 1999; Deshpande 1992).⁴ The last decade has also seen an impressive expansion in the outsourcing of services related to business from countries of the North to labour-intensive countries of the global South, facilitated by the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) – of which call centres are a significant component. Apart from supportive ‘political–economic’ changes, locational advantage in terms of appropriate time zone and lower wages has made India a significant player in the ICT-enabled services, leading to a prominent share in offshoring of call centres. India’s advantage also stems from her location in the knowledge economy and English language competency (Taylor and Bain 2010). Since these services thrive on an educated and skilled workforce, which is largely urban-based in India, urban labour markets become particularly important in such endeavours both for men and women, more so for the latter, as about 92 per cent of all women in ICT are in urban areas as compared to 84 per cent of all men (Sen and Raju 2012). On the other hand, a production system linked with global market in manufacturing is subject to the vagaries of product demand and market uncertainties leading to emergence of temporary and contingent workers with generalized erosion of job security (Mazumdar 2007, 8). Scholars point out how a huge proportion of contingent workers are usually women in export-oriented garment and electronics industries because of their production regimes, which thrive on cheap, easily manipulable and flexible labour. There is thus a contradictory relationship that exists between women and labour market that is simultaneously oppressive, exploitative and liberating even if partially (Ong 2000). Sen (1999 cited in Razavi *et al.*) sees the glass as half empty. On one hand, rural women escape their patriarchal homes through these types of work while on the other the ‘choice’ may not indicate positive changes in their lives working in the factories (also, Kabeer 1995, 2000).

This chapter explores how such complex and highly debated processes apply in different contexts and how they bear upon women in the urban labour market in general.⁵ In doing so, we also look at the newly emerging

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sectors of work such as ICTs and BPO, which are presumably global in their orientations, but continue to be framed by socio-spatially articulated constructs of gendered stereotypes pushing women, despite being at the relatively more privileged positions, to disadvantages. We maintain that the labour market processes have to be multiply placed, layered and textured to decode the dialectics between socio-structural barriers that impinge upon the gendered responses vis-à-vis agential resistances and contestations, if any in the labour market. Even if at the risk of stating the obvious, a caveat is in order. Women also have multiple age-specific, caste/class/ethnic and rural/urban locations. Intersectionalities of these provide a complex framework to understand how the capitalist production system reproduces discriminatory practices in the Indian labour market through wage differentials, job security/insecurity, enclaving of job placements for certain social groups, etc. More importantly, two paradoxical processes seem to be happening in India. One, the labour market had undoubtedly drawn on the pool of cheap labour of women almost in all spheres of work and yet socially encrypted and regionally embedded gendered codes that characterize India, result in spatially differentiated labour market outcomes (Raju 2013).⁶ As Razavi *et al.* point out (2012 vii), ‘both the formal rules and the informal practices that structure the operation of labour markets often reflect the gender norms of the societies in which they are embedded’. Hence, women’s increased participation in the labour force is not a straightforward story of progress in gender equality. Moreover, many of the factors that structure labour markets and women’s position within them are in turn shaped by broader policies and processes of social change.

Urban labour market: How global is the global

Any discussion on work in contemporary urban India needs to discuss transnational labour force. This invariably brings us to practices of globalizing forces and the contested nature of their implications. Scholars tend to divide in their opinion on the exact enactment of globalizing processes – some calling them inevitable and irreversibly universalizing while others look at them as a project – both dominated by capital.⁷ Increasingly, however, the hegemonic metanarratives (of globalization) that basically have masculine undertones are being challenged, particularly when seen through gender lenses and evidence-based analyses in local contexts (Freeman 2001). As Mirchandani (2004a) points out, treating globalization as a ‘meta-myth’ (Bradley 2000, quoted in Mirchandani 2004a) does not sufficiently allow for an exploration of the

incomplete and contested nature of the movements of capital and labour. She further observes that workforces are neither homogeneous nor passive in a globalizing context.⁸

It may perhaps be argued, as Krishna does, that present-day labour geographies need to be situated beyond the nation–state boundaries instead of being bounded by self-spatialization of a kind that ‘names itself as a destiny, a genius, a culture, a civilization, or homeland – a contiguous and identifiably discrete and separate entity’ (2001, 412). The proposition that spatial contextualization be avoided while looking at labour markets in a global environ can be questioned by bringing in the discussion of localized influences on globalizing processes. Rather than privileging one over the other, the labour market as it exists today allows one to argue for intersected effects of both global and local forces whichever way they are framed. In such situations, the local is not peripheral or incidental; there are enough sustaining as well as ‘ironies and resistances’ of local makings (Appadurai 1996, 29). So, while educated and skilled women workers can take advantage of emerging employment opportunities in the IT and BPO sectors, they may still be governed by contextual specificities of gendered constructs that do not differentiate their world of work from those illiterate or lowly literate and unskilled workers who are home-based in petty businesses. We will discuss this point later.

Urban labour market: Encountering the gendered constructs

However contradictory it may seem, it has to be acknowledged that the earlier invisibility and the dichotomous split in ‘productive’ and ‘reproductive’ spheres and the gendered division of labour within that, which had trivialized women’s contribution to the labour market in the past is now gradually disappearing (Chhachhi 1999). Although young women with good education appear to be more privileged in ITC-enabled services, the ‘unmarried young women as symptomatic of export-oriented growth’ syndrome no longer carries as much weight as it used to do.⁹ Likewise, one can observe women’s move away from stereotypical occupations such as teaching and caring/nursing – extension of familial responsibilities in the market – to semi-industrial and new generation ITC and BPO jobs. And yet, the essential nature of markets as gendered institutions, because of the ways they operate at the intersection of the ‘productive and reproductive’ economies and under-privileging those who are in reproductive economy, continue to haunt labour market dynamics (Deshpande 2007; also see Chapter 10 in this volume).

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An earlier study on migrant women in urban India, which looked at the intersection of marriage, marital responsibilities and career paths, observes that working women do not necessarily escape from their traditional roles. Thus, the study revealed a higher proportion of married women were self-employed in home-based work presumably managing both productive and reproductive responsibilities, while the proportion of never married women engaged in regular salaried jobs was almost twice as that of married women. Moreover, nearly all the unmarried women were full-time workers as compared to married women (Banerjee and Raju 2009).¹⁰ Interlinked with immediate familial responsibilities are larger kin relations that impose their own restrictive limits and codes on working women (Ong 1991).

Although diligence, patience and concentration are often cited as women workers' virtues, women are confined to soft-skilled jobs that are usually concentrated at the lower rungs of occupational hierarchy. Such a segmented division of labour may not always be overtly visible. Unni, Bali and Vyas (1999, quoted in De 2012) studying subcontracting in the garment industry in Ahmedabad, point out the variability of segmentation depending upon the size of the manufacturing structures: large factory sector, small units, shops and home-based garment workers. Although all the three segments are marked by subcontracting, it is of interest to note how even such work is embedded in gender stereotypes that requires rethinking about how the sexual division of work perpetuates different and distinct types of work. The authors observe a clear division of the type of garments stitched by women and men. By and large, women were engaged in stitching dresses and hosiery items and very few stitched men's pants and shirts, vice versa in the case of male tailors. Most women in this study felt that even the sub-contractors preferred trousers sown by men compared to women. Men were employed as supervisors, cutters and also marketed products whereas women were mostly stitchers and were also involved in the finishing and ornamentation of the product. Not surprisingly, women's work fetched lower remunerations than men. Also, comparatively large numbers of women were in the household segment of the production units.¹¹

The new generation jobs

With women's entrance in rapidly expanding IT workforce, one would have expected that there would be a loosening up of the grip on traditional gender roles, but as Patel and Parmentier (2005)'s study suggests 'not only does women's participation fail to occur at the same speed as IT expansion, but

that their participation is based on a continuation of traditional gender roles' whereby 'technology and its development ... adapt[s] to the existing social structure'. Further, '[t]he persistence of ... gender divides perpetuate the notion of gender segregation and do not enhance women's socio-economic and political status, nor provide equal participation in the information economy' (2005, 29; Kelkar, Shrestha and Veena 2002; Raju 2013).

The gendered segregation at workplaces is yet again visible in the engineering field, which as a profession has traditionally been characterized by male dominance. Of late, women's enrolment in the field of engineering has been increasing, but their employment rate has not only been low but they are found to be in teaching departments of Technical Educational Institutes (Parikh and Sukhatme 2004). There is a curious ambivalence at display here. On the one hand women have been able to break away from the stereotype, but on the other they are stuck with the traditional typecast of practices. Banking is another such arena where societal factors impact both the individual and organization levels in perpetuating the existing stereotypes, which ultimately harm the advancement of women in their careers, especially in management (Mirza and Jabeen 2011; see Chapter 11 in this volume).¹²

It is of interest to see how financial independence amongst young educated metropolitan girls in the IT sector eventually gets tied up with marriage prospects despite their exposure to western work-culture. The IT industry is attractive to many young people because of the salaries offered – often much lower than international standards – they are handsome enough. The monotony of the work itself is compensated for by the benefits of indoor facilities, recreational centres, gyms, etc. Jobs have attractive titles such as Customer Care Executive, Customer Support Executive, and so on. And yet economic resources do not necessarily seem to provide women opportunities to exercise their agency in personal lives. Women have to negotiate their socio-cultural rural/urban backgrounds (rural versus urban); despite unprecedented exposure, the women's bargaining agency is contingent upon which regional background they come from (Tara and Ilavarasan 2011).

There are interesting, if not peculiar, contradictions. Despite increasing women workforce in ITCs and IT-enabled services, their upward mobility in the workplace continues to remain constrained, essentially because of household ties. However, their lower mobility prompts human resource managers to prefer hiring them rather than men, as in women's case frequent poaching is minimal (Kelkar, Shrestha and Veena 2002; D'Mello 2006). One's position in the occupational hierarchy makes a difference, but very few women occupy higher echelons of the IT industry.

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The spatial and temporal elasticity and the contextual disconnect have made several scholars argue for the emergence of a 'flat' world and to treat call centres as 'disembodied entities' (Taylor and Bain 2010, 439). However, we dispute such claims to point out how social context beyond the workplace has consequences, particularly for women, in terms of conflicting demands between domestic responsibilities and the pressure of social mores that continue to dominate workplace sensitivities. That is, socially constructed spaces create a mix of high-tech operations and indigenous values instead of homogeneous spread of work culture (Ong 1991).

In furthering as well as explaining our arguments, we borrow from Kagitcibasi's concept of the 'autonomous-relational' self (2005). Seeing autonomy and agency being used extensively and often interchangeably, Kagitcibasi questions the often-posed separation of autonomy/agency and their intersections with relatedness. According to him, the separation between agency and relatedness has a root in the Euro-American cultural context with its ideological background of individualism. For him, autonomy and heteronomy are two ends of the same spectrum. An individual can have an interdependent as well as an independent self in a 'dialectic mutuality' or 'coexistence of opposites'. These selves are embedded within societally encoded gendered constructs, which are internalized during socializing processes (D'Mello 2006, 139). What we see in the Indian context is very little scope for mutually dialectic exchanges in the built-up of women's identities. Instead, the 'independent self' (which could have been drawn upon the bases of education and work status) annihilates itself under self-efficacy and self-definition vis-à-vis other means of overwhelming presence of relational self in the making of the 'self'.

What D'Mello contends on the basis of her empirical study of professionals in the field of information technology in Mumbai is apt in this context and we quote:

The autonomous-relational self ... is operationalized among IT workers, in ways that are more dichotomous than dialectically mutual. The breadwinner ideology predominated as a central aspect of masculine identity constructs, while the relational self occupied center stage in feminine identity constructs. Individual responses as well as the coping means used by women, reinforce the view that the relational self was the predominant pathways [for women]... Negotiating for power and equality in the family system [was found to be] a challenging task, threatening disintegration of family relationships'... many women in this study ... compromised their own career aspirations (D'Mello 2006, 152)

Urban labour market: Gender and class sensibilities

Very often, the notion of urban India is coincident with the emergence of the ‘new’ middle class – the middle class where working women, particularly professional IT women, signal the arrival of ‘global nation, rather than a parochial or traditional one’ (Radhakrishnan 2009, 197). Historically, the idealized construct of (Hindu) women into middle class domesticity had become the site

... for the production of modern nationalist culture ... [which] was based on a powerful dichotomy between the “inner” and the “outer” ... translated into a set of binaries that were inevitably gendered: spiritual/material, home/world, inner/outer... the outside world [was] to accommodate the changes occurring in society, a burden to be borne primarily by men. The (essential) inner world, the real of the ‘spiritual’, however, ... must remain free contamination ... maintaining the purity of bourgeois woman ... (Radhakrishnan 2009, 200).

It may be argued that the application of the category of middle class is so broad that it serves to obscure significant socio-economic differences within the middle-class morality. And yet, collective essentializing of women’s primary location within homes seems to have overwhelmed the discursive realm of its cultural discourse. As opposed to the earlier emphasis on the spiritual, the more contemporary construction of middle-class domestic, according to Radhakrishnan, hinges upon the notion of family (and the location of women within it). Using Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital along with his conception of gender and the family, she puts forward the concept of ‘respectable femininity’, the primary framing of women within the familial realm – family assuming perceived ‘normalcy’ ‘legitimated through middle-class status’. According to her, the symbolically authoritative dominance of middle class values allows the conception of ‘family-first’ to bear upon the national consciousness, opening ‘up space for grappling with the embeddedness of gender’, which continues to shape labour market outcomes of even those in new generation employment such as IT, limiting individual negotiations and inter-linkages with the global economy. Her IT women themselves enact highly competent ‘professional’ femininity, but one which remains ‘markedly Indian’ (Radhakrishnan 2009, 200–201, 209).¹³

Bourdieu’s ‘symbolic capital’ can be invoked somewhat differently to assert the inevitability of gendered encoding of the sort theorized so far. The multiple location of women across caste, class, ethnicity and rural–urban divide does mean that women occupy differentiated layers of larger structures of social relations – Bourdieu’s concept of fields, a site of struggle between the

competing claims of different forms of capital. However, individuals, on their own or collectively, may still attempt to decipher what comprises enduring and legitimate capital within available spaces. Thus, symbolic capital may be the signifier of a legitimacy of a particular type of cultural capital.

Undoubtedly, the new middle class in contemporary India occupies the nation's imagination in no small measure (Deshpande 2003; Rajagopal 2003 quoted in Radhakrishnan 2009) and yet one can argue that the ambivalent nature of urban India – a curious mix of urban characteristics with rural – would not only mean that the urban middle class is not the only iconic symbol of re-imagined modern India, but also that middle class is not an undifferentiated monolith.¹⁴ Notwithstanding such a critique, interestingly enough, certain gendered values that the middle class's symbolic capital appropriates, despite being capricious and particularistic, is the idealized location of women within the domestic sphere. We take a cue here from what Chatterjee has to say. Without engaging with her elaborate and nuanced critique of the co-opted feminism by neoliberal capital, we want to reiterate her idea about women as 'embedded in an assemblage of social relations ... of class, gender, caste, and religious position' for many of whom 'household work [remains] women's work as it was destined to be' (2012, 12).¹⁵ Chatterjee's women are Hindus and Muslims from the lower strata of the society in Ahmedabad city.

To the multiple locations of women has to be added the spatial contextualization, which has its own enactment upon how women's lives in India are constructed and socially articulated (Raju 2011). It seems in a way then that some of the middle-class gendered sensibilities eventually get institutionalized to reflect the broader Indian culture.

Labour market: Gender, structure and agency

Let us contend that any discussion on structure and agency particularly with reference to urban labour markets in India is severely constrained by inadequate information on one hand and by repetitive assertions of the continuation of traditional gender roles even in rapidly expanding new sectors on the other. Admittedly, any discourse on structure and agency has to be multiply placed, layered and textured. Although the available space here does not allow us an elaborate expansion of each and every aspect of it, we will touch upon a few of the concerns.

In decoding the dialectic between labour and agency, Coe and Jordhus-Lier identify four distinct thematic strands of labour geography each of which is underpinned by its own bodies of theory. The first deals with the unionized